# African Cultural Psychology

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## Abstract

Existing African and African American scholarship have attempted to account for the cultural aspects of psychological functioning. Traditionally mainstream psychology has harbored an individualist ideology where positive functioning is seen purely at the individual level. However, few theories postulate how cultural psychology junctures culture and psyche, cultural connections between African and African American people. Groups display of cultural psyche reference their experience of intra- and inter-personal realities that are bounded through culture. Research on the psychology of African and African American people grounded in cultural realities may assist in conceptual clarity for defining psychological health from a cultural perspective. This *cultural perspective* represents the collective symbolic representations of behavior and ways of perceiving that also serves to guide values that define the meaning of healthy psychological functioning. This discussion centers around four areas of importance: (a) alien Western episteme; (b) African episteme and cosmology; (c) African psychological functioning; and (d) cultural psychology for those of African descent. Our goal here is to provide an African cultural psychological view of these realities as expressed via mechanisms that determine affect, thought, emotion, and behaviors to prescribed cultural context. Such processes are culturally organized, defining positive mental health and well-being in accordance to a group's culture (Wilson 2012; Wilson & Williams 2013).

**Keywords:** African Psychology, cultural psychology, African episteme, African cosmology, psychological functioning


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## Iqoqa

Imfundo ekhona yase-Afrika kanye neyamaMamelika okudabuka e-Afrika seyizame ukuchaza ubunjalo bamasiko bokusebenza kwesayikholoji. Isayikholoji eyejwayelekile neyeningi seyifihle ukucabanga okuzimele lapho ukusebenza okuyikona kubonakala kuphela ezingeni elizimele. Kodwa-ke, izinjulalwazi ezimbalwa ziveza ukuthi isayikholoji yamasiko ihlela kanjani ngezigaba isiko nomqondo, ukuhlobana kwamasiko phakathi kwama-Afrika kanye namaMelika okudabuka e-Afrika. Amaqembu aveza umqondo wamasiko abeka ukubona kwawo amaqiniso aphakathi nanomkhawulo wawo aboshelwe esikweni. Ucwaningo kwisayikholoji yama-Afrika kanye neyamaMelika okudabuka e-Afrika, olugxile emaqinisweni amasiko lungelekelela ekucaciseni imicabango ukuchaza impilo ngokwesayikholoji ngendlelakubuka ngokwamasiko. Le ndlelakubuka ngokwamasiko imele iqoqo lemifanekiso ebonakalayo lezindlela zokuziphatha nezindlela zokubuka nezisiza ukukhomba okungamagugu okunikeza incazelo ukusebenza kwesayikholoji okunempilo. Le ngxoxo ingxila ezingxenyeni ezine ezibalulekile: (a) indlela yokufika yolwazi yaseNtshonalanga; (b) indlela yolwazi yase-Afrika kanye neyendabuko; (c) ukusebenza kwesayikholoji yase-Afrika; kanye (d) nesayikholoji yamasiko yalabo bokudabuka e-Afrika. Inhloso yethu lapha ukuveza umbono wesayikholoji yamasiko ase-Afrika wala maqiniso njengoba kuvezwe amathuluzi aphethe ukunyakaza, ukucabanga, umuzwa, kanye nendlela yokuziphatha esimweni samasiko esigunyaziwe. Lezi zinqubo zihlelwe ngokwesiko, ukuchaza impilo eyiyo yengqondo kanye nokuphatheka kahle njengokwenqubo yesiko yalelo qembu (Wilson 2012; Wilson & Williams 2013).

**Amagama asemqoka:** isayikholoji yase-Afrika, isayikholoji yesiko, indlela yolwazi yase-Afrika, indlela yokubuka izinto ngendabuko yase-Afrika, ukusebenza kwesayikholoji

## Introduction

Conventional mainstream psychology has harboured an individualist ideology, where positive functioning is observed purely at the individual level. Kraepelin first proposed the development of comparative psychiatry as a constituent of culture (Sam & Moreira 2012). The long-standing challenge between cultural psychology and mental health remains in the search for rich variation in cultural context and search for universality. Two well-known methods to examine the cultural context of mental health are the etic and emic approaches. The etic approach involves applying the universality of Western theoretical constructs onto different cultural populations; whereas, the emic approach allows for in-depth exploration of mental health theory within specific cultural-context. There is increased appreciation for the cultural effects on mental health (i.e., personality and self-hood) in relation to rules, adaptation, meaning of life, and variations in assessment (Cheung 2009; McAdams & Pals 2006). The concept of personality and selfhood have been consistently defined from a western European viewpoint (Wissing 2013).

