



# Human Thriving

## A Conceptual Debate and Literature Review

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**Abstract:** Human beings have an inherent drive for self-improvement and growth (Maslow, 1965; Ryan & Deci, 2002). In a quest to understand how human beings achieve fulfillment, researchers have sought to explain why some individuals thrive in certain situations, whereas others merely survive or succumb. The topic of thriving has become popular with scholars, resulting in a divergent body of literature and a lack of consensus on the key processes that underpin the construct. In view of such differences, the purpose of this paper is threefold: (i) to review a number of existing theoretical and conceptual debates, and to propose a conceptualization of thriving applicable across different populations and domains; (ii) to consolidate pertinent bodies of extant thriving research and identify key personal and contextual enablers to inform applied practice; and (iii) to identify noteworthy gaps within existing literature so as to make recommendations for future research and, ultimately, support the development of effective psychosocial interventions for thriving.

**Keywords:** functioning, health, performance, thrive, well-being

Human beings have an inherent drive for self-improvement and growth (Maslow, 1965; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This desire for personal fulfillment, however, can place human beings in unfamiliar scenarios (e.g., first day at school, job promotion, getting married) and expose them to situational demands that they likely react to in a wide range of ways. For instance, on occasions, these demands may prove overwhelming and some individuals may subsequently struggle with and succumb to the scenario, whereas in other instances, individuals may manage and survive. Alternatively, when exposed to a scenario, individuals may *thrive*; that is, they may grow or develop well and vigorously, and they may prosper and be successful (cf. Simpson, Weiner, Murray, & Burchfield, 1989; Soanes & Stevenson, 2005).

Within the academic literature, the quest for understanding human fulfillment and thriving gathered momentum toward the end of the 20th century. This focus culminated in *American Psychologist* publishing a Positive Psychology special issue for their millennial edition (see, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000a), which marked a prominent landmark in the field of psychology and set in motion a paradigmatic shift from an emphasis on pathology toward positive human functioning (cf. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000b). Indeed, in the introductory article of the special issue, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000b) concluded with a prediction that, in the 21st century, “a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and

communities” (p. 13). Researchers continue to work toward this goal and a recent review of positive psychology literature found that the field had burgeoned since the special issue in 2000, with over 1,300 articles published between 1999 and 2013 (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). However, this expansion of human functioning literature has been divergent and a lack of consensus exists on many of the key processes that underpin thriving. Accordingly, within this paper, we aim to discuss a number of existing theoretical and conceptual debates, and propose a conceptualization of thriving applicable across different populations and domains; consolidate pertinent bodies of thriving research and identify key personal and contextual enablers; and identify noteworthy gaps within existing literature so as to make recommendations for future research. To address this aim, the narrative is split into three main sections: Critical Issues in Understanding Human Thriving, Influential Psychosocial Variables for Human Thriving, and Future Directions for Research and Practice.

## Critical Issues in Understanding Human Thriving

### What is Thriving?

Although the topic of *thriving* is of interest to many researchers, much confusion exists regarding what is

explicitly meant by the term. In part, this confusion has resulted from ambiguity introduced from temporal and contextual variance in the construct (cf. Lerner, 2004). To elaborate on the temporal variation, Benson and Saito (2001) identified different thriving indicators for youth (e.g., positive nutrition, school success) and adult (e.g., community engagement, work effectiveness) populations. The variety of indicators suggests that thriving is multifaceted and may appear qualitatively different across individuals, making it difficult to integrate extant work and to establish a coherent operational definition to accurately reflect the construct across samples. In terms of contextual variance in the construct, researchers have espoused various conceptualizations based on the type of domain investigated (e.g., developmental, performance). Specifically, researchers examining human thriving in developmental domains (e.g., positive youth development) have generally conceptualized thriving as a developmental and growth-oriented process (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), whereas in performance domains (e.g., business) thriving has typically been based on a sense of accomplishment, prosperity, success, and wealth (see, e.g., Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010; Cui, 2007; Jackson, McDonald, & Wilkes, 2011; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). These domain-specific conceptualizations have resulted in a variety of thriving definitions (see Table 1), creating confusion as to whether thriving is a state, a process, or both a state and a process (cf. Benson & Scales, 2009). Additionally, questions remain as to whether thriving is a domain-specific experience or whether it requires a more global realization (Benson & Scales, 2009; see also, Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). The divergent meanings of thriving and the lack of a commonly accepted definition are problematic for scholars, because conceptual consensus provides direction and boundaries for scientific inquiry (Kaplan, 1964). To overcome these issues and advance the field, a ubiquitous and robust definition of thriving is required that is applicable across different populations and domains.

