

What is the process of personal growth? Introducing the Personal Growth Process Model

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ABSTRACT

Personal growth as a process remains vaguely understood. We introduce the Personal Growth Process (PGP) model based on Carl Rogers's organismic valuing process (OVP). The PGP model explains personal growth as a sociocognitive embodied process whereby an individual undergoes multiple mental shifts that make up an ongoing, fluctuating process over the long term, starting from a place of psychological safety. The mental shifts occurring throughout the growth process are broadly categorized as self-awareness, openness towards experiencing and change, existential courage, autonomy/internal locus of control, taking responsibility for the self and others, self-compassion, and compassion towards others. These shifts all represent progress toward well-being, defined here as authenticity, harmony and life-satisfaction. Importantly, the model does not include only individual psychological constructs, but ties the process to one's social environment and common social responsibility.

Personal growth is a relatively common topic in both research literature and everyday conversation. Surprisingly, however, there is a dearth of theory on it as a *process*. In the positive psychological literature, personal growth tends to be approached through proximal phenomena such as growth-related goals (Bauer & McAdams, 2010), narration of the life-story from a growth perspective (Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer & Park, 2010), the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Yeager et al., 2019), striving towards meaningful goals with grit (Duckworth et al., 2007; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016), the motivation to grow (Robitschek et al., 2012), or satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Baard et al., 2004). Moreover, personal growth is one of the six subcomponents of the psychological well-being construct of Ryff (1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008), wherein it is defined as the continuation of developing one's potential, "growing as a person," and confronting new challenges in life (Ryff, 1989). These studies have been fundamental to deepening our understanding of this complex phenomenon and its related factors; they do not, however, explain it as an ongoing *psychological process* with distinct supportive conditions and subprocesses.

What is the personal growth process? What are its subprocesses? Under what conditions does it occur? These are the leading questions guiding this theoretical article. Given the complexity of the process, we argue that a holistic, person-centered perspective is necessary to explain

the process of personal growth. For that reason, we refer to work done in the humanistic psychological tradition, in particular building on the work of Carl Rogers and his organismic valuing process (Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1980; Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020).

1. The organismic valuing process and therapeutic change

Carl Rogers (1959, 1961), known as one of the pioneers of humanistic psychology and person-centered psychotherapy, recorded extensive observations of the growth processes his clients underwent during their psychotherapy sessions. Based on these observations, Rogers (1959, 1961) described an overarching personal growth process, which he called the "organismic valuing process". The organismic valuing process is an embodied process whereby an individual organism, within a psychologically favorable growth-enhancing environment, can naturally orient towards environmental and internal "values" (i.e. sources of psychological and bodily nourishment) that enable that organism to achieve higher psychological and social functioning. He likens the idea to a plant turning towards the sun in order to grow: an individual, free of conditions of worth (i.e. conditions for being accepted) and in a psychologically favorable environment, can orient themselves toward sources of growth. On the other hand, the individual can also lose touch

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with their organismic valuing process due to various internal and environmental demands and conditions of worth. The overall process of personal growth, therefore, is the process of regaining a connection to the self and releasing the actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1964).

Rogers – a psychotherapist – detailed how the organismic valuing process fit within the process of therapeutic change, organizing it into seven sequential stages (see Rogers, 1961; Wilkins, 2016): 1) the person is defensive and resistant to change; 2) the person becomes somewhat less rigid and talks about external events; 3) the person talks about the self as an object (with distance); 4) the person starts to talk about their feelings and form a relationship with the therapist; 5) the person further expresses emotion and begins to take more personal responsibility; 6) the person starts to grow towards a sense of “congruence” and accept others more; and 7) the person becomes a fully-functioning, empathetic person, possessed of an unconditional positive regard for the self and others (Wilkins, 2016).

Much has been made of Roger’s organismic valuing and therapeutic change processes in the field of psychotherapy (e.g. Joseph & Murphy, 2012; Wilkins, 2016), but only relatively recently have they been considered in non-therapeutic contexts. Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) linked the organismic valuing process to recent research within positive psychology, showing the close connection of the constructs and processes of positive and humanistic psychology. Moreover, Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) explicated the Rogerian personal growth process as defined mental shifts linked to well-researched positive psychological phenomena. In integrating the Rogerian perspectives with recent positive psychological literature, Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) refer to the Rogerian therapeutic growth process as a *theory* or *model of personal growth* that can be applied outside of therapeutic context. The primary rationale of the paper by Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) was to identify the connections between the OVP (a humanistic theory) and positive psychology; the current paper narrows the focus to elaborate on how the OVP can be operationalized into a testable model of the personal growth process. More specifically, this paper expands on the construct of personal growth as a process by introducing the Personal Growth Process (PGP) model. We further aim to highlight the personal growth process as fundamentally social – and prosocial – in an attempt to move away from the traditional view of personal growth as individualistic and self-centered: the “self-made man” (e.g. De Keere, 2014).

Thus, the aim of this article is to propose a model of the personal growth process based on Rogers’ (1961, 1964) theories, particularly geared towards the humanistic and positive psychology audiences, including researchers and practitioners. This paper should be seen as a first step in clarifying personal growth as a process. Comparison of the model to other models of growth is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be important to do in the future.

2. Why do we need a model of personal growth?

The PGP model aims to help researchers explore in a holistic manner the hard-to-operationalize, fluctuating process by which people experience growth. So far, research on personal growth remains at the initial stage of differentiation in Magnusson and Törestad’s (1993) model of theoretical development. Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) observed that positive psychology has created a solid research base of differentiated knowledge with a multitude of constructs relevant for growth, such as mindful awareness, growth mindset, self-compassion, autonomy, harmony (and others). However, no model has yet integrated these constructs, explaining how their co-occurrence, interaction and supportive conditions lead to the phenomenon by which an individual “personally grows”. In this way, the PGP model aims to move well-being research into the integration stage of theory development (Magnusson & Törestad, 1993) – one has to look at the whole body in order to understand the purpose and function of individual body parts. In other words, a model of personal growth as a process offers a way of explaining the interrelations of concepts known to be relevant to well-being.

We argue that the process of personal growth can be best conceptualized as a nonlinear process of enhancement of various “well-being capacities” such as self-awareness, autonomy, existential courage and self-compassion. These are “well-being capacities” insofar as they act as inner resources that support an individual’s overall well-being and mental health (e.g. Maddi, 2004, 2006; Neff, 2003, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2018). Well-being is understood here as a multidimensional concept, entailing both eudaimonic and hedonic aspects, including authenticity (the integration of self), harmony (Kjell et al., 2015), and life satisfaction (Diener, 2009).

A model that defines personal growth as the enhancement of well-being capacities has clear implications for well-being interventions in various contexts. Given that the aim of such interventions is to improve well-being, they would benefit from a better understanding of how well-being develops and is enhanced. This model can help guide the efforts of intervention, such as understanding therapeutic change and the enhancement of well-being through, say, positive educational interventions (see Norrish, 2015).

