



# The Psychology of Well-Being in the Margins: Voices from and Prospects for South Asia and Southeast Asia

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**Abstract** Research and publications on the psychology of well-being have steadily increased in recent decades, but research on the peoples of South Asian and Southeast Asian is quite underrepresented in the research literature. Even as people from the regions comprise one third of the current global population, studies on well-being of individuals and groups from countries in the two regions are disproportionately fewer compared to other countries and regions. The special issue is a modest attempt to call attention to this underrepresentation, and to individuals and groups that are in the margins of these societies. The special issue features 11 empirical studies focused on well-being of people who either face economic hardships, have low-status occupations, experience discrimination due to gender, or experience physical disabilities. The studies highlight how well-being can be conceptualized as an adaptive process, which involves finding meaning and coping and drawing from one's agency and resources. The studies in the special, while limited in scope, will hopefully serve as catalyst for further research on the psychology of well-being in the two regions in ways that will enrich global theory and research.

**Keywords** Well-being · Positive psychology · South Asia · Southeast Asia · Internationalization

Research on the psychology of well-being has surged in the past two decades. Interest in a more holistic view of health and well-being has led to the development of theories,

elaboration of constructs, validation of measures, and evaluation of interventions related to a wide range of well-being concepts. This interest spans the whole globe, with research on the psychology of well-being being a truly global undertaking. However, it is fair to say that some voices and experiences are less represented in the published research. As we will show below, among the different regions of the world, South Asia and Southeast Asia are less represented compared to North America and Europe. But aside from geographic underrepresentation, there are individuals and groups that are also less represented in the well-being literature because they are not the typical types of individuals who can easily be recruited to participate in psychological research. We refer to individuals who are in the margins of their societies: those who are in the lowest socioeconomic groups, who are likely to be less educated, occupying lower status professions, or whose well-being is not often the focus of attention because they are not in the societies' spotlight, in a manner of speaking. This special issue of *Psychological Studies*, which was co-guest edited by the first two authors of this introduction (Bernardo and Mateo), aims to pay more attention to these underrepresented groups by featuring empirical research on such underrepresented groups in countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

## Psychology of Well-being Research in South Asia and Southeast Asia: A Brief Survey

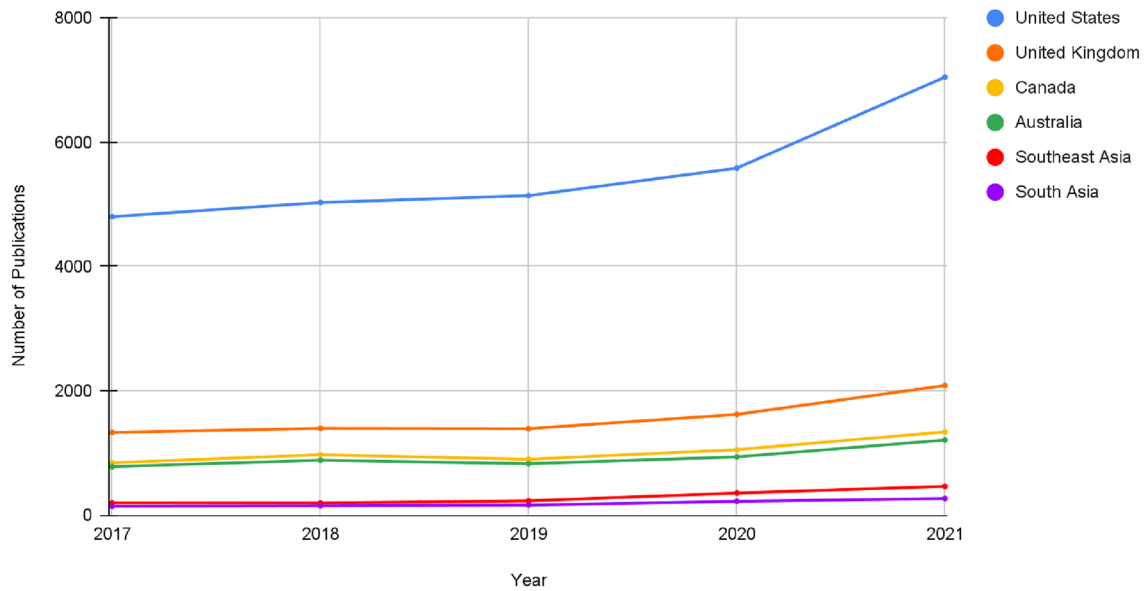
To get some evidence of how underrepresented South Asian and Southeast Asian peoples are in the psychology of well-being research literature, we did a search in Scopus using “psychology” and “well-being” or “wellbeing” as search terms. We limited the search to a ten-year period (January 2012 to December 2021) and searched for specific country

