

Original Paper

Promoting Psychological Wellbeing across the Life Span: Prospects and Challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract

Psychological wellbeing consists of two philosophical perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic viewpoints. These paradigms are developed and changes overtime across life span subject to life course experiences influenced by the individual's live experience. More importantly early years' experience moderate individuals' psychological wellbeing as being positive or negative with attendant consequences. Understanding psychological wellbeing across developmental life course provides useful insights for life adjustment as individual, families and groups to navigate life turbulence.

Keywords

psychological wellbeing, life span, adolescence, adulthood, developmental psychology

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the major areas of psychology which received much academic and research attention were Industrial and Organizational psychology. That was appropriate for that era as factories were bubbling and capacity utilization was high. Banks were prospering and the Universities were losing a good percentage of their bright students to the banks, private multinational firms and oil companies. The economy was doing well. Now, what is happening? Economy is not doing too well, there is youth restlessness, terrorism, spousal abuse, kidnapping, ritual murder, rape of underage children, family instability and recently, increase in incidence or visibility of suicide among adolescents and young adults. These are just some of the signals that all is not well. There is a Yoruba proverb that says "Amukun, eru re wo, o ni oke ni e nwo e ko wo isale" roughly translated, it means that the aberration you see has its roots in something deeper. Thus, some of these developments may suggest that somewhere along the way in the individual's life trajectory, some things may have gone fundamentally wrong. Thus, there is a need to critically look at the challenges and opportunities offered

by our own context for psychological well-being across the lifespan. This is the time for Developmental Psychologists to weigh in and provide insights that will be useful as individuals, families and groups navigate this turbulent period in our national history. This is not to discountenance other arms of psychology, because all areas of psychology are inter-related, none is superior to the other. However, the assertion is that all areas of psychology derive significant bearing from developmental psychology, this is because psychology is the science of behaviour and mind and a significant part of understanding human behaviour, aspirations, hopes, fears, and misbehaviors, is understanding who they are, how their life trajectories have been conditioned by the lived experiences. No other area of psychology offers this wide horizon better than developmental psychology.

2. What is Psychological Wellbeing? And why is it in the “domain” of Developmental Psychology?

Psychological well-being is generally defined as lives going well, a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively”. (Huppert, 2009) By definition therefore, people with high psychological well-being report feeling happy, capable, well-supported, satisfaction with life, and so on. Dolan, Layard and Metcalfe (2011) and Kahneman and Deaton (2010) agree that there are three aspects to Psychological well-being. These are evaluative, affective and eudemonic well-being. Evaluative well-being involves global assessments of how people evaluate their lives, or their satisfaction with life; affective or hedonic well-being involves measures of feelings such as happiness, sadness and enjoyment; and eudemonic well-being focuses on judgements about the meaning or purpose of one’s life and appraisals of constructs such as fulfilment, autonomy and control. Focussing mainly on eudemonic well-being, Ryff (2014) identified what he considered to be the six essential features of Psychological well-being. These are:

- a. The extent to which respondents felt their lives had meaning, purpose and direction (Purpose in life).
- b. Whether they viewed themselves to be living in accord with their own personal convictions (autonomy).
- c. The extent to which they are making use of their personal talents and potentials (personal growth).
- d. How well they were managing their life situations (Environmental mastery).
- e. The depth of connections they had in ties with significant others (positive relationships).
- f. The knowledge and acceptance they had of themselves including awareness of personal limitations (self-acceptance).

There are some questions we should ask at the onset to bring our focus back to our own cultural context. First, is the definition of psychological well-being universally applicable? Or is the definition culturally specific? For example, what we consider “normal” behaviour in Nigeria may be dubbed abnormal and

unhealthy in another country. What is perceived as psychologically healthy also varies with settings. Clapping and breaking into a dance may be an appropriate response to an inspiring sermon in a church context in Nigeria, but doing the same thing at a world conference on Mental Health may be viewed with some suspicion.