When developing such a definition of thriving, it is necessary to identify the commonalities in existing definitions and conceptual interpretations. By reflecting on the definitions of thriving in Table 1, it is apparent that two recurrent themes are development and success. More specifically, the development component of thriving relates to progressive enhancements that are either of a physical (e.g., an infant learning to walk), psychological (e.g., learning adaptive coping styles), or social (e.g., establishing a friendship group) nature. The success component is typically evidenced through a variety of temporally and contextually relevant outcomes (e.g., attainment scores, cardiovascular capacity, wealth). Furthermore, thriving is recognized as being multifaceted in nature (see, e.g., Spreitzer, Sutcliffe,

Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005), with development and success experienced in tandem rather than in isolation (cf. Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014). Indeed, Su et al. (2014) stated that “to thrive in life is not only marked by feeling of happiness, or a sense of accomplishment, or having supportive and rewarding relationships, but is a collection of all these aspects” (p. 272). Therefore, thriving can be broadly defined as *the joint experience of development and success*. The definition proposed here overcomes the temporal restrictiveness apparent in previous definitions that have been specific to certain age groups (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2003), while also considering a more broad focus than definitions that have been devised for particular contexts (e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005) or scenarios (e.g., Park, 1998). Furthermore, it recognizes that thriving can be a global construct (e.g., an individual can be thriving in all areas of their lives) or it can be experienced in specific scenarios (e.g., an individual can be experiencing development and success in their schooling, but not necessarily in their sport).

To achieve both development and success an individual needs to experience holistic functioning (cf. Su et al., 2014), which has typically been determined through indices of well-being and performance (see, e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Well-being is described as the state of being or doing well in life and can be categorized into physical (Scheier & Carver, 1987), emotional (Keyes, 2002), psychological (Ryff, 1989), and social (Keyes, 1998) dimensions. High levels of well-being are important for thriving as they demonstrate that the personal and social functioning necessary for development is occurring (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2001). Turning to performance, this is determined by the level of quality shown in the execution of an action, operation, or process (Simpson et al., 1989), and can be assessed, for example, on a range of artistic, athletic, cognitive, motor, or work-related tasks. An individual's performance on such tasks is considered to reflect their level of functioning (cf. Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and, if a high-level of functioning is achieved, superior performance may orient an individual to achieve success (cf. Lerner et al., 2003; Scales et al., 2000). The multifaceted nature of thriving means that subjectively perceiving high levels on only one of these indices, however, would not be sufficient for an individual to achieve development and success. To elaborate, if an individual was to perceive a high-level of performance and experience a low-level of well-being (e.g., vitality) he or she may be successful, but this may be accompanied by negative outcomes that could, ultimately, undermine development (e.g., increased risk of burnout; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Conversely, if an individual was to experience a high-level of well-being but perceive a low-level of performance, it is likely that his or her impaired task execution

**Table 1.** Definitions of thriving

Reference	Definition
O'Leary and Ickovics (1995, p. 122, 135)	"The effective mobilization of individual and social resources in response to risk or threat [or challenge]"
Epel et al. (1998, p. 303)	"Any physiological changes brought about as a result of facing stressors that leave one with greater physiological resilience than she or he had before facing adversity"
Ickovics and Park (1998, p. 237)	"The effective mobilization of individual and social resources in response to risk or threat, leading to positive mental or physical outcomes and/or positive social outcomes"
Park (1998, p. 269)	"A higher level of functioning in some life domain following a stressful encounter"
Walker and Grobe (1999, p. 152)	"The dynamic relationships among nutrition, weight, and psychosocial functioning across the life span, with positive and negative consequences for health"
Lerner et al. (2003, p. 176)	"A developmental concept that denotes a healthy change process linking youth with an adulthood status enabling society to be populated by healthy individuals oriented to integratively serve self and civil society"
Spreitzer et al. (2005, p. 538)	"The psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning"
Benson and Scales (2009, p. 90)	(1) Represents a dynamic and bi-directional interplay of a young person intrinsically animated and energized by discovering his/her specialness, and the developmental contexts (people, places) that know, affirm, celebrate, encourage, and guide its expression; (2) Involves 'stability of movement' or the 'balance' of movement toward something (Bill Damon, personal conversation, May 11, 2006), that is, thriving is a process of experiencing a balance between continuity and discontinuity of development over time that is optimal for a given individual's fused relations with her or his contexts (per discussion of developmental continuity and discontinuity in Lerner, 2002); and (3) Reflects both where a young person is currently in their journey to idealized personhood, and whether they are on the kind of path to get there that could rightly be called one of exemplary adaptive development regulations"
Bundick et al. (2010, p. 891)	"A dynamic and purposeful process of process of individual ↔ context interaction over time, through which the person and his/her environment are mutually enhanced"
Harris et al. (2012, p. 51)	"A positive response to a challenge (Carver, 1998) where gain occurs, rather than the minimisation of loss (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995)"
Mahoney et al. (2014, p. 186)	"Growth through daily lived experiences (Benson & Scales, 2009; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012)"
Sarkar and Fletcher (2014, p. 47)	"A sustained high level of functioning and performance that is not necessarily dependent on the occurrence of a potentially traumatic event (cf. Carver, 1998)"
Su et al. (2014, p. 256)	"The state of positive functioning at its fullest range – mentally, physically, and socially"