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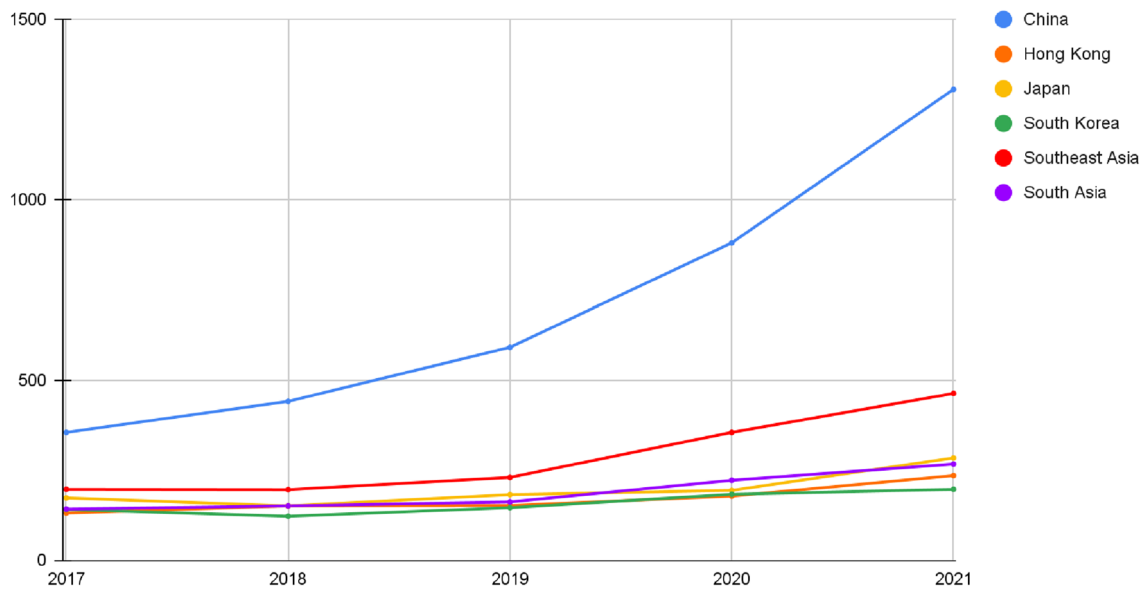
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affiliations in South Asia and Southeast Asia. We present some observations from the ten-year data below, but first we show the underrepresentation by focusing on the most recent five years (2017 to 2021). Figure 1 compares the South Asian and Southeast Asian publications during this period to four individual countries (USA, UK, Canada, and Australia) that are very well represented in the psychology of well-being literature. The total numbers of the different countries in the two Asian regions are below the numbers

of the four individual countries, as shown in the red and purple lines in Fig. 1. Even in comparison with the other Asian regions, South Asian and Southeast Asian countries do not compare favorably, as shown in the red and purple lines in Fig. 2. The regional totals are below the total on one country, China, and are in the same magnitude as other individual countries or territories (Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong). We wish to underscore the underrepresentation by recalling that South Asia and Southeast Asia account