Persons who personify individualism attribute behaviour to traits (Cheung, Van de Vijver & Leong 2011). For example, within the standard Western perspective, the concepts of personality formation and self are derived from a guise of internal understanding of individual existence (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). However, for persons of collectivistic cultures, personality and self are determined by an interdependent existence (Belgrave & Allison 2010; Guerry 1975; Stack 1974; Martin & Martin 1978; Nobles 2015) and use more situational descriptions in order to explain behaviour based on contextual conditions (Cheung, van de Vijver & Leong 2011). However, rich debate has occurred regarding homogeneous personality vs. heterogeneous personality, while it remains difficult to capture diverse constructs of individuality and collectivity (Chen, Meindl & Hunt 1997).

Divergence in human characteristics is often authenticated by assumptions that originate from a Western, European conception of the world (Jones & Campbell 2011). This cultural-deprivation model perspective assumes that Black people are confirmed only to the degree they are considered the same as white (Jones & Campbell 2011). This paper is designed to highlight how culture, found in the works of Black psychologists, is interwoven, and essential to defining psychological functioning for African and African Americans. Specifically, the psychological adaptation inquiry

from a cultural psychology perspective will reflect authentic African-centric psychological processes, where psychological differences due to different cultural origins evolve along different pathways. While Blacks have been dehumanised worldwide, their adjustment to and emancipation from oppression requires the operation and progression of an African cultural psychological explanation rooted in African cultural thought and philosophy.

While it is not the attempt of this article to examine parallels between those of African descent and those of European descent, nor claims to make universal assumptions about African and African American culture to the world, this discussion highlights and illuminates the psychological processes and resources of a positioned human being discernible to a group of people that are culturally, psychologically, socially, and politically significant in the world. In other words, it is imperative that constructing an African centred theory authenticating correct and normal behaviour must 'incorporate mutually verifying constructs about the nature of human beingness and human functioning' (Piper-Mandy & Rowe 2010). Accordingly, any analysis, theory, constructs or concepts must adequately reclaim our African cultural ways of being and expression (Rowe & Webb-Msemaji 2004). For example, research by Salami, Walker and Beach (2017) demonstrated differences in the precursor to depression as fundamentally different between Blacks and Whites. African Americans, due to their cultural disposition, reflected cognitive vulnerability of helplessness, while Euro-Americans were more of a hopelessness cognitive vulnerability, demonstrating different cultural disposition (Salami, Walker & Beach 2017). These different portrayals correspond to different cultural experiences, reflecting an authentic psychic energy to living in a racially stigmatised reality and culture.

What follows is an introduction of summary operational ethics of cultural psychology, thereafter next brief explanation regarding absolutist and relativism, where all human behaviour is argued to be culturally patterned, where after, the operative assumptions of African-centered psychology are revealed. Lastly, a core description of a cultural psychology for people of African descent will be introduced.

## Assumptions about Culture and Cultural Psychology informing Mental Health

Cross-cultural researchers (Hofstede 2011; Kagitcibasi 1994; King & Nobles

1997; Triandis 1996; Schooler 1996; Compton 2005; Li & Fuan 2007; Nobles, Goddard & Gilbert 2009) generally agree on the on conceptualisation of mental health and concur that a cultural element to functioning exists. Several cultural models demonstrate how different psychologies are apparent. For instance, Hofstede's (2011) introduced six cultural dimensions, Triandis' (1996) ideocentrism vs. allocentrism, Markus & Kitayama's (1991) interdependent vs. independent self, and King and Nobles' (1997) cultural agency and cultural agent (Culturecology Model) have all garnered much-needed attention. In fact, prior examinations explored the unitary dimension and its multi-linear typology within individualism and a collectivist construct. Triandis (1995) suggests a perpendicular axis typology, defining four types of individualism-collectivism (I-C). A horizontal individualism (HI) domain views individuals as equivalent, but autonomous of one another, self-governing and self-promotional, assertive, and unique. Second, vertical individualism (VI) imitates an autonomous/diverse self-construal (persons who see themselves as not the same, but self-determining). In the same way, horizontal collectivism (HC) imitates a mutually dependent/same self-construal, while vertical collectivism (VC) imitates a mutually supporting/different self-construal (Triandis 1995). While the work of Triandis and his colleagues are well-accepted (Schooler 1996; Compton 2005; Li & Fuan 2007) this model will be reexamined from an African-centered culturecological perspective to elucidate the formation of correct mental health functioning.