Another defining context of psychological well-being is the age-appropriateness of life events and behaviour as defined generally by that culture. Each society has its own social clock, an external gauge that works to shape a standard level of progress or accomplishment within a society. For the individual, reaching landmarks at the expected time indicates a competent level of mental and emotional maturity, while those who lag behind are regarded as less competent in the eyes of society, and perhaps in their own eyes as well. For example, choosing to remain unmarried or choosing not to raise a family may not be perceived as aberrant in some societies in the west. But making such choice in Nigeria will be perceived as odd and is likely to significantly limit the extent and diversity of an individual's social network and social support. Similarly, the age difference between the President of France and the wife may be perceived as odd in our culture but among the majority in the West, it is quaint, not odd. Thus, we can say that what is perceived as promoters or detractors of psychological wellbeing may vary from culture to culture.

However, there is no doubt about the importance of psychological well-being of individuals for the individual and for the larger society. In a meta-analysis of thirty-five studies on this subject, Chida and Steptoe (2008) found that psychological well-being in a population was correlated with reduced mortality in healthy and sick population, lower rates of heart disease and lower rate of mortality in patients with other diseases. Some cross-sectional survey by other researchers also indicate that happy people tend to function better in life than less happy people; they are typically more productive and more socially engaged; and tend to have higher incomes (Diener, 2000; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Ryan and Deci (2001) pointed out that people high in happiness or psychological well-being tend to have attribution styles that are more self-enhancing and more enabling than those low in subjective well-being, suggesting that positive emotions can lead to positive cognitions which, in turn, contribute to further positive emotions.

3. Psychological Wellbeing and Outcomes across the Life Span

A psychological well-being across the lifespan using the developmental task approach by Havighurst (1972), proposed a bio psychosocial model of development, wherein the developmental tasks of each stage are influenced by individual's biology (physiological maturation and genetic makeup), his psychology (personal values and goals), as well as his Sociology (specific culture to which an individual belongs. He defined developmental task as one that arises at certain period in our life, the success of which leads to happiness and success with later tasks while failure leads to unhappiness, social disapproval and difficulty in later life. This approach therefore lends itself very well to our

exercise of looking at our current socio-cultural context and surmising about the potential it has and the challenges it possesses to individual's efforts at performing the developmental tasks expected at each stage. We will be able to identify hopefully, the facilitating and the inhibiting factors in individual's attempts to fulfil these tasks. We are aware of the influence of genetics and personality, in the whole configuration. For example, Cross sectional and longitudinal studies provide evidence that several personality traits are predictors of differing levels of psychological well-being. Such individual differences include optimism, stability of self-esteem, life management strategies. Also, we are aware that Children's psychological well-being is most likely developed through interaction with their parents (Rosenberg, 1979).

Also since adults spend a significant portion of their lives at work, many of the characteristics of the work environment can therefore enhance or detract from our psychological well-being. For example, having a good control over our work and having the opportunity to regulate the pace and timing of our work all tend to enhance our self-esteem and sense of control, thus buffering us from stress. Similarly, the extent to which the work activities foster, encourage or demand creativity, originality, imagination and self-expression significantly impact the psychological wellbeing of workers. For example, colleagues who moved after some years of engagement in a typical Nigerian public University to work in the typical Nigerian private University often describe the latter's work environment as more prescriptive than the former. The latter is also perceived as bearing down on its workers, and therefore generating work related anxiety and stress. Thus, there are many interesting angles from which to view the issue of psychological wellbeing across the life span in Nigeria. Only the micro (individual) and the macro (society) levels across adolescence, adulthood and old age were emphasised in this paper.