3. The personal growth process (PGP) model

The suggested PGP model is based on Rogers’ work (1959, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1980), but departs from it in several key ways. The most notable departures are that it does not apply only to a therapeutic context and its delineation of the personal growth mental shifts or subprocesses (as they are called here). We have also linked these shifts to various positive psychological constructs to indicate a basis in empirical evidence. The PGP model is depicted in Fig. 1. Personal growth begins with a *basic need*, psychological safety, alongside a *requirement for growth*, i.e. the willingness to engage with growth prior to the process. The *subprocesses* of growth are a step outwards from these central pre-conditions, with the outermost circle depicting the *outcomes* (i.e. well-being).

According to the PGP model, personal growth is not a proximal experience, but a *process* of holistic change – it is an often chaotic, highly

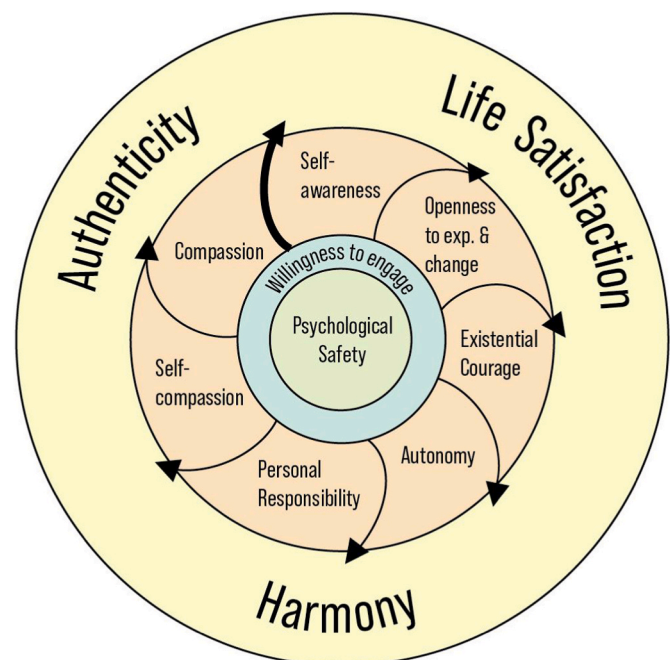


Fig. 1. The Personal Growth Process (PGP) Model, illustrating the conditions for growth in the centre (psychological safety), and the personal growth subprocesses surrounding it, starting with self-awareness. The outer circle represents the outcome of growth, well-being defined as authenticity, harmony and life-satisfaction, enveloping the process.

individualized, fluctuating process that may take years to unfold, with the individual moving constantly back and forth between distinct mental shifts, or subprocesses. We define personal growth as a *holistic, dynamic process of gradual, well-being enhancing psychosocial change*. This definition derives from Rogers' (1961) work on the organismic valuing process, as well as Maurer and Daukantaitė's (2020) work of reinterpreting the organismic valuing process as a theory of personal growth. Personal growth is 1) *holistic*, in that it is fundamentally embedded within the entire system into which the individual fits – including the physiological, biological, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural realms – and it affects each level of inquiry (see Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020; Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1964); 2) *dynamic*, in that the process is not sequential or linear, but chaotic and iterative (Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020; Rogers, 1961); 3) *gradual*, in that it is often arduous and occurs over a long period (Rogers, 1961); and 4) *well-being enhancing*, in that it is a process of increasing one's capacities and skills for well-being (Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020; Rogers, 1961; Ryan & Deci, 2018).

3.1. What is the difference between development (maturation) and personal growth?

Personal growth is a distinct process from development. The study of development focuses on changes in physical, cognitive and social-emotional factors across the lifespan (Berk, 2004), whereas personal growth specifically refers to increasing resources for well-being. In other words, personal growth is specifically related to well-being and functioning well, rather than gaining particular cognitive, emotional and physiological skills associated with maturation. To some extent, maturation and personal growth are related and certain maturational processes can better facilitate the subprocesses of personal growth (e.g. an adolescent interested in their identity and growth are more likely to engage with personal growth than a much younger child). Even so, while developmental stages are relatively well defined in relation to specific age-ranges (Berk, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1966; Piaget, 1971), we suggest that, personal growth is not age dependent – a younger individual can be further along in the personal growth process than an older individual. Furthermore, we suggest that while physiological processes often regulate maturation and developmental stages, there is no single trigger that motivates the personal growth process.

Nevertheless, there are commonalities between developmental stage theories and the PGP model, particularly those of Kegan (1982, 1994) and Loevinger (1966). For example, Kegan's (1982, 1994) Constructive Developmental theory (CDT) indicates that the individual can grow from a *socialized mind*, where the self and one's understanding of the world are governed by the influences of others and societal norms (usually around adolescence), towards a *self-authoring mind*, whereby the individual's sense of self is more or less independent, they are free of the opinions or influences of others, and they take some personal responsibility for themselves. They may grow yet further towards the *self-transforming mind*, whereby the person begins to regard their self-authored identity more objectively and they embrace a continually evolving, complex sense of self that allows for multiple identities and roles simultaneously (Helsing & Howell, 2014). The PGP model follows a similar trajectory – the individual may begin to develop self-awareness, which helps them distinguish the norms and values they actually ascribe from those placed on them by others. From there, they gradually break away from being unconsciously influenced by outside demands and pressures, growing more autonomous. At the same time, the individual becomes more able to perceive themselves and act authentically, which does not mean that they act in line with a single "true self" but rather means that they act in line with any of the multiple simultaneous roles and identities they may hold without a sense of inner conflict (Harter, 2012; Rogers, 1961).

The PGP model also aligns with Loevinger's (1966) stages of ego development. Loevinger (1966) indicated that at the final stages of ego development, the person is both autonomous and integrated, meaning

that they can self-govern as well as resolve seeming contradictions of the self with a sense of integration, empathy and wisdom. These qualities parallel the autonomy, authenticity and harmony that ensue from the growth process according to the PGP model.

Despite these linkages, the PGP model has one major departure from developmental stage theories in that the 'goal' of growth is capacity for well-being. Additionally, the PGP model posits that growth is a dynamic process as opposed to a series of stages. Nevertheless, although it is beyond the scope of the current article, in the future it would be important to explore the commonalities and discrepancies in these theories in more depth.

3.2. Motivation to grow from rigidity and fixedness

Fundamentally, personal growth is driven by an unconscious or conscious *willingness* or motivation to engage in the growth process. Individual motivations for engaging with growth may differ. Growth may be driven by recovery from traumatic experience, as is discussed well in the literature surrounding post-traumatic growth (e.g. Tedeschi et al., 2018); changes in one's life circumstances (a turning point experience in life: Wethington, 2003); actively seeking therapeutic help or counselling to solve psychological problems (Rogers, 1961, 1964); a positive influential event such as exposure to an influential person or idol (see Roepke, 2013); or a "wish for congruence" (Rogers, 1951; Glassman & Hadad, 2013), which Rogers (1951, 1961) described as a desire for one's self-image to be more in line with their actual experience of the self. Once a person is willing to engage with their own personal growth and lets that process unfold, an "actualizing tendency" is activated, which Rogers (1961) describes as a natural drive towards growth.