This study has an empirical focus. Indeed, it should also be noted that the application of an African episteme and cosmology to the understanding of African and African American psychological processes is most appropriate given that the African American experience, though unrecognised and in many quarters falsely denied, is essentially African (Nobles 2006; Kambon 1998a; Akbar 1994; Cuadill 1973). Researchers Woods, Kings, Hanna & Murray (2012: 72) captured Nobles' understanding that,

> ... [n]o one has yet to demonstrate or substantiate how African American people are not fundamentally African. At best, social commentary, not scientific fact, has simply declared that African Americans somehow magically stopped being African due to crossing the Atlantic and living for a long time in America, even though that stay has been for the most part isolated, rejected and segregated from mainstream society.

Nonetheless, what is illustrated is that the very same literature also suggests that these groups may demonstrate unique and amalgamated characteristics from their genetic culture of origin as well (Belgrave & Allison 2010).

## African Episteme and Cosmology

Three theoretical positions for the investigation of culture persist. The first is the absolutist position, where culture does not inform the expression or meaning for human performance. The use of standardised constructs and measurement tools without recourse to an alternative indigenous view reflects this understanding. This ethnocentric approach and its inherent assumptions are only logically possible from within the worldview from which it emanates (Sam & Moreira 2012). For instance, in this excerpt Vincent Guerry's (1975: 29) *Life with the Baoulè*, we see how Western thought permeates his interaction with someone of an African way of being:

> Meeting a Baoulè with a little boy, I asked him 'Is he your son?' He says yes, he is. But I want to be sure, so I narrow down my question: 'Is he your real son? From your own body?' No. So I explain to him that this means he is not his own son. He replies 'He is not my bodily son, but he is my real son'. At this point I am lost. He insists that the boy is his real son, even though not physically. To me, 'real son' and 'adoptive son' are contradictory ideas, separated by a strict boundary of fact. Whereas to the Baoulè they are overlapping, and can both be simultaneously true.

The psychology of Blacks continues to be collapsed within or studied as an aspect of Western psychology. Theoretical constructs of race developed from Western conceptual frameworks, often displacing African and African American psychological health and well-being. The US Census Bureau sees race as a matter of a person's self-identification (Belgrave & Allison 2010). Literature refers to the identity of racial formation as connecting with a group or combined identity with a foundation on an individual's observation that he/she has similar experiences with others (Yip, Seaton & Sellers 2006). To date, no accord has been established to form a concept or idea of racial or Black identity for African Americans (Jones & Campbell 2011; Marks,

Settles, Cooke, Morgan & Sellers 2004). The Census Bureau defines Black or African American as: 'A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa' (p. 97). The discussion of race in context demonstrates connections between African and African Americans free of cultural context. However, the purpose of this communicative discourse is to articulate how *culture* can play a significant positive role for human psychological functioning unique to those of African descent. Wilson and Williams (2016: 6) states,

> since all groups display characteristics of affect, emotion, and thought as expressed values and behaviors [sic] to prescribed cultural context, defining positive psychological functioning and well-being should be in accordance with a group's culture.

The second position is that of the relativist perspective, where all human behaviours are culturally patterned. The attempt here is to gain clarity of human functioning on the terms of indigenous patterns of behaviour. One benefit is the explanation of human phenomena from within the cultural context of the individual. A relativist position provides the opportunity to collect an abundance of data that extrapolates the foundation and manifestation of culture-bound positive psychological functioning. However, the reality of Africans has been shaped by centuries of engagement with Europeans through the colonisation period, illicit slave trade and the rise of capitalism (Nobles 2015). These Africans were shipped to the Americas. The 'African American' is one of geopolitical consequences of this, which include displaced group lineage, lack of cultural acknowledgement, social status in the US, and historical structural endemic discriminatory patterns and widely held practices in unfavourable judicial and social policies (Woods, King, Hannah & Murray 2012; Alexander 2010; King, Moody, Thompson & Bennett 1983). As a result, the ideas and beliefs (ideations) of African people were virtually ignored (Nobles 2015). Nobles add that 'The psychological effect of European imperialism has never been fully understood' (Nobles 2015: 51).