4. Psychological wellbeing in Adolescence (10-17 Years)

Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Research indicate that the period is typically characterized by lower levels of wellbeing than in childhood, with some even claiming that satisfaction with life declines from age 11 to 16 (Goldbeck, Schmitz, Besier, Herschbach, & Henrich, 2007). Neurobiological, cognitive, and environmental shifts during this stage of life may each be responsible for the decline in wellbeing that is typical of adolescence. More so, such neurobiological changes may also co-occur with changes of perceptions and motivation that enhance the decline of wellbeing (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993). All the developmental changes occurring in adolescence can make coping with stressors a tumultuous task and, thus, an individual's wellbeing can suffer. The pursuit and achievement of personal goals in adolescents such as high academic performance, successful career and outstanding sport performance can lead to a psychologically fulfilling life as this provides structure and meaning to one's activities and identity (Gray, Ozer & Rosenthal, 2017). However, inhibited goal progress and conflict are associated with decrease psychological wellbeing in adolescents (Sheldon, Jose, Kashdan, & Jarden, 2015). The Harvard Raising Teens Project identified

10 tasks of adult development that adolescents need to undertake to make a successful transition to adulthood. They are:

- a. Adjust to sexually maturing bodies and feelings.
- b. Develop and apply abstract thinking skills.
- c. Develop and apply new perspectives on human relationships.
- d. Develop and apply new skills in such areas as decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution.
- e. Identify meaningful moral standards, values and belief systems.
- f. Understand and express more complex emotional experiences.
- g. Form friendships that are mutually close and supportive.
- h. Establish key aspects of identity.
- i. Meet the demands of increasing mature roles and responsibilities.
- j. Re-negotiate relationships with adults in parenting roles.

The question here is the extent to which the social and cultural context supports the typical Nigerian adolescents in fulfilling these tasks. The issue of identifying meaningful moral standard to serve as compass for aspirations, and decision making seems to be problematic. With the globalization, most adolescents are aware of what is possible for adolescents in other countries. The ascendancy of social media and the popularity of this among the adolescents have led to heterodoxy of values, celebration of inanities and a microwave approach to problem solving. Another development arising from social media is that an adolescent definition of friendship is becoming very shallow. An adolescent will boastfully declare that he has 200 FB friends, yet does not have any deep or affectionate relations with any, thus limiting the chances of promoting the development of complex emotional experiences. Internet dating which has landed many adolescents in trouble, including loss of life is gradually becoming a concern for parents and the larger society. The internet loaded with contents to enhance the psychological well-being of adolescents, but the misuse of these access can create a disadvantage for individuals.

Another author summarized the tasks of adolescents as revolving around four questions: 1) Who am I? 2) Who are others? 3) What can I do or be? and 4) What do I value?. Of these four questions, in my opinion the one that seems most problematic is the fourth one—what can I value? Nigeria appears to be in a period of moral crisis, somewhat akin to what Emile Durkheim, the renowned Sociologist called the period of anomie. Anomie is defined as a period of social instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values. It is also defined as a period of personal unrest, alienation, and anxiety that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals. It appears that traditionally held values come daily under assault and adherence to “omoluabi” concept in interpersonal relationships is viewed as retrogressive or as unwise. The advent of the internet and social media as given more power to the adolescent to access content that worsen the values of the societal ideals. It is also a period that is characterized, according to

Merton by disjunction between “culturally prescribed aspirations” of a society and “socially structured avenues” for realizing those aspirations. In this type of environment, it quite possible that adolescents may be hampered from having a moral compass needed to undergird their choices and their interpretation of events around them.