However, personal growth is not a given (Rogers, 1961). While it may be a natural process, it is not a *necessary* one, and may be fought against for any number of reasons. Personal growth may be avoided or rejected because the individual does not have the motivation to engage with growth. Before the process begins, an individual may be estranged from their experience and unwilling to look inwards. The individual can remain in this pre-growth stage of fixedness and rigidity (Rogers, 1961), wherein they may not take personal responsibility for their actions or how their life has unfolded and they may not engage with their mind or attempt to understand themselves. This results in a sense of distance from the self, particularly one's psychological and social being. One may not question their situation or look inward, living very much on autopilot (Rogers, 1961).

We also suggest that social determinants, just as they exert a powerful effect on overall health (WHO, 2008), may influence one's capacity and willingness to engage with their personal growth process (e.g. Kaufman, 2020). To some degree, engagement with the personal growth process carries with it the privilege of having one's basic needs for survival more or less met (i.e. safety, nutrition, housing). This is indeed suggested in the new hierarchy of needs by Kaufman (2020; based on Maslow, 1962) and makes it imperative that these basic needs are met to ensure every individual has the opportunity to engage with growth. This is not to say that personal growth is impossible for people who are struggling to meet their basic needs – indeed, there is evidence that certain individuals can and do engage with growth even in dire circumstances, as suggested in the literature surrounding post-traumatic growth (see Frankl, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2018).

3.3. Psychologically safe environment as basic condition for personal growth

While personal growth is located within the individual, it is not an inherently individual process – it is fundamentally embedded in and influenced by other people. For that reason, for growth to occur – in an individual who is willing to engage in the growth process – the individual must have a supportive, psychologically safe environment.

Rogers (1959, 1961) suggests that the social environment is an essential condition of the personal growth process, acting as either enabler or hindrance. According to Rogers (1961), the basic qualities of a growth-promoting environment are a sense of genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard.

Genuineness refers to an atmosphere marked by authentic expressions of emotions and the self, such that the individual feels that there is no need for a façade. Moreover, there is a congruence in communication, something Rogers (1980, p. 15) described as “when my experiencing of this moment is present in my awareness and when what is present in my awareness is present in my communication, then each of these three levels matches or is congruent. At such moments I am integrated or whole, I am completely in one piece.” All sides in the communicative event (both the self and the partner, be it therapist, teacher, facilitator, a friend, family member, etc.) are able to express their own emotions honestly and openly, showing vulnerability. This mutual opportunity to express vulnerability is a key component for the growth process to take root – the individual(s) feels that they are capable of processing self-related personal topics without needing to put on any defenses (Rogers, 1961).

Empathy, according to Rogers (1961), refers to a sense that the atmosphere is marked by a deep understanding and caring for the individual – there is a willingness to understand and adopt that individual’s perspective, such that the individual feels truly seen and heard (Rogers, 1961). Rogers (1980) writes of the importance of truly hearing the other individual:

“When I truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words, but him, and when I let him know that I have heard his own private personal meanings, many things happen. There is first of all a grateful look. He feels released. He wants to tell me more about his world. He surges forth in a new sense of freedom. He becomes more open to the process of change.” (Rogers, 1980, p. 10).

Finally, unconditional positive regard refers to a feeling that one’s worth is not in question and that one is being met with true acceptance without strings attached. There are, in other words, no conditions of worth (i.e. conditions placed on the self to be accepted) and one’s intrinsic worthiness is respected (Rogers, 1961). Rogers (1980) beautifully illustrates the unconditional positive regard towards others:

“People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them *be*. In fact, perhaps the reason we can truly appreciate a sunset is that we cannot control it. When I look at a sunset as I did the other evening, I don’t find myself saying, ‘Soften the orange a little on the right hand corner, and put a bit more purple along the base, and use a little more pink in the cloud color’. I don’t do that. I don’t *try* to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds.” (Rogers, 1980, p. 22).

All three conditions of the growth-promoting climate (congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard) were more recently described by Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020) as the integrated construct *psychological safety*. Psychological safety is referred to in organizational psychology as a belief among workers that it is safe to take interpersonal risks at the workplace (Edmondson et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2017), making it an important vehicle for successful organizational innovation and change (Newman et al., 2017). In this article, psychological safety refers to the sense that one can safely be oneself with trusted others without feeling the need to defend oneself against threats such as dismissal, mockery, rejection, diminishing of one’s words, bullying, or any other negative response. By removing these threats – as well as including conditions of growth such as a sense of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard – a growth-promoting atmosphere arises.

The basic conditions for growth in the PGP model are fulfilled by various aspects of the social context as opposed to only the client–therapist relationship. Psychological safety can arise from both one-on-

one relationships and groups as well as other contexts such as family, friend groups, organization or school or even an individual’s cultural belonging (including e.g. role models or idols). Furthermore, it is important to point out that while psychological safety from the social environment is an important precondition for growth, it serves also as a continuous source of support throughout the growth process.

Psychological safety may also become internalized over the growth process, as suggested by Rogers (1961) and discussed by Maurer and Daukantaitė (2020). Once an individual has an established source of safety within their social environment, thus allowing them to build other internal resources (particularly self-compassion, which we discuss further below) as part of the growth process, this sense of safety may become instilled within the individual. Such individuals would be more able to face life’s fluctuations, such as hardships, and grow because of this strong inner sense of safety, even in cases where their environment lacks a source of psychological safety (see Rogers, 1961; Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020; see also literature on post-traumatic growth: Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2018; Joseph & Linley, 2005).

3.4. Authenticity, harmony and life satisfaction as the “goals” of growth

Well-being is what the personal growth process leads towards, but it is not merely the end point. It is also intertwined with the process as a whole – enhancements to each of the individual subprocesses may lead to increases in well-being in terms of both the eudaimonic and hedonic aspects. In other words, well-being envelopes the growth process.

Well-being is conceptualized in the PGP model as authenticity (i.e. congruence or integration of self), harmony and life satisfaction. These aspects were chosen because of their similarities to Rogers’ (1961, 1964) observations of the growth process. He suggested that growth leads towards congruence (defined since as authenticity; Wood et al., 2008) and harmony with the world. Life satisfaction is our own addition, intended to provide a holistic view of well-being by adding a hedonic element to the eudaimonic and secondary-control forms of well-being observed by Rogers (i.e. authenticity and harmony, respectively; see Kjell, 2011).