This discourse is of special interest for how indigenous psychologies can add to cultural psychology for a more adequate study of psychological functioning. The key theoretical link between positive psychological functioning and racial-cultural content should be of interest to theoreticians, practitioners, and culture psychologists alike, for a holistic method of inquiry. The

theoretical contributions in the study of Black extended family (Martin & Martin 1978), personhood (Pense 2009), mental health (Azibo 1996), and culture (Valsiner 2009; Matsumoto 2006; Nobles 1985) may advance our understanding of the psychological health status of Africans and African Americans (racially) and Africans residing in the diaspora (Wilson & Williams 2013). While more research is being conducted, little has been discussed in selected journals, *Culture and Psychology*, regarding how the instrument of culture impacts and defines psychology for those of African descent.

Lastly, the third position, universalist, hypothesises that concept of 'psychic unity' as 'early stage-based models of human development tended to privilege psychological universalism [in their dissemination of ideal processes]' (Hammock 2008: 226), and that culture influences its development and display. Panse (2006) articulates that the common bond among all human beings through which people exist occurs through our discovery of common human qualities. This is the combination of relativist and absolutist positions. Some authors (Sam & Moreira 2012) contend that the most comprehensive approach to understanding mental health functioning is to incorporate universalist, absolutist, and relativist perspectives. Kambon and Bowen (2014: 89) succinctly state,

> The primary developmental emphasis of these models has focused on psychologically transitioning from an Anti-Black to *Non-Black* – racially neutral or Universal – Human identity. Other constructs like Individualism/Individual Human Identity (achieving an Individual identity independent of race and culture) have been emphasized [sic] and are generally thrust toward the need to transcend racial identity to achieve an optimal individual-personal human identity within the framework of European/European American cultural reality.

While the African American environment separates them from their place of origin, they represent a multidimensional ethnic group identity appropriated from vestiges and symbols of African culture (Wilson & Williams 2013). The mental health of a person is essential to their identity and wellbeing. To articulate the African American cultural identity/reality the field of psychology and mental health practitioners must not be in a state of constant reaction to Western theoretical models, but must employ more autochthonous psychology (Wilson & Williams 2013). According to noted Black psycholo-

gists (Nobles 2006; and 2015; Hilliard 2001; Akbar 1994; Kambon 1998a; 1998b; Wilson 1995; Wright 1984) black psychological phenomena exist. For instance, experts (Nobles 2015) in Black/African psychological research have declared that consciousness and personality are difficult to unravel and that the character of the mind includes both immaterial and material collective experience. This intergenerational setting of being reflects thoughts of reincarnation and collective consciousness. Cognisance, all things considered, mirrors the intrapsychic limit with regards to insight and divine understanding, which means epistemically moving beyond simply considering, feeling, and mindfulness. It must consider a divine presence/spirit (Nobles 2015). Thus, African people reincarnate consciousness generationally, regardless of locale. This interchange comprises both macro (e.g. McAdams 2006) and micro-social conscious (e.g. Bamberg 2004) approach to deal with the examination of mental working/ emotional wellness/ mental health.

