



Re-Visioning Strengths and Virtues in the Context of Gender and Culture

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Confessions

- My initial ambivalent relationship with Positive Psychology
- My intellectual roots
 - Multicultural Psychology
 - Feminist Psychology/Psychology of Women
 - Community and Socioecological Psychology
 - Humanistic-Existential Psychology
- The fundamental position of positive psychology is compatible with the strengths-centered, affirmative, and liberation-based traditions in these approaches to the study human behavior

“Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive”. (IPPA website)

-Central Areas of Scholarship in Positive Psychology

-Positive Traits (Strengths and Virtues, Positive Youth Development)

-Positive Experience (Happiness, SWB, Eudaimonia, Positivity, Flow)

-Positive Institutions (Schools, Organizations, Leadership)

-The positive psychology vision of cross-fertilization across disciplines within psychology for those interested in optimal human functioning

Positive Psychology and Culture

- Positive psychology began with quite a bit of criticism related to its relative exclusion of cultural and contextual considerations.
- Recommendations have emerged that encourage positive psychology to more substantively incorporate culturally derived constructs, meanings, and contexts, as well as include a broader diversity of voices in the conversation about “the good life”
- Pedrotti describes a culturally embedded view for positive psychology
 - While constructs of interest to positive psychology (e.g., courage, wisdom, hope) may be universally relevant, how they are experienced, manifested, and valued are embedded in, and will vary with, culture (Pedrotti, 2011; Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2009).

“Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive”. (IPPA website)

-Through a Multicultural-Feminist-Community lens

-Positive Sociocultural Identity and Socialization

-Inclusion and Positive Intergroup Relations

-Positive Social Change towards Liberation, Equality, and Social Justice

-While a cross-cultural comparative approach (particularly in Asian cultural contexts) has received some attention in positive psychology, contributions from **multicultural** psychology, feminist psychology, and community psychology do not yet have much visibility within the positive psychology universe.

Multicultural, Feminist, and Community (MFC) Psychologies

- MFC psychologies have a strong tradition of identifying and promoting strengths, as well as a core commitment to a non-pathologizing position. A strengths-based orientation is central to these fields.
- There is tremendous potential for the cross-fertilization envisioned for positive psychology to more meaningfully include voices from MFC psychologies.

Multicultural Psychology

- Multicultural psychology is the psychological study of issues and topics relevant to the sociocultural and sociopolitical experiences and identities of people from diverse sociodemographic groups (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religious, disability).
- One of loudest rallying cries of the early multicultural psychology movement was that “difference does not equal deviance” which cautioned the field to be aware of a pathologizing approach to the study of diverse populations.

Multicultural Psychology

- Concerned with emphasis on “universals” of human behavior in mainstream psychology
- Advocates the importance of **culture and context** in understanding human behavior
- Critiques comparisons to a “norm” that results in pathology of historically oppressed and stigmatized groups:
“Difference does not equal deviance”
 - Contrasts with cross-cultural psychology which places primacy on comparative research
- Resilience in the context of adversity
- Attention to social justice

Feminist Psychology

Feminist Psychology is the study of the lives of women and girls of all ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, abilities, and socioeconomic levels that recognizes the social construction of gender, the importance of the sociopolitical context for human behavior, and the androcentric bias of psychology. It is intentionally participatory and collaborative in its methods with a strong orientation towards reflexivity in research and practice. Issues such as women's ways of knowing, a relational orientation to living, gender equality, power, privilege, voice and choice are centered in the content and methods of feminist psychology.

Community Psychology

Community psychology is the study of human behavior in its multiple and layered contexts from microsystems and organizations to communities and macrosystems. Central to community psychology are applications to the promotion of well-being, the prevention of dysfunction, the liberation of oppressed peoples, the greater inclusion of historically marginalized groups, and the facilitation of empowerment. **Preventive interventions and an emphasis on wellness promotion through the facilitation of strengths and mobilization of resources has been a defining feature of the field (Cowen, 1991).**

Multiple Levels of Analysis

- Positive Psychology focuses analysis at the Individual, Microsystem, and Organizational levels of analysis
- What about the Community and Macrosystem levels of analysis?
 - less attention has been paid in positive psychology to processes at collective and sociopolitical levels of analysis nor to how macrosystemic factors contribute to “the pursuit of happiness.”
 - We need to more closely study the role of community and macrosystemic factors in the pursuit of happiness

MFC Psychologies

- Each has noted the dominance of white, male, heterosexual voices in the larger field of psychology and have challenged the field to be more inclusive of diverse approaches to the study of human behavior
- From within each of the MFC psychologies, there has been a longstanding and consistent call for an emphasis on strengths, assets, and resources of historically oppressed and stigmatized cultures and communities.