Authenticity is defined as the coherence one finds between their intra- and interpersonal selves. In other words, the self as internally experienced (one’s emotions, thoughts, experiences, concept of self) coheres with how one’s outer self is interacting and behaving in a social context. Authenticity is overall an integration of the personality and social roles. An authentic person does not need to take up roles or put up a façade, but can be open in different circumstances (displaying identity consistency, which relates to well-being: see Daukantaitė & Soto-Thompson, 2014); they do not experience overbearing conflicts between awareness, experience and behavior. Growth occurs as individuals approach authenticity, also called the *integration of self* (also called congruence by Rogers, 1961) between their experience, awareness and behaviors (Rogers, 1961). Integrating one’s experiences by listening to the mind and actively holding these experiences in awareness allows for overt behaviors aligned with one’s value representations. Rogers (1951) also suggested that authenticity happens when one’s sense of self is in line with one’s experience of self (i.e. how one actually behaves in situations aligns with one’s self-concept; Rogers, 1951), which is important for well-being (Rogers, 1951, 1961). Importantly, authenticity is a continually fluctuating process (see Rogers, 1961).

Wood et al. (2008) and Joseph (2016) defined authenticity based on the Rogers (1961) concept of congruence. Wood et al. (2008) define it as a personality characteristic based on the organismic valuing process, particularly Rogers’ emphasis on connecting experiences with the ability to behave in line with one’s values (Wood et al., 2008). The construct has three subcomponents: 1) *alienation from the self*, which entails a person’s capacity to bring to awareness one’s “true experiencing” (i.e. what one is actually experiencing in the moment, devoid of external pressures and demands); alienation occurs when one is not aware of one’s true experience and can be described as a feeling of “not knowing oneself”. 2) *Authentic living* refers to one’s ability to behave in line with

one's true experiencing and values. 3) *Accepting external influence* refers to the degree to which a person considers other people's values and demands and behaves according to these demands, which can undermine authentic living and enhance the feeling of self-alienation if they are not aligned with the individual's true experiencing. Rejecting these demands enhances authenticity, which in turn is related to higher subjective and psychological well-being (Wood et al., 2008). Authenticity was also examined by Joseph (2016), who refers to its subcomponents as 1) 'know yourself' (listening to one's inner communications), 2) 'own yourself' (being able to reject external demands), and 3), and 'be yourself' (behaving in authentic ways).

Authenticity is also closely related to Siegel's (2011, 2018) concept of integration and mindsight. He proposes that well-being is in part based on the degree of integration across various levels of the self: 1) integration of consciousness (greater self-awareness and regulation of emotions); 2) horizontal integration (integration of both sides of the brain); 3) vertical integration (connecting with the body, i.e. nervous system, using the "wisdom of the body"); 4) memory integration (making implicit memories explicit and finding resolution to troubling events in one's life); 5) narrative integration (finding a coherent life-narrative); 6) state integration (finding coherence between different social roles in our lives); 7) interpersonal integration (ability to better tune in with others); and 8) temporal integration (accepting uncertainty and life's inevitable end). Integration of self and one's social world in these various ways is the basis of mental health (Siegel, 2011).

The other aspects of well-being in the PGP model are life satisfaction and harmony (Kjell, 2011; Kjell et al., 2015). Harmony refers to a sense of balance and flexibility in integrating different facets of one's life (Kjell et al., 2015; Lomas, 2021). Lomas (2021) has suggested that because of Western biases toward individualism in research, harmony is an underappreciated aspect of well-being. The harmony in life construct described by Kjell et al. (Kjell, 2011; Kjell et al., 2015) considers harmony as a secondary-control aspect of living – that is, the individual is capable of letting go of their control and living harmoniously with the fluctuations of life together with one's self and the social and natural environment. On the other hand is well-being as a primary-control aspect of living (e.g. subjective well-being: Diener, 2009), which according to Kjell (2011) implies that the individual can exert control over their environment and does not need to take into consideration other beings and systems. Secondary control is related more closely to 'existential courage' in being able to let go of control and live in harmony with the environment in a peaceful co-existence. According to Rogers (1964), a person that is growing is oriented towards harmonizing with their surrounding world, possessing a benevolent attitude towards others and the world. In fact, Rogers (1964) considered the fully functioning person to be one who feels connected to the rest of humanity and the world, wishing for and enacting the well-being of the self and others.

Life satisfaction is considered to also increase during the personal growth process. Life satisfaction, as a domain of subjective well-being, is commonly defined as a hedonic form of well-being. Prior studies have found life satisfaction to be related to the other well-being constructs of the PGP model, specifically eudaimonia (e.g. authenticity) (see Huta, 2016; Keyes et al., 2002; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016) and harmony (e.g. Kjell et al., 2015; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). However, it may be misleading to conceptualize life satisfaction as solely hedonic, as people may feel satisfied with their lives for eudaimonic reasons. It may be understood as a domain-independent concept (Diener et al., 1985). In other words, a person may be satisfied with their lives for a multitude of different reasons – because they feel that life is meaningful, because they have a sense of inner direction and self-acceptance, or because they have functional and supportive interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, we include it as an aspect of well-being in the PGP model to provide a holistic perspective of well-being as it is currently understood in positive psychology literature. In other words, as an individual engages with the growth process, strengthening their capacities for acting authentically and in harmony with others, may also become more capable of

recognizing aspects of their lives that they are satisfied with.

The PGP model thus posits that personal growth is the multidimensional enhancement of well-being capacity, encompassing eudaimonia (authenticity), harmony (as a secondary-control aspect of well-being: Kjell et al., 2015), and hedonia. We must emphasize that the personal growth process does not end in a permanent state of high well-being; the ups and downs of life can still have an impact, with the potential to disrupt the individual's engagement with the growth process and their experience of well-being. Well-being as a state is a transitory but integral part of the process itself, whereby an individual becomes increasingly capable of experiencing a sense of integration within and between the self and the social and natural worlds as well as a sense of satisfaction with one's life. In this transitory, "self-transcendent" state, the individual extends their circle of concern from the self and individual towards others and the collective wellness of the world (e.g. Kaufman, 2020).

3.5. The personal growth process

When the basic conditions of growth (genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard, or psychological safety) are met and an individual's willingness to engage with growth is activated, the actual process begins to take root. Besides self-awareness (presented later), the subprocesses of the PGP model do not necessarily occur in sequential order. Moreover, a person moves forward and backward in the growth process continuously and is never really finished. In the following sections, we 1) present important subprocesses of the PGP model (see Fig. 1), 2) explain how these subprocesses fit into the positive psychology literature, and 3) illustrate their interlinkages.

Fig. 1. The Personal Growth Process (PGP) Model, illustrating the conditions for growth in the centre (psychological safety), and the personal growth subprocesses surrounding it, starting with self-awareness. The outer circle represents the outcome of growth, well-being defined as authenticity, harmony and life-satisfaction, enveloping the process.