Defining African and African diasporas psychological health has been the work of the professional organisation, The Association of Black psychologists, who for over fifty years has been defining and refining Black reality (Williams 2008; Neville Tynes & Utsey 2009; Belgrave & Allison 2010; Piper-Mandy & Rowe 2010; Nobles 2012). Early works and writings of conventional psychology, for the most part, described African Americans and Black culture in the pejorative in all spheres of American intellectual and cultural study (Martin & Martin 1978). Some of the most influential works of E. Franklin Frazier (1939), Gunnar Myrdal (1945), Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake (1945), up to the seminal work of Daniel Partick Moynihan's report on the Black family, reveal the antipathy of mainstream culture's attempt to pathologise this segment of the population (Martin & Martin 1978). Scholars have attempted to deconstruct the cultural-deprivation hypothesis and began to articulate more accurate and comprehensive explanations by examining strengths of the Black family life experience (Robert Hill 1972; Robert Staples 1971; Nobles 1985; White 2004). Early works by Orlando Taylor (1971), Joseph Holloway (1990), Joyce Ladner (1971) and Melville Herskovits (1958) acknowledge the cultural retention found in Black life were attributed to 'African survivalism'. In other words, the critics contend that significant features of African culture were evident in the New World within patterns of black life (Belgrave & Allison 2010). For example, Wilson and Williams (2013) capture such features as extended family, sense of family, concern about kin and non-kin individuals as symbolic representation for

collective personhood. There is a need to theoretically ground and empirically investigate autochthonous psychological functioning perspective. Discussions on the context of personality and selfhood informing healthy experiences appear in works by African-centered psychologists (Nobles 2006; Hobfoll *et al.* 2002; Kambon 1998b; Azibo 1998; Myers & Haggins 1998; Adeola & Perry 1997; Akbar 1994) who have declared, for example, that the psychology for people of African American ancestry has roots in African philosophy and psychology. African (Black) psychology has been defined by Kambon (1998a: 242) as:

> … as a system of knowledge (philosophy, definitions, concepts, models, procedures, and practice) concerning the nature of the social universe from the perspective of African cosmology. Black psychology is nothing more or less than the uncovering, articulation, operationalization [sic], and application of the principles of the African reality structure relative to psychological phenomena.

The unpredictable connection among culture and psychological well-being remains an imperative theme of dialogue. There cannot be emotional well-being without culture. Culture is a component and inherent part of mental health functioning. The meaning of wellbeing relies upon the way of being and thinking, and may shift in time and place (Sam & Moreira 2012). To not acknowledge this uncovers a nearsighted ethnocentric perspective of the statement of positive emotional wellness. This underscores the significance of articulating and characterising African psychological wellness from various perspective introductions.

## Defining Psychological Functioning

The productive use of autochthonous psychologies in the field of cultural psychology has been informative. Being acquainted with other societal values and their indigenous concepts may yield expanded understanding about culture's impact on psychology (Valsiner 2009). However, the challenge remains with the science of psychology and its historical roots orientated towards the West (Valsiner 2009). From the Euro-social psychological perspective, ethnocentrism limits our understanding of other psychologies in the world. For instance, mental working can be seen as the state in which

mental processes are self-protecting, in accordance with universal principles. In this regard, the World Health Organization defines mental health as, 'as a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community' (WHO 2007). Azibo (1996: 76 - 177) on the other hand, describes mental health as,

> … the achievement in the psychological and behavioral [sic] spheres of life of a functioning that (a) is in harmony with and (b) embraces the natural order … [and is] that psychological and behavioral [sic] functioning that is in accord with the basic nature of the original human nature and its attendant cosmology and survival thrust.

It has been noted that different cultures are said to exhibit common characteristics of communal and collectivist well-being. Cultures that are looked upon as 'representing' a communalistic theme regardless of their diversities (in ancestry, place, and religious worship), include nations of diasporic Africans, Asians, Latinos, and Indians (Choi & Han 2009; Triandis 1995). For instance, according to Susrut Indian conceptualisation health is a state of spiritual, physical and mental well-being (Valsiner 2009; Durghanand Sinha 1996). For the analysis of selfhood, mental and social well-being for Chinese traditionalists reflects a Confucian philosophy of collectivism (Choi & Han 2009). Guerry (1975: 29), examines Baoulè's universe to state, 'their thirst for unity, the desire for cohesion, seems to be the deepest aspiration of the Baoulè: to stick closely as possible to one another, be the other a deity, the universe, or the clan'. With reference to Akan culture Gyekye (n.d.) states,

> Because the human individual is not self-sufficient, he would necessarily require the assistance, goodwill and the relationships of others in order to satisfy his basic needs … the well-being of man depends upon his fellow man – *obi yiye firi obi.*

For African Americans, Stack (1974) has called attention to that Black family connection techniques are a common social-cultural network. Essentially, in Martin and Martin's (1978) study of extended family, sound mental working is the effect of encountering healthy emotional and moral support during complacent times and gives people a feeling of identity, roots, and emotional stability of belonging.