Eight “Positive” Concepts from Multicultural, Feminist, and Community Psychology

1. Collective Identity and Intersectionality
2. Social Justice and Social Change
3. Overcoming “isms”; Liberation and Liberatory Practice
4. Bridging Differences and Positive Intergroup Relations
5. Affirmative Cultural Socialization
6. Empowerment and Critical Consciousness
7. Multiple Ways of Knowing
8. Interconnectedness (Persons-Spirit-Nature)

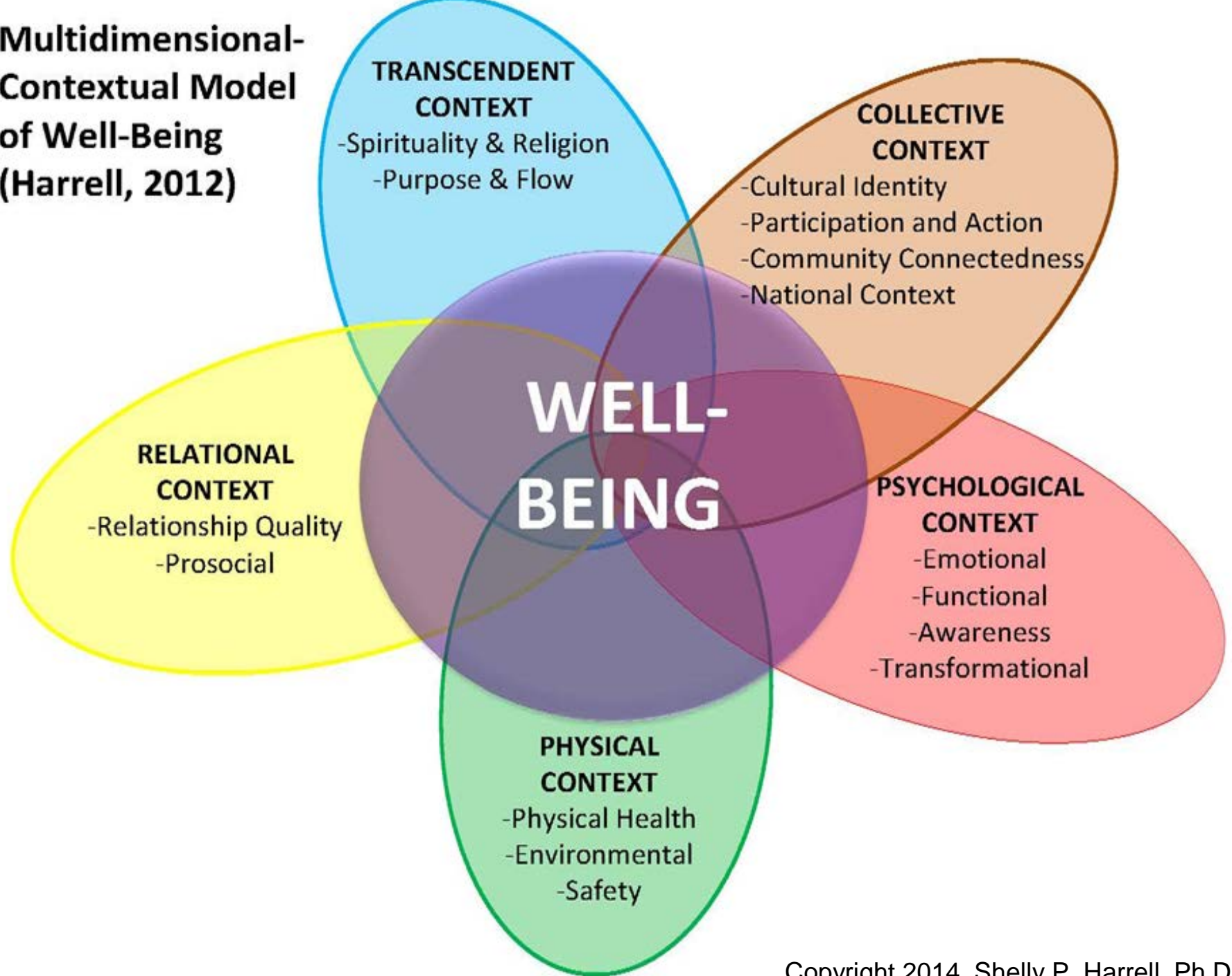
Example: A Culturally-Embedded Approach to Well-Being