**Fig. 1** Number of publications from South Asia and Southeast Asia compared to four selected Western countries from 2017 to 2021

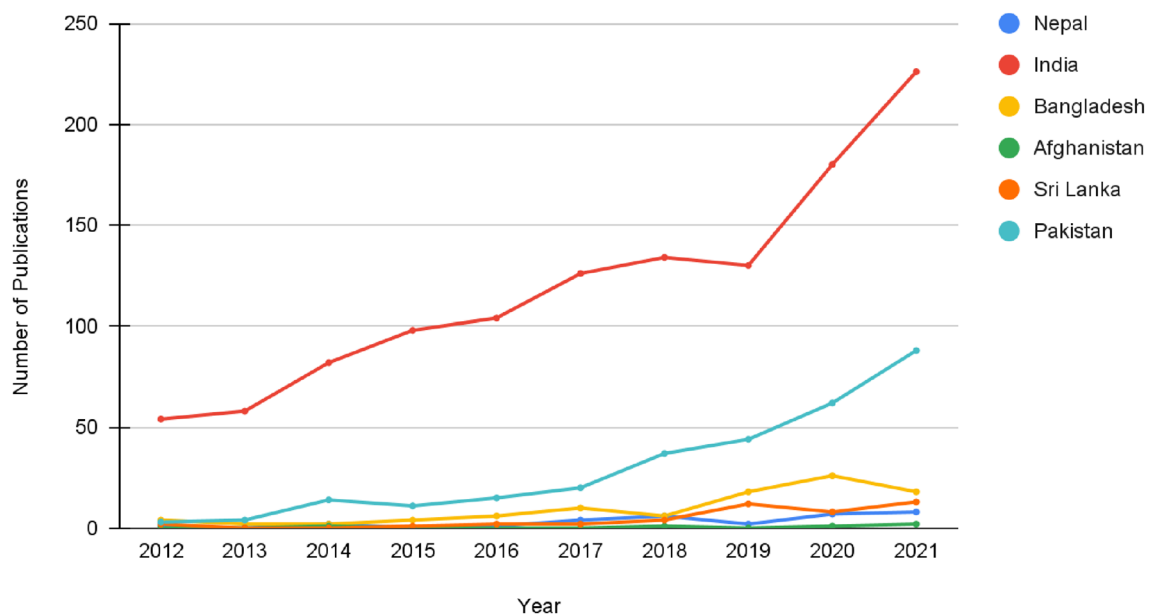


**Fig. 2** Number of publications from South Asia and Southeast Asia compared to four selected East Asian countries/territories from 2017 to 2021

24.9% and 8.6% of the world population, respectively (Worldometer, 2022). So the observation about the very few published studies on people who represent 33.5% of the world population is clearly a sign of underrepresentation.

But there has been a clear upward trend in psychology of well-being publications from the two regions in the past ten years. Figure 3 shows the trends for South Asia. Not surprisingly, the highest number of publications were from India (1192 over the 10 years), with Pakistan also showing a marked increase in publication from the last three years. The institutions that produced the most publications on the psychology of well-being over the ten-year period were also mostly from these two countries (see

Table 1). While there was diversity in the specific topics of the research publications, we observed a tendency to focus on applied concerns. For example, there were several studies that related to psychological well-being and physical health, particularly among HIV-infected persons. There were also studies on the relationship between well-being and common mental health concerns, like depression and anxiety. Consistent with the applied focus, there were numerous studies that related to stress and burnout in the workplace and other contexts, and to student learning in school. While there were very few publications that came from Afghanistan, it is notable that the topics focused on conflict, violence, and war.