The challenge is what we can glean from indigenous episteme that will help us understand those of African descent, while valuing the intricacy of the continental, diasporic, and American experience (Belgrave & Allison 2010). This nescience continues to hinder our development in expanding these other psychologies and capturing from their historical traditions potential towards a healthier perspective that may be more holistic for our way of being in the world (Hanks 2009). Borrowing from these histories of proven philosophies it is reasonable, according to the ontological processes discussed, to assume that psychological functioning is determined through our discovery of common human qualities. Panse (2006) believes that the common bond that makes us human beings occurs through the guise and rules of culture.

## Culture and Psychology: The Discussion

The term *culture* has been used in a variety of ways in various disciplines. As Valsiner (2009: 5f) suggests, the term culture is,

> being sculpted in a variety of versions … such as the dialogical self, social representation processes, semiotic mediation, symbolic action, and actuation theories – have all been co-participants in this new advancement of ideas.

Although many scholars have defined culture to explain various aspects of human thought, behaviour and practices, this multidimensional construct remains abstract in application and explanation when defining psychological functioning between different groups of people (Organista, Marin & Chun 2010; Valsiner 2009; Matsumoto 2006). It has been a widely held view that,

> the cultural psychology of African Americans involves the evolution of African patterns of thought, feeling and behavior [sic] and their utilization [sic] as adaptive mechanisms in a context of racism and oppression (Jones & Campbell 2011: 1).

Culture is a vast structure of practices, thoughts, states of mind, values, propensities, convictions, traditions, dialect, customs, services and practices exceptional to a specific gathering of individuals, which gives them a general plan for living and examples for deciphering reality (Nobles 2015). Culture

and psychology attempt to provide a heterogeneous view of culture that allows different perspectives to be presented. However, discourse in culture and psychology has been limited, and continues to hinder our understanding of cultural psychology (Valsiner 2009), particularly from African and African American perspectives.

## Different Cultural Psychology: Defining our Mental Health

Conventional psychology is entrenched in Western ideology. For example, traditional psychology's concept of personhood (self or identity) explains the European identity from the interest of European Utamawazo (worldview) (Ani1994); self-interest, competition, and separateness (Johnson 2003; Karp & Masolo 2000) yielding to the polarisation between matter and spirit (Sawyer 2004). Wu and Keysar (2007) suggest that individuals with this more individualised self-construct are more likely to represent European cultural *utamawazo*, or worldview. Individuals who ascribe to a Eurocentric *utamawazo* demonstrate personhood as valuing material external worth, a sense of distinction, and uniqueness (Myers & Haggins 1998).

According to theorists (Nobles 2006; Hobfoll *et al*. 2002; Kambon 1998a; Azibo 1998; Myers & Haggins 1998; Adeola & Perry 1997; Akbar 1994), African Americans ascribe to an African *utamawazo* (Ani 1994). The African *utamawazo* is characterised as sacred, emotional, and communal (Mattis, Hearn & Jagers 2002). Inherent within these discussions is the emphasis on the ontological understanding of communion and connection with others, due to identity, physical location, and spiritual divine order (Adams & Salter 2007).

Collectivism, as characterised by reliance, closeness to family, or family uprightness and friendliness, may reflect mutual aid systems in black families. During slavery, Africans had to depend heavily on mutual cooperation in order to survive (Belgrave & Allison 2010). During this period, Africans had to work their crops in order to eat; make their clothes, share room and board, care for enslaved children who were separated from their own parents, develop codes of conduct, which insured their security, care for their own sick, and even bury their own dead (Martin & Martin 1978). This value orientation of the group reflects their *asili*, or ontological, cosmological and epistemological ideas of existence (Karp & Masolo 2000; Ani 1994) more than non-African *utamawazo*, that includes a tendency to promote the idea of the survival of only the fittest.