- *The Multidimensional Well-Being Assessment (MWA)*
 - Attempts to address the individualistic and culture-bound nature of most measures of well-being
 - Purpose to be inclusive of aspects of well-being that may be particularly relevant to historically oppressed and stigmatized groups
 - Includes dimensions of well-being that emerge from the literature in multicultural psychology where themes of collectivism, spirituality, and overcoming adversity are prominent.

- 160-items within five primary contexts of well-being.
 - **Psychological** (Emotional, Functional, Awareness, and Transformational dimensions),
 - **Physical** (Physical Health, Physical Environment, and Safety dimensions)
 - **Relational** (Prosocial Behavior and Relationship Quality dimensions)
 - **Collective** (Sociocultural Identity, Community Connectedness, Civic Participation and Engagement, and National Context dimensions)
 - **Transcendent** (Meaning-Purpose-Flow and Spiritual-Religious dimensions)

- Preliminary psychometric data is strong with alpha reliabilities ranging from .70-.94. In addition, the pattern of statistically significant validity coefficients reflects hypothesized relationships with measures of similar constructs (Harrell et. al., 2013).

Multidimensional-Contextual Model of Well-Being (Harrell, 2012)



Re-Visioning Strengths and Virtues: Positive Womanist Life Principles

- Strengths and Virtues from a culturally-embedded perspective
 - The six VIA virtues (Wisdom, Transcendence, Humanity, Temperance, Justice, and Courage) were derived from the study of diverse cultural and religious worldviews
 - Did not include indigneous peoples (Native American, Aboriginal, First Nations) or any African cultures in its initial research.

- Emphasis of the Positive Womanist Life Principles is on articulating **cultural strengths**—those ways of living optimally that emerge within a particular cultural context.

Positive Womanist Life Principles:

A culturally-embedded application of the VIA strengths and virtues

- A culturally embedded framework for identifying, enhancing and building the strengths and gifts of women of color from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Informed by Womanist Theory
 - Within a womanist theory, there is an ultimate concern for the liberation and optimal development of all of humanity across gender, ethnicity, race, religion/religiosity, class, and sexual orientation.
 - Grounded in and inspired by Alice Walker's four-part conceptualization of the "womanist" concept.
 - Courageous, audacious, wants to know more
 - Commitment to love and wholeness of all people
 - Cherishes and celebrates life
 - Strength, Intensity, Passion (purple is to lavender)

The Six Positive Womanist Life Principles

- (1) Extended Ways of Knowing (Wisdom),
 - (2) Spirited and Inspired Living (Transcendence),
 - (3) Interconnected Love (Humanity),
 - (4) Balance and Flexibility (Temperance),
 - (5) Liberation and Inclusion (Justice), and
 - (6) Empowered Authenticity (Courage).
- Forty specific strengths and gifts are organized within the six life principles.

PWLP #1: *Extended Ways of Knowing*

Womanist “Wisdom”

- 1.1 - Intuitive, Spiritual, and Relational Knowing (through signs, symbols, body, etc.)
- 1.2 - Historical and Contextual Perspective
- 1.3 - Nonlinear and diunital thinking; Understands co-existence of seeming opposites
- 1.4 - Creativity-Resourcefulness; ingenuity (making a way out of no way)
- 1.5 - Seeks to “know more and in more depth”; Questioning, interrogates reality
- 1.6 - Insight and Understanding; Critical consciousness; Understands the “big picture”; broader perspective
- 1.7 - Teaches, passes lessons down; Holder of wisdom; Mentor; advice-giver
- 1.8 - “Mother wit”; Common sense

PWLP #2: *Spirited and Inspired Living*

Womanist “Transcendence”

2.1 - Reverence for the spirit-infused essence of all life- human, animals, plants, nature, etc.