would hinder success. Based on this summary, it is suggested that thriving can be realized through effective holistic functioning and observed through the experience of a high-level of well-being and a perceived high-level of performance. This adjectival description captures the essence of thriving in state form and in response to a situation. Longer term, if an individual repeatedly perceived high-levels of well-being and performance across a series of situations, then the experience of thriving could lead to sustained development and success (Carver, 1998; see also, Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

It is important to differentiate thriving from other terms (e.g., prospering, resilience, growth, flourishing) referred to by scholars which may at first glance appear to be similar, yet have fundamental differences. To illustrate, the term prospering appears similar to thriving in that it captures the success component of thriving (cf. Soanes & Stevenson, 2005); however, it is different because it does not capture the developmental aspect. Resilience and growth are

additional terms that have been closely associated with thriving, since all three terms have been used to reflect a capacity for positive adaptation to adversity. Specifically, following adversity, resilience is considered to represent a maintenance of functioning (Bonanno, 2004), whereas stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and thriving (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995) have been suggested to describe establishing an elevated level of functioning. Despite this apparent similarity, resilience, growth, and thriving are distinct constructs because resilience and growth typically occur following an adverse event, but thriving does not depend on the occurrence of a negative encounter (Carver, 1998; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Instead, thriving can be experienced following both life adversity and life opportunity (see, Feeney & Collins, 2015); the similarity between thriving following adversity and growth following adversity remains an aspect of thriving which has not yet been satisfactorily addressed

in the wider literature. Future research designed to address this issue is warranted.

The term that arguably has the greatest conceptual similarity with thriving is flourishing. An individual is said to be flourishing when he or she displays positive feeling and functioning in life and is, subsequently, described as mentally healthy (Keyes, 2002, 2003). Flourishing is similar to human thriving because both constructs are concerned with an individual's experience of development and success; however, attempts have been made in the extant literature to differentiate the two constructs (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Spreitzer et al., 2005). For example, Benson and Scales (2009) identify spiritual development and prosocial orientations as explicit indicators of thriving in adolescent populations, whereas these themes are not pronounced in flourishing research (see, e.g., Keyes, 2007). The presentation of thriving including both well-being and performance components in the present paper highlights a further distinction between thriving and flourishing. More specifically, although both constructs encompass subjective well-being (i.e., an individual's evaluations of their affective states and psychological and social functioning; Keyes & Waterman, 2003), thriving is distinct because it also encapsulates performance (see, e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Additionally, it is noted that flourishing focuses predominantly on psychosocial and emotional well-being (see Fredrickson, 2006; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005), whereas thriving typically encapsulates both an individual's mental health and his or her physical state (see Epel, McEwen, & Ickovics, 1998; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