3.5.1. Self-awareness

The self, in the context of the PGP model, refers to the multidimensional construct containing both one's intra- and interpersonal beings, meaning that one forms the self both from the collection of internal experiences as well as the way in which one connects and interacts with others in their social surroundings (Carden et al., 2021). The inner experiences one comes to understand are one's emotions (emotional awareness), sensations, thoughts, beliefs, attributions, values, etc. The outer experiences are the individual's capacity to be aware of themselves in social situations and understand how their behavior influences the situation and other people. Therefore, the self is understood here as both an internal subjective being but also as a more external and interpersonal being. The self is a natural self-organizing aspect of the human mind, whereby the individual is seeking coherence between self and environment via consistent behavior and cognition (see Ryan & Deci, 2018). Awareness, on the other hand, is the act of engaging in deeper insight and understanding of events both internal and external to the person. It refers to the conscious understanding of such events and an ability to hold the meaning of those events in mind (e.g. Carden et al., 2021).

Self-awareness is well captured in constructs such as mindful awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2015), meta-awareness (e.g. Schooler et al., 2011), mindsight (Siegel, 2011, 2018) and mentalization (particularly the subscale of mentalization of self; Dimitrijević et al., 2018), and refers here to the ability to listen to and better understand the self. Targets of such awareness include one's reactions, bodily sensations, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, attributions, values, behavior, influence on others, etc. Rogers (1961) wrote that self-awareness takes the longest to unfold. Moreover, while it can be considered the starting point of the personal growth process, it is never finished.

Self-awareness is seen as a precursor to other subprocesses –

including autonomy and integration of self (i.e. authenticity) – making it somewhat more fundamental in the model (see Fig. 1). For instance, a sense of autonomy requires an understanding of which aspects of one's value system and thoughts are governed by outside sources (e.g. internalized societal norms, other people's ideas) and which are endorsed internally. Without self-awareness, it is unlikely that one will be able to distinguish these positions. Similarly, authenticity inherently entails 'knowing the self' (Joseph, 2016; Wood et al., 2008), making self-awareness intrinsic to its definition. Self-awareness is therefore suggested to come prior to the full development of authenticity. These suggestions would need further investigation.

Positive psychology research has shown that awareness is important for well-being (the focus of the growth process). For example, Dimitrijević et al.'s (2018) concept of mentalization contains aspects of self-awareness, referring to the sociocognitive ability to recognize one's own thoughts and emotions. More specifically, it refers to one's ability to interpret one's own behavior through reference to intentional mental states such as emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes (Dimitrijević et al., 2018). Mentalization has three subcomponents: 1) mentalization of the self, 2) mentalization of others and 3) motivation to mentalize (Dimitrijević et al., 2018). Mentalization of the self (i.e. introspection) is particularly close to the PGP model's concept of self-awareness.

Self-awareness is also closely linked with the concept of mindful awareness, or the ability to focus on the inner workings of one's mind in the present moment (i.e. Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Mindful awareness has been defined variously as a sensory or a cognitive process. As a sensory process, it refers to the gentle observation, without judgment, of the present moment and any inner experiences or thoughts arising in that moment with a continual directing of attention back into an 'attentional anchor' such as the flow of the breath (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). According to Brown and Ryan (2003), authors of the Mindful Awareness Attention scale, mindful awareness "can be considered an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality." (p. 822). Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2018) write that it is "defined as the open and receptive awareness of what is occurring both within people and within their context" (p. 268).

As a cognitive process, mindful awareness is defined as thinking with awareness (Langer, 1989, 2016) – that is, being actively aware of one's thought processes, attending to the notion that there are alternatives to one's views, and being able to actively adjust one's behaviour according to unfolding circumstances. Someone with a high level of cognitive mindful awareness tends a) have greater openness to novelty, b) is more alert to distinction, c) is more sensitive to context, d) has a greater implicit awareness of multiple perspectives and e) has a present-focused orientation (Langer, 2016). As is evident, whether defined as a sensory or as a cognitive process, mindful awareness is a similar concept to self-awareness, which we define as the ability to observe the self in the present moment without judgment.

Another closely related concept is Siegel's (2011) *mindsight*, which refers to the ability to see and understand one's own mind as well as the minds of others with greater clarity. According to Siegel (2018), this awareness is the "prime mover" of the growth process – personal transformation occurs through cultivating *mindsight* and rehearsing inward-directed attention to achieve a resolution. The subcomponents of *mindsight* are 1) insight into one's mind, 2) empathy towards others, and 3) integration between inner workings (e.g. nervous system, reactions) and the social world (Siegel, 2011). Importantly, awareness directed at the self strengthens neural patterns in the brain relating to integration and transformation – as Siegel (2018, p. 19) writes, "Where attention goes, neural firing flows, and neural connection grows".

Drawing on the concepts of mentalization, mindful awareness and *mindsight*, we define self-awareness in the PGP model as holding one's mind in awareness and reflecting on one's way to interact with the social world. As both an intra- and an interpersonal phenomenon, self-awareness means engaging more in introspection (i.e. being aware of one's emotions, sensations, reactions, thoughts, beliefs, values,

attitudes, opinions etc.) and reflecting on how one interacts and influences other people in the social world. Defined this way, self-awareness is a meta-awareness of one's mind, including how clearly one is able to understand one's mind, emotions and behavior and how it connects to their social world.

3.5.2. Openness towards experiencing and change

Another fundamental mental shift in the growth process is becoming more willing to openly orient towards one's true experiencing without feeling the need to put up facades or defenses (Rogers, 1961). This concept is distinct from the "openness" trait of the Big Five, which refers to a general tendency to be receptive to novel experiences and events. Openness to experiencing and change is the process of openly observing one's unfolding experiences and listening to the self, which over time crystallizes into a greater sensitivity to face one's self and how one experiences the world without a need to escape or deny it. It involves embracing complexity and fluidity, where one stops putting experiences into pre-defined categories. Each experience is taken as new and uncategorized, and there is no need to immediately judge it (Rogers, 1961) and the need to have clear definitions, categories, certainty and sense of unchangingness is lessened (Rogers, 1961). The individual also becomes more open to change and embraces oneself as fluid rather than fixed (avoiding identity essentialism, Dulaney et al., 2019; Christy et al., 2019).

Important to this concept is the Rogers' (1961) notion that there is no real one 'true' fixed representation of the self (as identity essentialism would suggest; see Dulaney et al., 2019; Christy et al., 2019); the self is a fluid process that changes throughout life according to one's experience. As such, according to Rogers (1961) and the PGP model, somebody with a greater willingness to let go of identity essentialism (i.e. a fixed view of the self) and instead embrace the self as fluid in response to the environment can be considered to be farther along in the personal growth process.

Greater openness to experiencing and change is also theorized to be inversely related to the need for cognitive closure. Need for cognitive closure refers to a desire to receive information about the world (and the self) that is clear, unambiguous and unlikely to change (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Adopting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) might enter the personal growth process at this point. Also called an incremental mindset, a growth mindset is an attributional style whereby one considers themselves to be capable of changing through effort – in other words, one embraces the change in oneself through time and one's own intentional actions. A fixed mindset, by contrast, refers to the attributional style that one is an unchanging pre-determined entity (Dweck, 2006; Yeager et al., 2019). This openness to change applies as much to personality characteristics as life circumstances (Rogers, 1961). The need for security, as represented in a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006), is lessened as the individual becomes more open to the changes that life brings. This leads us naturally to the next point about existential courage.