5. Psychological Well-Being in emerging Adulthood (18-25 years) and adulthood (26-65 years)

Emerging Adulthood

As with late adolescence, emerging adulthood is characterized by a sharp decline in wellbeing (Carstensen *et al.*, 2011; Stone, Schwartz, Broderick, & Deaton, 2010). Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that individuals in this age group have fewer positive emotional experiences than during adulthood (Carstensen *et al.*, 2011). Satisfaction with life steeply declines in emerging adulthood at rates that may not be recovered again until older age (Stone *et al.*, 2010). Also, emerging adults are still developing effective emotional regulation skills and can be faced with an onslaught of hardships related to accepting responsibility, making major life decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2000). Another possible reason adduced for decrease during emerging adulthood period is the risks associated with exploration. Failed career, scholarly, or romantic efforts may lead to discouragement and dissatisfaction with life. Emerging adulthood is a time of development and growth; unfortunately, it seems that these challenges may have detrimental consequences for wellbeing. According to Vaillant in his book, “Aging Well” In order for a person to mature as an adult and to be on the road towards a mature, happy, joyful and satisfying life, there are six principal adult tasks that must be attended to with success. These include:

- a. The young person must evolve an identity that allows him/her to become separate from the parents.
- b. The young adult should develop intimacy which permits him/her to become reciprocally and not narcissistically involved with a partner.
- c. Career consolidation-mastery of this task permits the adult to find a career that is both valuable to her as she once found play.
- d. Task of generativity- a broader social circle through which one manifests care for the next generation.
- e. The task of keeper of meaning- the task of passing on to the next generation the traditions of the past.
- f. Integrity- the task of achieving some sense of peace and unity with respect to one life and to the whole world.

With the high rate of youth unemployment necessitating greater and longer dependence on parent support, some youths are “forced” to co-reside with their parents and be dependent on them economically. Separation of identity becomes difficult in this circumstance. Other youths seek their

independence at all costs by engaging in criminal entrepreneurship, e.g., “yahoo, yahoo”, jail break, marriages for young girls and similar other practices that provides avenue for independence from parents. Needless to say that the idea of career consolidation is a reality only for a relatively small percentage of the youth in an economy where PhD holders were among those responding to the advertisement of drivers in a major indigenous company!

The other option that is practiced by the young youths is to seek greener pastures outside the country. As it stands, these young adults have effectively shifted base and are raising the next generation in cultures very different from where they were raised. Consequently, we can ask, what traditions of the past can you pass to a child born and raised in the Diaspora. This calls into question the ability of the adults to fulfill the expectation of being “keepers of meaning” to the next generation.

Adulthood

Adults on the other hand tends to have a stronger preponderance of positive affect than do emerging adults and this positive trend continues throughout adulthood (Carstensen *et al.*, 2011; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001). The preponderance of positive affect is more of a result of less negative affect, rather than just an increase of positive affect. There are mixed results concerning the exact trajectory of satisfaction with life across adulthood. Studies have shown that satisfaction with life decreases, increases, or is stable across adulthood (Lang & Heckhausen, 2001; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Prenda & Lachman, 2001; Stone *et al.*, 2010) leading to the suggestion that satisfaction with life varies more between-persons in adulthood than in other life stages. Assuming that we are speaking of individuals in the 40-60 years’ bracket, this is the period where some may experience midlife crisis, and are marrying off their children and becoming grandparents. The developmental tasks in this period include:

- a. Expanding personal and social involvement and responsibility.
- b. Assisting next generation in becoming competent, mature individuals.
- c. Reaching and maintaining satisfaction in career.
- d. Balancing work and relationships.
- e. Re-assessment of life principles.

A look at the stage of adulthood in our society, and particularly in the Yoruba today speaks about resilience. Nigerian adults seem very resilient and will do everything to ensure they fulfill these developmental tasks. The typical Yoruba woman will sell her clothes and jewelry to pay her children school fees, all in a bid to ensure better life for her children. While the man will either borrow money or work multiple jobs/businesses to support the family. However, nowadays we also see how the desire to perform this task may lead to parents engaging in various shortcuts in order to enhance the chances of their children. For example, parents buying answers scripts for their children or bribing officials to award marks illegally to their children. These two examples point to the fact that this natural desire to assist the next generation is often very strong but the means to legitimately do so may be limited or