## Assessment of Thriving

The aforementioned temporal and contextual variance in human thriving mean that various potential indicators of development and success exist, and have been proposed within the literature (see, Benson & Saito, 2001; Carver, 1998; Feeney & Collins, 2015; King et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2003; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Scales et al., 2000; Spreitzer et al., 2005). In addition to monitoring the presence of these collections of indicators, psychometric measures of thriving have been developed either through the application of measures previously devised for other constructs (e.g., psychological well-being, stress-related growth; see, Cohen, Cimboric, Armeli, & Hettler, 1998; Su et al., 2014) or through the creation of domain and temporally specific measures (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). To elaborate on the

temporally specific measures, both Benson and Scales (2009) and Lerner et al. (2010) proposed measures to assess thriving in adolescents. These measures offer a comprehensive assessment of thriving within this age group; however, they are not readily applicable to, and nor are they validated with, the broader population. In contrast, grounded in Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) suggestion that thriving comprised the joint experience of vitality and learning, Porath et al. (2012) devised a measure of thriving at work for application with all individuals. This measure has subsequently been applied in work (see, e.g., Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014) and sport (see, e.g., Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett, & Temby, 2015) contexts and has helped identify relationships between thriving and other variables (e.g., mental toughness, task focus). However, when considering the definition of thriving proposed in this paper, the dimensions of vitality and learning are too narrow because they only encapsulate the development aspect of thriving (cf. Spreitzer et al., 2005). Thus, a more systematic development of measures to assess thriving is needed.

## Influential Psychosocial Variables for Human Thriving

The construct of thriving has been examined throughout the human life span (i.e., from infants to the elderly; see, e.g., Haynes, Cutler, Gray, & Kempe, 1984; Tremethick, 1997) and across a variety of contexts and domains such as during adversity (e.g., O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), and in health (e.g., Wright & Birks, 2000), the military (e.g., Jarrett, 2013), work (e.g., Sumsion, 2004), and youth development (e.g., Gestsdottir, Urban, Bowers, Lerner, & Lerner, 2011). Within these diverse scenarios, researchers have identified an abundance of psychosocial variables that may facilitate thriving. These variables can be broadly separated into two groups: personal enablers and contextual enablers (cf. Carver, 1998; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Rather than providing an exhaustive list of all potential associations within these categories, the following synthesis aims to provide readers with a brief, narrative review of the enablers that have been identified in studies where thriving has been a target variable of interest.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, this section defines both types of enablers, presents examples of each, and discusses the evidence for their relationship with types of performance, well-being, and ultimately thriving. Further, the potential processes through which enablers may facilitate thriving are discussed.

<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that the conceptualizations of thriving used in the included studies are likely to vary contingent on the authors' chosen interpretation (e.g., considering thriving analogous with stress-related growth or as a sense of vitality and learning), and caution is therefore needed when extending previously identified enablers to the prediction of thriving as it is defined in this paper.



## Personal Enablers

Personal enablers are the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors of an individual that help him or her to thrive (cf. Park, 1998). Examples of personal enablers identified in the thriving literature include, but are not limited to, a positive perspective (see, e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), religiosity and spirituality (see, e.g., Park, 1998), proactive personality (see, e.g., Sumsion, 2004), motivation (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009), knowledge and learning (see, e.g., Niessen, Sonnentag, & Sach, 2012), psychological resilience (see, e.g., Gan, Xie, Wang, Rodriguez, & Tang, 2013), and possessing social competencies (see, e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

### Positive Perspective

To elaborate on the role of a positive perspective as a personal enabler, thriving researchers initially proposed that being optimistic, having high self-efficacy, and being honest to one's values could enable individuals to thrive by maintaining task engagement when coping with an adversity or stressor (see, e.g., Carver, 1998; Park, 1998). This suggestion has subsequently been supported through qualitative research conducted with high achievers (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and teachers (Sumsion, 2004), with the latter identifying a positive moral purpose and philosophical stance as important for sustaining personal and professional satisfaction, and thus increasing the likelihood of thriving in the context of a staffing crisis. However, an optimistic and hopeful perspective is not only applicable for thriving when faced with intense stressors. Under the broader rubric of developmental assets (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998) and adolescent strengths (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011), self-esteem, possessing positive views of one's personal future, and having hopeful future expectations have been explored as potential enablers for components of adolescent thriving (e.g., competence, success in school). Additionally, within the context of thriving at work, Niessen et al. (2012) have suggested that optimism and self-efficacy are important variables for future research to consider.

### Religiosity and Spirituality

For some individuals, religiosity, spirituality, and faith were considered enablers of thriving. For example, Park (1998) speculated that religious coping may enable thriving and stress-related growth through one's relationship with God and a religious social support network. In addition to the direct effect of religiosity on development and success, religiosity can also act as a mediator on the relationship between spirituality and thriving (Dowling et al., 2004). Through their work, Dowling et al. (2004; see also, Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003) found that spirituality, believed to reflect an individual's value in moral and civic identities, was directly related

to thriving as a form of adolescent functioning, but also indirectly related through relationships with religiosity (i.e., participation in the practices of a faith-based institution related to a supernatural power).