3.5.3. Existential courage to face adversities in life

Courageously facing and accepting life's ups and downs is another turn in the growth process. Various existential/humanistic/positive psychology thinkers such as Frankl (1946/1992), Wong (2010; Wong et al., 2021) and Purjo (2020) indicate that a fundamental element of human life (and personal growth) is the cultivation of 'existential courage' in the face of opposition and hardships. This means orientating towards meaning in difficult situations to find the resolution and courage to weather that adversity, similar to concepts like hardiness (Maddi et al., 2004; 2006) and *sisu* (Lahti, 2019). In the PGP model, existential courage entails an attitude to courageously face adverse life situations with grace, responding flexibly and appropriately (i.e. changing course when necessary).

Maddi (2004, 2006, 2013) defines hardiness as the belief that one can deal with adversities in life by turning them into opportunities.

Hardiness comprises three main aspects: commitment, control and challenge. Commitment is the willingness to not sink into isolation, but rather actively orient towards the people and events involved in the adversity. Control is the willingness to avoid passivity and exert active control over the situation. Finally, challenge describes the willingness to resist fear of change and seeking easy comforts, taking the current situation with its adversities head on and believing that it can help one grow. According to Maddi (2004), all three components are necessary for strong hardiness. Rehearsing hardiness also depends on how the adversities themselves are seen, i.e. they are 1) developmental adversities rather than devastating catastrophes, 2) manageable rather than unmanageable, and 3) important to engage with rather than run away from (Maddi, 2004). Maddi (2004, 2013) has suggested that hardiness may be a way to operationalize existential courage.

More recently, Lahti (2019) examined *sisu*, a malleable trait (i.e. able to be enhanced) considered to be part of the Finnish national consciousness that describes an embodied fortitude to face adversities by tapping into a 'second wind' of mental strength – that is, the ability to exceed our apparent limits. Lahti (2019) conducted an extensive qualitative thematic analysis ($N = 1208$) of *sisu*, extracting three main components: 1) extraordinary perseverance – enduring hardships, finishing what one starts, doing the impossible and exceeding oneself in face of insurmountable adversities; 2) an action mindset, or taking action against adversities with boldness, facing one's fears head-on, and not being bound by the observed limitations of the situation; and 3) latent power – a visceral and somatic (rather than conscious) reserve of will-power, a 'second wind' through which one draws the strength to face adversities. During the personal growth process, the enhancement of existential courage may involve the utilization of *sisu*.

3.5.4. Sense of autonomy (internal locus of control)

Rogers (1961) observed during his therapy sessions that individuals often gradually became less heteronomous (externally directed) and more autonomous (internally directed) after realizing which thoughts, beliefs, and values they themselves endorsed and which came from externally placed demands and pressures. A better understanding of one's own internal phenomena means that one is more likely to enact them in daily life – one feels that they are in the driver's seat rather than a passenger. The belief that one is able to directly impact one's life and determine one's own future is called an internal locus of control (in contrast to an external locus of control, or the belief that one is controlled by outside forces; e.g. Crick & Dodge, 1994). With an internal locus of control, the individual gains a greater sense of autonomy over many aspects of their lives, from small daily attitudes and actions to long-term instances of planning and goal setting. They are less likely to perceive themselves as a passive victim of circumstances or others' whims. These feelings in turn strengthen one's ability to distinguish between one's own thoughts and beliefs and those that arise from the influence of close (or not-so-close) others in one's life, allowing them to reject those that are incongruent with their selves and embrace those that are congruent. This distinction can help one in pursuing more self-concordant actions (e.g. Milyavskaya et al., 2014; Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

Autonomy is one of the basic needs of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2018) and refers to having volition and self-direction in one's decisions and actions (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Autonomy is also one of the six subcomponents of Ryff's (1989) theory of psychological well-being. While for SDT, autonomy is seen as a prerequisite of or an essential need for well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2018), it is considered an outcome in psychological well-being theory (Ryff, 1989) – in other words, it is an aspect of well-being itself.

In the PGP model, autonomy is neither a need/prerequisite of nor a component of well-being, but a skill. Whereas a need is a stable characteristic that is fulfilled mostly by one's social environment, autonomy in the PGP model can be rehearsed and developed as well as fall into disuse – it is, in other words, dynamic. It refers to an active process

whereby one cultivates (or does not) an internal locus of control. Similarly, distinct from Ryff's (1989) conceptualization of autonomy as an aspect of well-being, we conceptualize it as an element of higher functioning that enhances one's *capacity* for well-being in tandem with the other subprocesses herein.

A common criticism of autonomy is an 'individualized bias' whereby it is considered independent from others' influence (e.g. Becker & Marecek, 2008). However, as discussed by Ryan and Deci (2018) autonomy is not strictly about independence, but more about volition – to be able to act in a manner of one's choosing as opposed to acting independently of others. This is a subtle but important difference (Ryan & Deci, 2018). When autonomy is understood more as volition, we can see that an autonomous person can still be interdependent with and highly influenced by others through social bonds. In the PGP model, autonomy is more about volition than about independence.

3.5.5. Taking responsibility for the self and others

The next turn is taking responsibility for one's own life and how it affects other's lives (Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020; Rogers, 1961). Through a heightened awareness of one's thoughts, beliefs, and values and the ability to act in self-concordant ways (see Sheldon, 2014), one may understand the essential responsibility one has over one's own choices, behaviors and outcomes. One understands that there is a limit to one's control over external forces, but also that one is responsible for one's actions in spite of that limited control. Importantly, acknowledging this responsibility does not give one license to ruthlessly blame oneself for uncontrollable suffering; rather, it helps one recognize situations in which one has control and exercise that power responsibly. At the same time, the person may also come to understand their influence on others and can claim responsibility on this influence on others.

Such responsibility is particularly important for individuals high in a sense of autonomy, which was noted by both Wong (2010) and Arslan and Wong (2022). Freedom without responsibility can have destructive consequences, meaning that taking responsibility for one's actions is essential for a meaningful, value-prone life (Arslan & Wong, 2022; Wong, 2010). These researchers have approached responsibility along two lines: personal and social (Arslan & Wong, 2022). Personal responsibility refers to recognizing one's accountability for one's and others' well-being (see Arslan & Wong, 2022), whereas social responsibility refers to the civic and moral values paired with action that benefit society at large (see Arslan & Wong, 2022). According to Wong (2010), responsibility is an essential component of meaning in life. He describes this in his PURE model, which describes the components of meaning in life: Purpose (having purposeful life goals), Understanding (the demands of each situation in life), Responsibility (taking responsibility over one's purpose and actions) and Evaluation (making continuous evaluations of one's choices and their value-base) (see Wong, 2010).