**Fig. 3** Summary of number of publications from South Asia from 2012 to 2021

**Table 1** Top institutional affiliations of psychology of well-being publications in South Asia

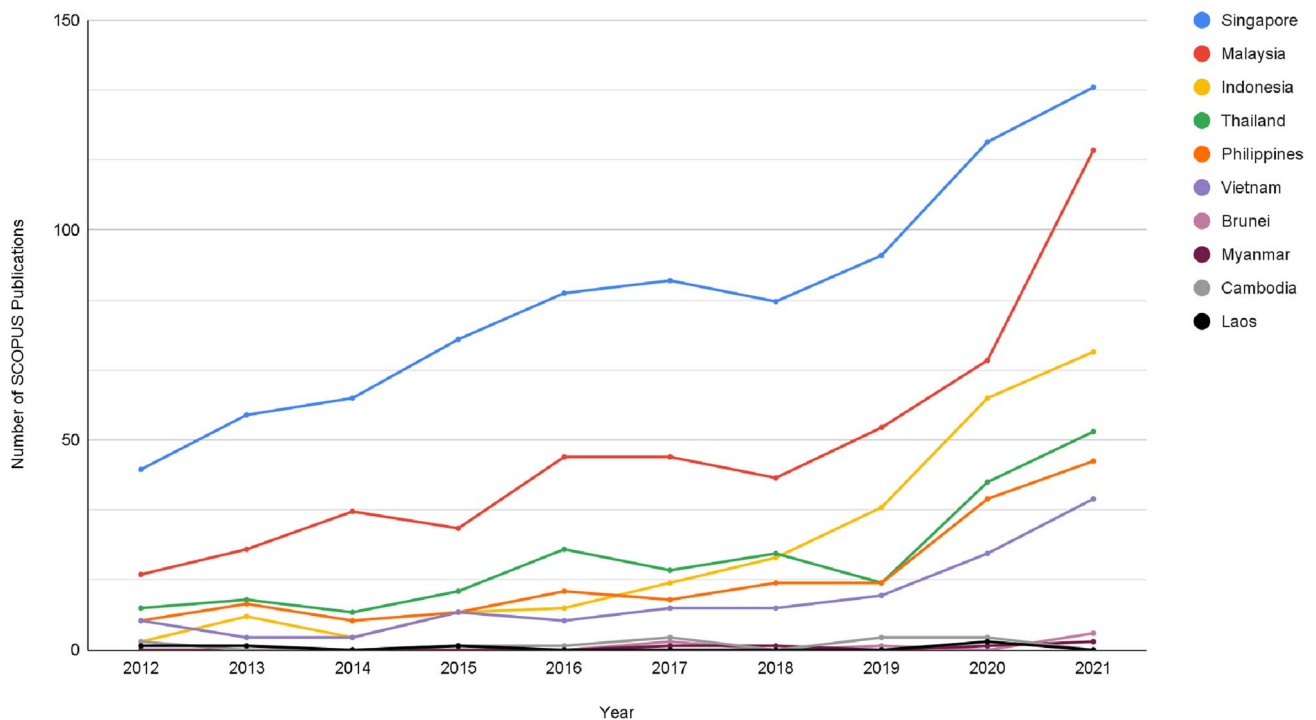
Institution	Country	Number of publications
National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences	India	164
All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi	India	50
University of Delhi	India	46
Indian Institute of Technology Delhi	India	41
Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education & Research, Chandigarh	India	37
Quaid-i-Azam University	Pakistan	31
University of the Punjab	Pakistan	30
The Aga Khan University	Pakistan	22
University of Dhaka	Bangladesh	20
COMSATS Institute of Information Technology Lahore	Pakistan	16
University of Management and Technology Lahore	Pakistan	15
University of Colombo	Sri Lanka	14

The publications on the psychology of well-being from Southeast Asian countries are summarized in Fig. 4, which shows that the highest number of publications (838 over the 10 years) come from Singapore, but in 2021 there was a notable increase in publications from Malaysia (of the 478 publications over the 10 years, 24.90% were published in 2021). The trend showing increases in psychology of well-being publications are observed in six Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam. Table 2 summarizes the institutions that produced the most number of psychology of well-being publications during the ten-year period, and not surprisingly, the most productive institutions were universities from the two top producing countries, Singapore and Malaysia. Similar to South Asia, we see a clear applied focus in the well-being research published from Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, well-being research that related to physical health was a dominant theme, particularly also relating to HIV infections. Research on well-being in the workplace was also a common focus in Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand; whereas well-being of students and teachers in schools was a typical focus in Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Across different Southeast Asian countries, the relationship between well-being and mental health and dysfunction was also a common focus, as was research on well-being interventions and other psychological interventions.