### Proactive Personality

Another personal enabler previously linked with thriving is an individual's proactive personality (see, e.g., Globerman, White, Mullings, & Davies, 2003; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Sumsion, 2004). For example, Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) noted that thriving high achievers show a desire to actively seek out opportunities for challenge. Furthermore, Sumsion (2004) found that teachers who engaged in purposeful career decision making were more likely to thrive, and Globerman et al. (2003) identified that, by proactively articulating one's values to the organization, social workers were more likely to thrive in a hospital setting. Proactive personality has also been examined in the context of positive youth development, where researchers have examined the impact of intentional self-regulation on thriving (see, e.g., Gestsdottir et al., 2011). Grounded in the belief that individuals play an active role in their development (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999), Gestsdottir et al. (2011) proposed that adolescents adopt the self-regulatory processes of selection (i.e., selecting appropriate goal content), optimization (i.e., seeking resources that are compatible with personal values to pursue a goal), and compensation (i.e., avoiding or minimizing losses when faced with a loss of goal-relevant means) to obtain the resources from their environment that enable them to function optimally and thrive.

### Motivation

Previous research has shown that thriving individuals are intrinsically motivated and energized by their personal talents and interests (Benson & Scales, 2009). To elaborate, an individual's core passions act as "sparks" to fuel one's interest in growing knowledge and/or skills, drive the creation of a nurturing environment and, ultimately, enable thriving through the execution of actions that are mutually beneficial to the individual and his or her society (Benson & Scales, 2009; see also, Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). High-quality forms of motivation such as intrinsic motivation (i.e., engaging in an activity because the behavior is inherently rewarding) may also arise and result in high-level performance and well-being when a task is perceived as being meaningful (i.e., has purpose and significance; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). To elaborate, Spreitzer et al. (2005) speculated that when an individual experienced positive meaning in their work, he or she would be more likely to engage in agentic (i.e., autonomous) behaviors that could ultimately lead to thriving. In support of this assertion, Niessen et al. (2012) found that employees who experienced positive meaning at work in the morning, showed signs of

thriving (i.e., felt more vital, had a higher sense of learning) at the end of the working day.

### Knowledge and Learning

An individual's personal motivation is important for establishing his or her commitment to learning, and this desire to learn is relevant to thriving in all populations. For example, being motivated to learn is a key internal asset for adolescents, whose academic performance is often considered a marker of thriving (see, e.g., Lerner et al., 2005; Scales et al., 2000; Smith & Barker, 2009). In relation to adults, learning and possessing knowledge is important for thriving at work. Indeed, within the work literature, studies have highlighted that to thrive in their roles, employees should stay current and remain aware of recent developments in their field (Globberman et al., 2003), be knowledgeable (Niessen et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005), and possess psychological capital (Paterson et al., 2014). In addition to academic and vocational contexts, researchers have also found that under hardship, experience and learning (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and excellence, wisdom, and creativity (Bradshaw, Richardson, & Kulkarni, 2007) are personal enablers that support development and success.

### Psychological Resilience

Possessing resilient qualities (e.g., flexibility and adaptability), or displaying resilience more generally, has frequently been advocated for thriving following an adversity or when experiencing strain (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Gan et al., 2013; Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007; Jarrett, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). To provide some examples, resilience was identified as important for thriving, assessed through positive future expectations and effective adjustment, in survivors of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (Gan et al., 2013), and for combat soldiers exposed to sudden trauma (e.g., loss of a fellow soldier, perpetrating harm on others) and experiencing intense, unrelenting stressors (e.g., fatigue, prolonged separation from family; Jarrett, 2013). Similarly, within the vocational literature, Jackson et al. (2007) found that nurses who developed personal resilience were able to withstand workplace adversity (e.g., excessive workloads) and thrive (i.e., report higher levels of job satisfaction). Further, Beltman et al. (2011) noted that resilient protective factors (e.g., altruistic motives) assisted teachers to stay in their roles and to subsequently thrive, rather than just survive.