Within the PGP model, taking responsibility for the self, others and the whole system (the world) is an inherent part of the growth process. The individual, having the capacity to be more autonomous in their actions and cognitions, comes to realize their role in their own life as well as the greater social world as agents of change. This acknowledgment comes with a greater sense of responsibility. Claiming this responsibility for oneself is a leap towards maturity and growth.

3.5.6. Befriending the self: self-compassion and trust in one's organism

A heightened understanding of the self and a stronger sense of autonomy may also cultivate a more loving and compassionate attitude towards the self. Rogers (1961, 1980) saw that some clients who felt better able to trust their experience and understand their selves also had a sense that they *liked* and accepted what they came to learn about themselves, usually without any conditions of worth (see Patterson & Joseph, 2006). In other words, the unconditional positive regard in their social environment (necessary for growth to take root) was mirrored within themselves – an *unconditional positive self-regard*. At this point,

one's source of psychological safety may become an inner resource. Patterson and Joseph (2006) found that such unconditional positive self-regard was related highly to psychological well-being and happiness. Similarly, Flanagan et al. (2015) found that post-traumatic growth was also related to higher levels of unconditional positive self-regard.

Positive self-regard is a related construct to self-compassion, which Neff (2003, 2011) describes as a kinder attitude towards the self, awareness of and compassion towards one's hardships, and an understanding of how those hardships relate to the shared human condition. In other words, self-compassion is the implicit understanding that one is not isolated in their experiences, but that such experiences are shared by a multitude of others (Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff, 2003). This orientation is much in line with the compassionate attitude Rogers (1961) observed in his clients.

In the PGP model, the subprocess of self-compassion consists of both a sense of trust in and unconditional regard for the self. This process of becoming friends with oneself may also entail being more comfortable in one's own company and more capable of enjoying solitude. Finnish psychotherapists Hellsten and Tuomikoski (2016) proposed that finding comfort in solitude is a key quality of personal growth. In the PGP theory, personal growth involves a movement away from the idea that solitude is a painful state of loneliness, towards a fruitful state of reinvention, relaxation and even flourishing (see a similar argument on solitude by Weinstein et al., 2021).

Here, there is a clear connection between self-awareness, openness towards experiencing and change, and self-compassion. Rogers (1961) also observed in self-compassionate individuals a tendency to better trust their own "organismic experience". Rogers (1961, 1963) describes this as a feeling of being able to trust in the flow of one's experience and use it as a guide for one's decisions and behavior. As with the previous subprocesses, when one is more capable of being open towards one's experiencing, one is able to better befriend the self and can also hold in awareness one's experience (reactions, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, representations) without the need to be defensive. One feels that their experience is trustworthy and will guide them towards growth. This is in a sense a greater trust in one's 'gut-feeling' (Rogers, 1961, 1963). Accordingly, there may be a particularly powerful connection between self-awareness, openness towards experiencing and change, and self-compassion.

3.5.7. Compassion for other people and the world

Self-compassion naturally extends to compassion for others (e.g. see Lepron et al., 2015). Throughout the growth process, a person gains insight into the interconnectivity between themselves, other human beings, and the wider world. These feelings may cultivate a greater sense of 'common humanity' (Neff, 2003) and greater feeling of compassion for other people and the world. Rogers (1964) wrote:

"I find it significant that when individuals are prized as persons, the values they select do not run the full gamut of possibilities. I do not find, in such a climate of freedom, that one person comes to value fraud and murder and thievery, while another values a life of self-sacrifice, and another values only money. Instead there seems to be a deep and underlying thread of commonality. I believe that when the human being is inwardly free to choose whatever he deeply values, he tends to value those objects, experiences, and goals which make for his own survival, growth, and development, and for the survival and development of others. I hypothesize that it is characteristic of the human organism to prefer such actualizing and socialized goals when he is exposed to a growth promoting climate" (Rogers, 1964, p. 166)

In other words, Rogers (1964) observed that people, within a growth promoting climate, tend to develop a sense of common humanity and compassion for others' development and well-being. This suggests that personal growth is an inherently prosocial process.

Some researchers have recently taken on the task of measuring

compassion. Pommier et al. (2019) created a compassion scale on the basis of the self-compassion construct by Neff (2003), defining compassion as 'entailing more compassionate and less uncompassionate responding to others in terms of emotional responding, cognitive understanding, and paying attention to suffering' (p. 1–2). Their concept entails three subcomponents of compassion: 1) kindness towards others, 2) sense of common humanity (i.e. shared experiences, such as suffering), and 3) mindfulness (i.e. caring more about the suffering of others). Similarly, Gilbert (2014) defines compassion as having a strong sensitivity towards the suffering of other people as well as the self, as well as a willingness to prevent and alleviate that suffering.

A related concept is benevolence, defined as the feeling of being able to contribute to the betterment of other people's lives and the world at large (Martela & Ryan, 2016, 2020). Benevolence has been shown to explain variations in subjective well-being (Martela & Ryan, 2016) and may be the fourth basic psychological need in SDT (Martela & Ryan, 2020). Andersson et al. (2021) found that benevolence was positively related to self-compassion and negatively related to mental health symptoms such as depression, stress and emotional exhaustion, suggesting that benevolence is a positive mental health factor.

Based on the above, within the PGP model, growth entails a movement towards greater compassion and benevolence, which may relate to an individual's growing understanding that they are fundamentally connected to the rest of humanity. A stronger connection to the world may entail greater care for the world and compassion for the lives of others, both near (immediate family and friends) and far (distant people and strangers).

4. Discussion

4.1. Implications for theory

The PGP model described above has several implications for theory within the field of positive psychology. First, it provides a structure for the complex and as yet obscure process of personal growth. While a familiar phenomenon in both academic and lay discourses, personal growth process still lacks a unified theoretical framework in positive psychology. The PGP model provides such a framework through theorization of the interconnections between well-evidenced positive psychological constructs (e.g. autonomy, growth mindset, compassion, self-compassion, harmony), based on the rich therapeutic tradition of Carl Rogers. As noted above, researching each construct separately has been important for deepening our scientific understanding of their place within the human experience, but it is equally important to understand how these concepts are linked and integrated across time (see a similar argument in Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020).

Second, the model proposes that well-being, far from being an ultimate state of superior functioning, is fundamentally embedded within a series of parallel subprocesses that serve as resources for building one's capacity for well-being. In other words, the subprocesses of self-compassion, autonomy, compassion for others, etc. serve to enhance an individual's capacity for self-integration and harmony. Furthermore, we suggest that the individual's overall mental health (lack of symptoms, presence of well-being) may improve throughout the personal growth process.

Conceptualizing well-being as a concomitant process with each of the mental shifts noted above has wider implications for how we pursue the enhancement of well-being, particularly in terms of interventions in schools or workplaces. Indeed, by directing efforts towards the most fundamental aspects of the model for personal growth – willingness to engage with the growth process, psychological safety, and self-awareness – interventions may be able to help foster more organic, longer-term well-being enhancement.