**Table 2** Top institutional affiliations of psychology of well-being publications in Southeast Asia

Institution	Country	Number of publications
National University of Singapore	Singapore	335
Nanyang Technological University	Singapore	252
National Institute of Education	Singapore	93
Singapore Management University	Singapore	89
Universiti Malaya	Malaysia	72
NUS Yoo Loo Lin School of Medicine	Singapore	63
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	Malaysia	53
Universiti Putra Malaysia	Malaysia	52
Monash University Malaysia	Malaysia	49
De La Salle University	Philippines	43
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Malaysia	41
Chulalongkorn University	Thailand	40
Mahidol University	Thailand	39
Ateneo de Manila University	Philippines	34

The ten-year snapshot of research on psychology and well-being already indicates the intention to orient the research questions on well-being to the specific social concerns in the region and individual countries/territories. This trend provides a very good reason to further study the psychology of well-being in the two regions, as the construct of well-being is given meaning and relevance in ways that



**Fig. 4** Summary of number of publications from Southeast Asia from 2012 to 2021

connect to more diverse life experiences in more problematic social circumstances, compared to what one might be likely to investigate in more developed countries.

### Themes of the Special Issue

In this special issue, we understood the “psychology of well-being in the margins” as having at least two meanings. First, the people of South Asia and Southeast Asia, while representing roughly one third of the global population, are marginalized and underrepresented in the psychology of well-being literature. Second, and equally important, the socioeconomic conditions in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries are characterized by so much inequality and diversity that there are social groups and individuals that also tend to be marginalized in psychology research. Hence, we sought to publish research that focused on these individuals and groups from South Asia and Southeast Asia. In this special issue, we feature 11 empirical studies that inquire into some facet of well-being of different marginalized groups. Three studies explicitly focus on well-being among those who are economically marginalized in society (Aruta et al., 2022; Sulkers & Loos, 2022; Tee et al., 2022), a marginal status that intersects with the focus of three other studies involving individuals in low status occupations (Aboobaker, 2022; Bernardo et al., 2022; Mata & Tarroja, 2022). The latter set of studies do not explicit focus on the economic status of the participants in their study, but their social context indicates that the some of the jobs involved are taken by persons from lower socioeconomic groups. We also see intersectionalities in the marginalization of women, where in three studies, the disadvantages of women also relate to caste (Johri & Anand, 2022) or stigmas associated with their marital status (Mendez, 2022; Thasleema & Rajan, 2022) and also socioeconomic status (Thasleema & Rajan, 2022). The other two studies in this special issue relate to some aspect of physical disabilities—one relating to experience of deaf people (Lee et al., 2022) and another on experiences of caregivers of family members with spinal cord injury (Biclar et al., 2022).

While the studies are small in scope, and perhaps, not theoretically innovative, there are some themes that seem to be important to note across some studies. One such theme is the concept of well-being as being an adaptive process. In a number of studies, the results were discussed with reference to coping and/or adapting to more challenging circumstances, which become more salient when one studies people in marginalized groups or difficult situations. For example, the construction of well-being among deaf persons in Ipoh highlighted the sense of wanting to belong in their communities, a simple enough goal but made difficult because of the physical condition (Lee et al., 2022). Finding meaning in life seems to allow young people from low-income regions in the