2.2 - Soulfulness; Feels deeply; Being “moved”
Passionate aliveness in joy and pain

2.3 - Hope in adversity; transcendence of limitations and barriers; possibility of change

2.4 - Faith- supreme confidence that God/Spirit is always there and will protect and get you through hard times

2.5 - Personal and intimate relationship with God, Nature, Ancestors

2.6 - Expressiveness and improvisationality through music, dance, poetry, art; orality; Celebration

2.7 - Life-giving and renewing; birthing and re-birthing; transformative energy

2.8 - Sense of purpose and “calling”

PWLP #3: *Interconnected Love*

Womanist “Humanity”

3.1 - Collective, interdependent, and unitive consciousness; Ubuntu- “I am because we are and because we are I am”

3.2 - Hospitality, welcoming, sharing (“what’s mine is yours”)

3.3 - Communal nurturance and caring; participates in growth and development of others

3.4 - Compassionate presence; witnessing; being “with” the experience of others

3.5 - Sisterfriend relationships; Lifts up, encourages, supports others

3.6 - Healer; provides healing where there is suffering

PWLP #4: *Balance and Flexibility*

Womanist “Temperance”

4.1 - Harmony and balance; understanding and patience with cycles of life and natural order

4.2 - Forgiveness and mercy

4.3 - Purposeful sacrifice and discipline; responsible, takes care of business; does what is needed

4.4 - Flexible and adaptive when necessary; role flexibility; can change directions if the situation calls for it

4.5 - Acceptance and surrender; seeing “what is” and “turning it over”

4.6 - Discernment, judgment; sees through insincerity; prioritizing based on values

PWLP #5: *Liberation and Inclusion*

Womanist “Justice”

5.1 - Respect for the worth and dignity of ALL people in the context of honoring differences; universalism, egalitarianism

5.2 - Movement toward wholeness within self; movement towards inclusiveness across persons

5.3 - Resists oppression; stands up against exploitation and violence in any form; protects the weak and downtrodden

5.4 - In-charge and serious; initiative; “Do it yourself” spirit

5.5 - Collective responsibility and participatory action; mobilizes and brings people together for common cause

5.6 - Moral-spiritual responsibility for the conduct of self and others; doing the right thing for humanity

PWLP #6: *Empowered Authenticity*

Womanist “Courage”

6.1 - Self-determination; self-defining; self-affirming; “loves herself...regardless”

6.2 - Audacious, willful, outrageous when necessary

6.3 - Speaks truth to power; truth-telling; straightforward communication; giving testimony

6.4 - Conviction, standing one’s ground; follows beliefs, integrity, “walks her talk”; capability

6.5 - Perseverance, endurance, “can do” attitude

6.6 - Transgressive and revolutionary; risk-taking; subversive; acts for a higher cause;

- The Positive Womanist Life Principles offers a model for a culturally-embedded approach to strengths and virtues.
- The Positive Womanist Life Principles provides a structure for identifying, contextualizing, and facilitating strengths that is grounded in the culturally-embedded experiences of women of color.
- The Positive Womanist Life Principles can be used to inform the development and implementation of strengths-based interventions for women of color.
 - Example: Phenomenal Women Rising (PWR)
- It is hoped that the PWLP will lead to the continued articulation of the strengths/gifts, as well as ways of applying the framework to the development of interventions that focus on enhancing the well-being, optimal functioning, and thriving of historically oppressed women of color.

Concluding Remarks: “I Rise”



MFC Psychologies intersect with Positive Psychology in their emphasis on the transformative process of rising from dynamics of oppression to manifest optimal functioning for humanity in all of its diversity.

“Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

&

“I’ll Rise” by Ben Harper

The Well-Being Project

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THE WELL-BEING PROJECT is a research study being conducted by Dr. Shelly Harrell and the Harrell Research Group at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology. We want to better understand and measure well-being for different people in different life situations. We are trying to get a large diversity of people to complete our questionnaire and help us learn more about what makes life GOOD!



For more info visit us at www.wellbeingresearch.net or email wellbeing@harrellresearchgroup.org