A further implication of this model is that it positions personal growth not as a Westernized individualized process but as a fundamentally social one. Personal growth is often coupled with the notion of

the “self-made man”, someone who is able to exist and thrive on their own devices (e.g. De Keere, 2014) and both Rogers and positive psychology as a field have been criticized for being too individualistic (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Friedman, 2008). In contrast, the PGP model is defined by the social, which is essential for the initiation of growth (psychological safety) as well as one of the ‘goals’ (prosocial tendencies). An individual engaged with growth is far from “self-made” – they are a fundamentally interconnected being influenced by the systems in which they are embedded. One of the ‘outcomes’ of growth – harmony – is also aligned with Eastern conceptualizations of well-being, which are often disregarded due to Western biases in research (Lomas, 2021).

This article aimed to introduce a novel model of personal growth as a process using knowledge from humanistic psychology. It does not aim to be a systematic review of the different approaches to personal growth in the research literature (although such a review should be undertaken in the future). Although we ground the model in existing empirical evidence, the model itself needs to be tested – does the process unfold through these suggested mental shifts or subprocesses? What is missing? Because the personal growth process is chaotic, longitudinal studies of trajectories of growth – ideally based on holistic, person-centered methodologies – are necessary to find support for this model, alongside qualitative studies that help deepen our understanding of personal growth as an experience.

We have several suggestions for how the study of personal growth, and specifically the PGP model, could be taken forward. First, mixed-methods studies may be useful for testing and refining the model. Qualitative interviews could be conducted on individuals who perceive themselves as having personally grown, in order to enrich our understanding of the subprocesses and ‘outcomes’ of the PGP model. Further insights may be gleaned by interviewing therapists with extensive experience of therapeutic change, who may be able to offer another perspective on how the subprocess or ‘outcomes’ unfold. It may also be useful to explore personal growth in different age groups, to clarify how the process differs across the life course. This line of inquiry would enable us to better define the aspects of the model and aid in operationalizing them for measurement. It is essential to develop valid measurements of the subprocesses in order to test the PGP model on a larger scale. Also, we suggest testing specific hypotheses about the role of psychological safety, as well as the more ‘fundamental’ role of self-awareness, in the PGP model. This could be done through longitudinal structural equation modeling studies looking at mediation effects.

The present paper is a first step towards an explanation of personal growth as a process. However, far more extensive discussion is warranted, including comparison with other models and theories of growth and developmental change. For instance, the PGP model proposes that self-awareness is integral for growth, whereas Robitschek et al. (2012) suggest that personal growth may happen outside of our conscious knowledge (Robitschek, 1999). However, even in Robitschek et al.’s (2012) concept of personal growth initiative, intentionality of growth is central. Moreover, Robitschek (1999) notes that unintentional change is negatively related to well-being. Such discrepancies and similarities between personal growth models and models of developmental change is necessary to get a more comprehensive understanding of personal growth as a process. Such comparisons should be the subject of future theoretical and empirical papers.

4.2. Implications for practice: the importance of social atmosphere

We have emphasized above that personal growth, far from being an individualized process, is prosocial and deeply embedded within one’s social environment. This suggests that nurturing this process is a common social responsibility. The social environment is essential to growth promotion (Joseph, 2021), which means that environmental conditions that cultivate psychological safety are critical in any situation in which people’s personal growth is of high value. Such situations may include raising children, forging friendships, achieving a successful therapeutic

relationship, successfully implementing a positive psychology intervention at schools or workplaces, working in a team, or any other situation in which people can develop and grow.

Take, for example, implementing a positive educational intervention (Norris, 2015; Norris et al., 2013). The main aim of positive education is to promote youth well-being by bringing the science of positive psychology into the classroom. Commonly, the greatest care is taken on the content of the education – what is being taught. However, if that focus were to shift towards the personal growth process, the context is much more salient – *how can the growth process be facilitated in this context?* This shift in focus entails a shift in priorities – rather than content, the “quality” of the interpersonal atmosphere takes precedence, which signals a fundamental change in how positive interventions are planned and implemented in the classrooms. Most notably, it becomes clear that the intervention is ultimately an interaction between individuals in which the recipient can experience the situation as growth-enhancing, neutral, or in the worst-case scenario even stifling. With more awareness of the importance of the social context, interventions may be more likely to succeed in promoting recipients’ personal growth. Additionally, the PGP model would implicate which types of well-being resources (subprocesses) should be targeted with interventions – cultivating the various subprocesses with different exercises would be advisable.

The PGP model’s focus on context, namely psychological safety, also highlights the importance of considering different temperaments and personalities in the classroom, especially in the case of highly sensitive students (see Boyce, 2019; Greven et al., 2019). Highly sensitive students might be simultaneously the most likely to benefit from an intervention (as long as they perceive the environment as supportive; Nocentini et al., 2018) and most likely to suffer in unsupportive environments (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). Ensuring psychological safety for such students may involve not forcing them to expose their inner feelings in front of others, not pushing them to perform, or not making them participate in an overtly active manner (see discussion on how to support highly sensitive children in Boyce, 2019).

The PGP model may also be useful in psychotherapy or counselling. A therapist or a counsellor could use the PGP model to target different subprocesses through various exercises, such as using self-reflection of values, cultivating self-compassion, or rehearsing mindfulness (aiming to enhance self-awareness and openness to experience), while ensuring that this happens in a psychologically safe atmosphere. The PGP model, in other words, provides a framework for practitioners to be able to target the aspects suggested most relevant for personal growth.

Finally, the PGP model may be useful in developmental research and practice. Based on the PGP model, personal growth may be supported through autonomy-supportive parenting (e.g. Benito-Gomez et al., 2020), which focuses on supporting authentic expression and mutual engagement in reflection of the self, others and the world (to enhance self-awareness, perspective and openness to experiencing and change), resting on a foundation of unconditional positive regard for the child (see similar arguments for the need for unconditional positive regard and scaffolding to enhance adolescent authenticity by Harter, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The PGP model provides a framework of the process of personal growth, representing the first formal attempt to explain what happens when an individual experiences growth. The model describes personal growth as a highly socio-cognitive process whereby the social environment plays a crucial enabling (or stifling) role. The personal growth process itself is suggested to be a long-term fluctuating process involving shifts in self-awareness, openness to experience and change, higher levels of existential courage in facing life’s ups and downs, sense of autonomy (internal locus of control), ability to take personal responsibility, cultivating greater compassion for the self, and finally compassion for other people and the world, all of which coincides with a growing capacity for well-being (a sense of integration, authenticity,

harmony and life satisfaction). The personal growth process is a natural change process, but its unfolding is largely dependent on the basic needs provided by a psychologically safe social environment. We thus have a social responsibility to cultivate social environments that can promote instead of stifle the personal growth process.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mia M. Maurer: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jason Maurer:** Conceptualization, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Eva Hoff:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Daiva Daukantaite:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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