Philippines to cope and persist in school despite the challenges (Aruta et al., 2022). Hope associated with personal agency and with the support of one’s family also seems to buffer the distress due to the economic difficulties of Malaysians during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tee et al., 2022). In the case of Filipino migrant workers in Macau, detachment from their heritage cultures seems to also show adaptive functions as it relates to positive well-being in their present circumstances (Bernardo et al., 2022). Even among the poorest of the poor, the urban slum communities of India, life satisfaction does not seem to be low as the poor people seem to have adapted to the relative deprivation in their communities (Sulkers & Loos, 2022). Also consistent with this theme are findings on how self-efficacy is an important correlate of well-being among child-care workers (Mata & Tarroja, 2022) and family caregivers of persons with spinal cord injury (Biclar et al., 2022). Thus, rather than seeing well-being as an ideal subjective state, the studies point to how the subjective state of well-being reflects individuals’ attempts to actively adapt and adjust to their difficult life circumstances, drawing from personal and shared agency and other resources.

Further to the preceding point, we note that while the studies tended to highlight a specific dimension of marginality in framing the research question, in the researcher’s attempts to interpret the results, the understanding of the intersecting challenges of the participants is quite apparent. Thus, it is important to view the adaptive dimension of well-being processes as one that deals with different intersecting challenges. For example, the tribal unmarried mothers had to deal with stigma associated with their unmarried motherhood status, and the stigma was stronger among those from lower socioeconomic groups (Thasleema & Rajan, 2022); the latter also must cope with the more difficult financial situation as they try to raise their children. The hospitality workers who must adapt to the challenges of their low status occupations (Aboobaker, 2002) also have to cope with how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed their industry while also dealing with the very real fears of being infected. Thus, for individuals in the margins of society, the pursuit of well-being is typically a process that requires dealing and adapting with multiple-related difficult challenges.

In a couple of studies, spirituality seems to be a resource for these adaptive well-being processes. The study of workers in the hospitality industry in India highlights the role of workplace spirituality in well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among those who had strong levels of fear of COVID-19 (Aboobaker, 2022). The idea of meaningful work was one of the dimensions of workplace spirituality in that study, which echoes how spirituality was an important theme in the meaning-making process of unmarried women in the Philippines (Mendez, 2022). Interestingly, the external-spiritual locus-of-hope dimensions studied

among the economically challenged individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (Tee et al., 2022) and the Filipino migrant workers in Macau (Bernardo et al., 2022) were not significant factors in the well-being models tested. This might suggest that spirituality might be an important resource for aspects of well-being that relate to meaning, but not for aspects of well-being that involve goal-pursuit. These different possible roles of spirituality in fostering well-being can be studied further in future research, particularly amid the diverse forms of spirituality experienced by different peoples in the two regions. Further explorations might even reveal cases when spirituality adversely affects the well-being processes of individuals. For example, one study of Filipino women who are victims of intimate partner violence showed that spiritual-related hope was negatively associated with help-seeking to deal with their abusive situation (Bernardo & Estrellado, 2017); echoing results showing how religions forms of coping are less helpful resources for coping for women survivors of intimate partner violence and might even constitute more of a burden (Abu-Raiya et al., 2017).

We also observe that many of the findings reported in the special issue draw from established theories or frameworks for well-being and also utilize commonly used measures of different facets of well-being. However, some of the studies in the special issue show how the theories are adapted and modified to consider the specific life circumstances and contexts of the marginalized target participants. We see this approach in the adaptation of the “need-to-belong” theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) to study the deaf persons in Ipoh (Lee et al., 2022), the job-demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to study workplace well-being among hospitality industry workers (Aboobakr, 2022), the system justification theory (Jost, 2019) in the study of tribal married mothers (Thasleema & Rajan, 2022), and in the use of a cultural adaptation of hope theory (Bernardo, 2010) in studying persons who experienced economic challenges in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tee et al., 2022). We believe that such adaptations are positive steps forward as they introduce theoretical elaborations of the established models. But in future, psychologists in South Asia and Southeast Asia might endeavor to develop more contextualized theories of well-being for the people from the region.