### Social Competencies

Across scenarios where an individual may thrive, it may be the case that his or her response will be affected by social agents present (e.g., family, friends, colleagues) and the perceived support available in that environment

(Feeney & Collins, 2015). Interpersonal exchanges with parents, for example, may provide a young student with reassurance when preparing for a challenging examination. To access and benefit from these social exchanges, an individual will likely draw on personal enablers to enhance his or her ability to form an interpersonal bond and sustain a lasting connection. For example, social competencies such as peaceful conflict resolution and interpersonal/cultural competence enable an individual to retain his or her personal and environmental resources and employ them in an attempt to thrive (Benson et al., 1998).

## Contextual Enablers

Contextual enablers are the characteristics of an environment which can foster continued task engagement and subsequent thriving (Carver, 1998). Some of these enablers apply across the majority of contexts (e.g., the opportunity for challenge), whereas others are more context specific (e.g., employer support). Examples of contextual enablers identified in the thriving literature include, but are not limited to, a challenge environment (see, e.g., O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), attachment and trust (see, e.g., Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009), family support (see, e.g., Weine et al., 2013), and colleague/employer support (see, e.g., Paterson et al., 2014).

### Challenge Environment

Research suggests that situations that provide an appropriate balance of challenge and difficulty can evoke task engagement and facilitate thriving (Carver, 1998; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Examples of appropriate scenarios include those that offer learning and career opportunities (Bakker et al., 2010), a high promotion focus (Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2016), and set boundaries and expectations (Benson et al., 1998). If a situation contains a high-level of hindrance stressors (i.e., those which thwart growth) and is perceived as having too much difficulty, this will result in a threat appraisal and, while still potentially evoking task engagement, undermine thriving (Carver, 1998; Flinchbaugh, Luth, & Li, 2015). Examples of situations that may be perceived as threatening include those which have a high level of turbulence and volatility as these reduce employees' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus ultimately precluding feelings of development and success (cf. Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

### Attachment and Trust

Interpersonal relationships can act as resources to permit the exploration of a challenging situation and the instigation of agentic behaviors which, in either case, can increase the likelihood of an individual thriving (Carver, 1998;

Feeney & Collins, 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Common factors that provide stable foundations for these interpersonal bonds and subsequent thriving are attachment and trust (Bowlby, 1969; Carver, 1998). For example, relationships established with a high security of attachment and acceptance from significant others can act as secure bases and safe havens for exploration. Trust implies a willingness to place personal vulnerability in the hands of another party on the belief that their future actions will be mutually beneficial (Robinson, 1996). In relation to thriving, Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009) found that trust in an employee-employer relationship was pertinent to an employee reporting high-levels of learning and vitality in his or her role. Interpersonal relationships built on secure attachment, acceptance, and trust can act as contextual enablers for thriving across the entire human life span (see, e.g., Haynes et al., 1984; Tremethick, 1997); however, it is likely that the significant partner in these relationships may change (e.g., parents, friends, colleagues, romantic partners, children).

### Family Support

The impact that parents could have on thriving first became clear in medical research investigating the failure-to-thrive (FTT) syndrome in newborn babies and infants (see, e.g., Bullard, Glaser, Heagarty, & Pivchik, 1967; Haynes et al., 1984). This developmental syndrome is characterized by signs of growth failure, severe malnutrition, and variable degrees of impaired development; and can result from organic (e.g., illness) or nonorganic (e.g., parental) causes (see, for a review, Elice & Fields, 1990). To elaborate on the nonorganic causes, Bullard et al. (1967) found evidence of parental neglect and maternal deprivation across 50 cases of infants who were experiencing FTT. Additionally, Haynes et al. (1984) identified differences in mother-child interactions between thriving and FTT groups. Although recent research has challenged the role of parental factors in FTT (see, e.g., Emond, Drewett, Blair, & Emmett, 2007; Wright & Birks, 2000), it is apparent that the quality of parental care and the nature of interactions between the parent and child are important for an infant's positive growth and development (see, e.g., Connell & Prinz, 2002; Poehlmann & Fiese, 2001). This parental role also appears to extend to enabling thriving in adolescents, where parents may provide guidance in relation to an adolescent's schooling (see, e.g., Theokas et al., 2005) and financial support for the child to access facilitative opportunities and resources (see, e.g., Weine et al., 2013). More recent investigations have broadened extant research on family support to include the role of spouses in promoting thriving (see, Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Tomlinson, Feeney, & Van Vleet, 2016). Within these studies, partners were suggested to alleviate strain caused by time-related work pressures (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and that their support acted as a relational

catalyst for thriving through the support of goal strivings (Tomlinson et al., 2016).