may be accomplished at very great sacrifice. With respect to the first task—expansion of personal and social involvement and responsibility, the opportunity to do so exist in the extended family, in the work group, neighborhood, worship society, and community. However, because of the high dependence in our social environment on affluence (money and connections) as definer of relevance and usefulness to these groups, efforts of individuals to fulfill this task may be unrewarding for individuals who do not have money or connections. Thus, some go to great lengths to acquire chieftaincy titles that provide some psychological rewards of relevance and importance, some seek political office expecting overnight enrichment and some engage in other nefarious activities to make money. Balancing work and relationships is increasingly becoming challenging, particularly for female adults who often have to care for their children at various stages of growth as well as for aging parents. The task of taking care of aging parents in the absence of supportive community services can be stressful, hampering psychological health (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2013).

6. Psychological wellbeing in Old Age (65 years and older)

Old age has been defined as the final stage of the normal life span. It has been argued that the passage from youth to old age is mirrored by a shift from the pursuit of wealth to the maintenance of health. By this time, the aging body increasingly becomes a concern, replacing the midlife preoccupation with career and relationships. Going by the Developmental tasks approach of Havighurst the key developmental tasks of old age are:

- a. Adjusting to Deteriorating Health and Physical Strength:
- b. Adjusting to Retirement and Reduced Income:
- c. Meeting Social and Civil Obligations:
- d. Adjusting to Death or Loss of Spouse:
- e. Affiliation with Members of One's Age Group:
- f. Establishing Good Physical Living Arrangement:

The elderly in Nigeria continue to enjoy a fair level of respect and the norms support the care of the old by the young. There are also many elderly people who are icons in the society. We still revere them at important cultural ceremonies like wedding, naming ceremonies etc. However, there is clear evidence that psychological well-being in old age for a great majority of Nigerians is a pipe dream. Pension covers only 5% of the population and a large number of the elderly in the rural area and those who have worked in the informal sector are uncovered. The idea of reduced income is laughable when those eligible to pensions are not paid and when the majority receive no supplemental income and some of the adult children on whom they depend for assistance are also under severe financial pressures. We are witnessing an increase in the number of elderly beggars in our markets, bus stops and generally on the street. Can a beggar be said to be enjoying psychological well-being? Without a good measure of income security in old age, psychological well-being is compromised.

Secondly, the health care system in the country is still geared towards acute health needs of children and youths and has paid scant attention to the chronic illnesses of old age, which by definition are long term and very expensive. There is also very limited public enlightenment on the risk factors of the old age chronic diseases. Despite these challenges, a good sign that most Nigerians still abhor the practice of institutionalization of the elderly preferring option for living arrangement where children continue to do their best to provide for their elderly parents.

7. Conclusion

What this review has done so far is to present mainly generalities about the challenges which the Nigerian social context places on individual's abilities to experience psychological well-being at various stages in life. It is also important to note that some variability in well-being is heritable through a temperamental predisposition for positivity and satisfaction with life (Diener *et al.*, 1999). Wellbeing also systematically varies as a function of certain major life events, such as getting married, having children, or widowhood (Clark & Oswald, 2002). However, this paper leaves a picture of how our current practices at the macro level of society is limiting individual's abilities to be the best that they can be. The physiological needs for different stages of life are similar across cultures. No data exist on children who begin to walk at the age of three months; neither is there much about those who grow old in childhood (except in the case of Progeria). However, societies differ widely in the extent to which enabling environment is provided for the pursuit of goals that enhance psychological well-being. In addition, changes in individual's psychological well-being can also be the result of more minor events. Greater social activity, higher physical health, and less perceived stress are related to high fluctuations in well-being (Schilling & Diehl, 2014; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005). Importantly, the amount by which well-being fluctuates at an intrapersonal level can depend on life stage. For example, older adults tend to have less variability in positive and negative affect than young adults (Röcke & Brose, 2013). Similar to physical activity, psychological well-being differs between people, and across the lifespan and in major life stages.

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