### Prospects for Psychology and Well-Being in South Asia and Southeast Asia

In that connection, we see a need to encourage more contextualized and original theorizing about the psychology of well-being in the regions. Some very important work has actually been done in the past in this regard. In 2014, for example, a special issue of this journal explored the mutual connections between positive psychological concepts and

Indian psychological theories (Rao, 2014). The special issue featured research that explored well-being concepts like happiness (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014), transcendental experiences (Pirta, 2014), and other positive mental states (Mitra, 2014) from Indian philosophical traditions. Psychologists from Indonesia (Maulana et al., 2019) and the Philippines (Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016) have also embarked on defining the construct of well-being from local contextualized perspectives. Qualitative studies, such as the one on deaf people in Ipoh (Lee et al., 2022) show how more socially constructed and contextualized theories of well-being can be developed in the region.

The identification of indigenous constructs and theoretical concepts that relate to well-being are also potentially important developments for research and theory on psychology of well-being. Constructs developed by Asian psychologists, including interdependent happiness (Hitokoto & Takahashi, 2021; Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015), external locus-of-hope (Bernardo, 2010; Bernardo et al., 2018), relational mobility (Yuki & Schug, 2020; Zhang & Zhao, 2021), among others, have the potential of enriching theoretical and empirical work on the psychology of well-being. Connected to the preceding point on contextualized perspectives, psychologists in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions could aim to introduce constructs that either modify existing well-being constructs, develop new measures of such constructs, and even propose different psychological theories of well-being that apply not just to South Asians or Southeast Asians.

Understanding the influence of social processes on well-being processes is also an important theme to explore in further contextualizing psychology of well-being theories. Two studies in the special issue inquired into well-being processes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aboobaker, 2022; Tee et al., 2022), and other Asian studies have focused on this global phenomenon, as well (e.g., Galanza et al., 2021; Singh & Quraishi, 2021). But aside from COVID-19, South Asian and Southeast Asian psychologists can also investigate the role of other powerful social changes in shaping people’s well-being. There has been some inquiry on well-being amid climate change (Aruta & Guinto, 2022; Kumar et al., 2021), after war and conflict (Milazzo & Cuesta, 2021), rapid economic growth (Cai et al., 2021), the rise of information and communications technology (Lim et al., 2021), among others. There has even been research on how representations of important national historical events relate to well-being of people (Lim & Leong, 2021). South Asian and Southeast Asian psychologists can also investigate how significant social changes in their respective societies shape well-being processes, particularly as such processes seem to have an adaptive dimension.

As the above discussion points point to ways by which research on the psychology of well-being can be broadened and deepened in the two regions, it might also be helpful to



undertake cross-cultural studies that can explore the extent to which psychological concepts and processes related to well-being are shared (or not) across other cultures within and beyond the two regions (see e.g., Bernardo et al., 2018; Hitokoto & Takahashi, 2021). Finally, none of the research studies in the special issue involve interventions that aim to improve well-being among the target participants. There have been interventions for strengthening aspects of well-being of individuals involving participants from the two regions (e.g., Datu et al., 2022; Koay et al., 2020), and there should be more such studies, especially among those in the marginalized sectors of society, possibly trying out different modalities of intervention, beyond the individualized forms of psychological treatment.

### Concluding points

This special issue aimed to address the underrepresentation of South Asian and Southeast Asian voices in the psychology of well-being research literature. The 11 empirical studies featured in the special issue may be small in scope but show determined attempts to focus inquiry on well-being on marginalized individuals and groups in the region. Many of the studies draw from established theories and frameworks but they do point to potentially useful insights for adapting on modifying such frameworks that we hope the readers of the special issue will appreciate. The articles in the special issue will hopefully serve as catalysts for more innovative theorizing that takes inspiration from the diverse and complex experiences of people from the region, and from the rich philosophical and cultural knowledge that has guided the lives of people and societies in the region.

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**Declarations**

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