### Colleague and Employer Support

On reaching adulthood and becoming employed, the social agents impacting on an individual's experience of development and success are likely to change from parents toward colleagues and employers (cf. Erikson, 1959; Levinson, 1986). Working among a group of colleagues can provide an individual with a source of support and guidance for completing daily tasks and overcoming challenges. For example, an open environment that encourages broad information sharing between colleagues enables individuals to obtain necessary knowledge for completing novel tasks (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014) and an opportunity to air grievances (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Furthermore, if an employee receives recognition from colleagues about their professional expertise or feels a valued part of the team, this can instill confidence and a sense of relatedness (Liu & Bern-Klug, 2013; Sumsion, 2004). Most recently, research has suggested that dyadic relationships between employees can become resilient to within-dyad adversity and that this resilience can, ultimately, help promote dyadic thriving over time (Thompson & Ravlin, 2017). These environmental and interpersonal features can, therefore, lead to colleagues acting as contextual enablers for enhanced performance and well-being.

Turning from colleagues to employers, Paterson et al. (2014) found a significant relationship between employees' perceptions of a supervisor supportive climate, their desire to work in collaboration with others, and thriving. Specifically, it was suggested that a supportive supervisor engenders agentic behaviors because employees will not be afraid to take risks under the belief that they will be supported, and that these behaviors result in elevated learning and vitality (see also, Kahn, 1990). In addition to agentic behaviors, a supportive climate may also create various other enablers of thriving (e.g., job autonomy, decision-making discretion, perceived professional freedom and agency; see, e.g., Bakker et al., 2010; Liu & Bern-Klug, 2013; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014; Spreitzer et al., 2005; Sumsion, 2004; Wallace et al., 2016). Employers can further support employee development and success through the provision of performance feedback (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). To elaborate, it is suggested that feedback provides employees with informational guidance about their job performance, which is likely to facilitate their perception of competence and, in turn, enable thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

### Potential Processes

Researchers have tended to focus on two processes through which enablers may facilitate thriving: the satisfaction of



basic psychological needs and the manifestation of a challenge appraisal. Grounded within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), it is proposed that human beings have three basic psychological needs (i.e., for autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and experiencing satisfaction of these needs has been forwarded as a prerequisite for thriving (see Mahoney, Ntoumanis, Mallett, & Gucciardi, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sheldon, 2009). Indeed, in support for this assertion, extant research has found a relationship between needs satisfaction and thriving outcomes across a range of domains, including education (see, e.g., Sheldon & Krieger, 2007), the performing arts (see, e.g., Quested & Duda, 2010), sport (see, e.g., Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004), and work (see, for a review, Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Building from the conceptual standpoint of needs acting as the proximal determinants of thriving, researchers have examined how personal (e.g., perceiving positive meaning in work) and contextual (e.g., supportive work) enablers can influence an individual's perceptions of needs satisfaction and subsequent thriving (see, e.g., Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

An alternative or additional mechanism linking personal and contextual enablers to thriving is the elicitation of a challenge appraisal (see, e.g., O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, upon experiencing a potential stressor human beings make a judgment about whether the encounter is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful (i.e., expectations of harm/loss, threat, or challenge). Harm/loss appraisals are made when damage has already been sustained, whereas threat and challenge appraisals are made in the expectation of future harm/loss or the potential for gain or growth, respectively (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Challenge appraisals thus encourage task engagement and create opportunities for positive change, and it is for these reasons that it has previously been associated with thriving (see, Carver, 1998, O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Furthermore, influencing the type of stress appraisal made by an individual is a range of personal (e.g., beliefs) and situational (e.g., predictability) factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which may relate to the personal and contextual enablers presented for thriving. For example, the personal enabler of proactive personality could influence a personal belief of control over a situation, which can increase the likelihood of making a challenge appraisal, engaging in a scenario, and potential thriving.

## Future Directions for Research and Practice

It is apparent from the literature reviewed in this paper that thriving is of interest to a wide array of researchers and

practitioners operating in diverse domains and contexts. However, to continue to advance knowledge and understanding of human thriving, various lines of research inquiry need to be conducted, and in a more coherent manner. The first challenge faced by human thriving researchers is to reach a consensus about what is meant by the construct. As explained in the first section of this paper, the temporal and contextual diversity in how thriving has been examined has resulted in a lack of consensus about the definition of the construct and the key processes that underpin it. In an attempt to address this issue, a definition of human thriving was presented that was conceived to be temporally and contextually robust. Specifically, human thriving was defined as the joint experience of development and success, which can be realized through effective holistic functioning and observed through the experience of a high-level of well-being and a perceived high-level of performance. Future research should examine the applicability and utility of this conceptualization in various settings, and refine it if appropriate. Furthermore, having agreed on a definition, the systematic development of valid and reliable measurement tools is required.

Turning from the definition to the processes underpinning thriving, it is suggested that researchers establish whether the enablers identified in the extant thriving literature support both development and success. In addition, it is recommended that scholars extend the contexts in which they examine personal and contextual enablers. For instance, although considerable attention has been paid to contextual enablers of thriving at work (see, for a review, Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), there are limited specific investigations of thriving or its enablers in other areas (e.g., military, sport, the performing arts). Future research is also needed to examine and clarify the mechanisms that underpin the relationships between personal and contextual enablers and thriving. For example, although some human thriving researchers have proposed the role of agentic or autonomous behaviors in mediating the relationship between enablers and thriving (see, e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005), others have espoused the role of challenge appraisals (see, e.g., O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995) and, thus, it may be beneficial for future work to examine whether these mechanisms work in isolation or are integrated. A further line of future research inquiry is the study of the lasting, and potentially cumulative, effect(s) of thriving on an individual (cf. Benson & Scales, 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Although the developmental consequences of early life FTT (see, e.g., Corbett & Drewett, 2004) and the effect of positive youth development (thriving) on future contribution and risk behaviors (see, e.g., Jellicic, Bobek, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2007) have already been longitudinally tracked in youth populations, sparse research exists on the lasting effect of thriving in adult samples. To illustrate,



little is currently known about whether (and how) thriving in response to one situation (e.g., salesperson closing a deal) significantly affects responses to future scenarios (e.g., future sales pitches); nor is there any evidence on the impact of thriving in one area of life (e.g., sport) on other areas (e.g., academic attainment).

Establishing a robust understanding of human thriving and underpinning processes also has implications for professional practice. To elaborate, the identification of situation salient enablers will assist practitioners in designing and delivering targeted, evidence-based interventions that facilitate the experience of development and success. One example of an existing intervention that aims to facilitate thriving is the Warrior Resilience and Thriving (WRT; Jarrett, 2013) program implemented by the US Army. Specifically, the program teaches soldiers strategies to enhance personal and contextual enablers such as resilience, emotional control, and critical thinking. Treatment programs such as the WRT have traditionally been developed using the framework of posttraumatic growth and, therefore, focus on thriving following extreme adversities. In addition to refining and trialing such interventions in other settings, there is also a need to develop interventions that are appropriate for thriving in non-traumatic situations and for responding to daily stressors. When designing such interventions, practitioners may draw lessons from the appraisal literature to increase an individual's awareness and accuracy when interpreting situational demands and resources (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, by considering the enabler literature presented and discussed in this paper (e.g., Lerner et al., 2011; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), psychologists can develop personal enablers with the individual (see, e.g., Melnyk, Kelly, Jacobson, Arcoleo, & Shaibi, 2014) and optimize contextual enablers in the surrounding environment (see, e.g., Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012) to facilitate individuals' experiences of development and success. Finally, once a greater understanding of the cumulative effect of thriving is established, practitioners might construct strategies to assist individuals in repeating their thriving response in future scenarios.

## Conclusion

As anticipated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000b), there has been a burgeoning of academic inquiry on the psychology of positive human functioning since the turn of the century. This review, however, has highlighted that much of this human functioning literature has been divergent and a lack of consensus exists on the definition and conceptualization of the main target outcome, human thriving. In recognition of this, we have discussed existing theoretical and conceptual debates, reviewed extant literature examining

enablers of thriving, and made recommendations for future investigations on this topic. Furthermore, a conceptualization of human thriving is presented, whereby thriving is defined as the joint experience of development and success, which can be realized through effective holistic functioning and observed through the experience of a high-level of well-being and a perceived high-level of performance. Overall, it is hoped that this conceptualization will provide readers with some clarity on the construct of thriving and that the identification of salient psychosocial variables will stimulate further scientific inquiry to support the development of effective psychosocial interventions for thriving.

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