This episteme has its origin in Kemetic cosmology (Grills 2004; Kambon 1998a; Azibo 1996; Akbar 1994; Nobles 1985). It is within this African philosophical system that consciousness is structured through the seven principles of *Ma'at* truth, justice, balance, harmony, order, proprietary/reciprocity, and righteousness or self-governed way of life (Williams 1987). This suggests that an individual's worth is inherent in the individual's being (internal) as opposed to an individual's material goods (external) (Sawyer 2004). The awareness of one's internal energy and external world can be captured in the similar views of various African philosophies and/or communities. The Akan of West Africa believe the principle of two: *okra and sunsum*, immaterial/spiritual and *honam*, material/physical; the Yoruba speak of the *ara* (body) that can be handled, sensed, damaged and dissolved subsequent to death and the *emi* (spirit) is the divine element that links the person directly with god. The Mende person is seen as the *ngafa* or spirit source. The amaZulu of South Africa believe in the 'UQOBO,' as the origin of living consciousness. Epistemologically, this conscious understanding incorporates both the seen and the unseen.

The metaphysical understanding of the African individual is communal (Gyekye n.d.). Grills (2004: 181) states, 'In the African world there is no "I" without the "We"' (p. 181). The metaphysic and the status of person-hood in the African social order (Gyekye n.d.) follows the idiom 'I am because you are and since you are, therefore, I am' (Mbiti 1969) as opposed to Western formation of reality by the European philosopher Descartes, who maintained 'I think, therefore, I am' as the basis of personhood/identity (Johnson 2003). The philosophical proposition of Western man locates personhood based on the ideas of Descartes and Locke (Guerry 1975). The African concept of personhood in Western Bantu society sees individuals by their communing with others justifying their status as human beings (*Muntu)* (Janz 2004).

However, culture has been regulated as an independent variable, often marginalised due to limitations of time and place. The marginalised status of culture to the understanding of mental health and psychological functioning results from an etic approach of mainstream psychology. One assumption of this approach is the existence of 'psychic unity' of human experience such that the expression of individualism-collectivism constructs is common across cultures (Sam & Moreira 2012). Recent investigation has revealed cultural variation and multiple cultural domains within individualism-collectivism construct (Li & Aksoy 2007).

The examination of mental health in accordance with laws of social relations provides an important background for examining mental illness. While the scholarship within sociological perspective offers little insight into mental illness, it can serve as a significant construct from which to assess the trajectory of mental illness within the context of culture. While theories in sociological research discuss the direct implications of sociocultural connections to a people's way of functioning, stronger connections are required in order to define their mental health implications, grounded in a specific *cultural* reality, and may assist in conceptualising mental health and illness from a sociological perspective. This treatise focuses on the relevance of mental health constructs from a collectivist-individualist continuum, where there is a need to transpose the current individualistic paradigm onto a broader cultural paradigm of mental health and mental illness.

There are a number of theorists and practitioners who have begun to incorporate African-centered approaches into the articulation of personality (Kambon & Bowen 2014) and mental health (Azibo 1996). One substantial contribution to cultural mental health from Black psychology is the Azibo Nosology. As a part of his theory in diagnosing personality function on an order-disorder continuum, this system of diagnosis places at its centre an African understanding of personality as a function of inheritance, social ecology, and the interplay between the two. This view emerged out of relevant theories on mental health and illness. The 'Culturecology Model' (King & Nobles 1995; Nobles, Goddard & Gilbert 2009) asserts mental illness to be defined by cultural agents operating within a cultural worldview. In this work, cultural agency is the choreographed display of behaviour in accordance with what is socially conforming or morally contravening in one's interactions with the world. *Culturecology* recognises the interaction between people and their environment (be this hostile, or harmonious), as well as the ontogeny and phylogenetic survival thrust; it establishes what is normal and natural for the cultural organism.

The Culturecology Model, introduced by Lewis King and Wade Nobles (1997), suggests that the person comes with an ontological cultural DNA with facilities, ideas, values, life practices, and expectations defined by pre-scripted recurrent tales of history and survival. This will to survive on which mental health is premised emanates for those of African descent out of an orientation towards self-extension (Kambon & Bowen 2014; Kambon 1998a, 1998b) in which person and environment cannot be understood in

absence of their cultural psyche. King and Nobles (1997; Nobles, Goddard & Gilbert 2009) interject that the Culturecology Model identifies that

(1) 'the nature of the person' and 'the nature of the environment' are inextricably connected;
(2) both the environment and human beings are cultural phenomena; and
(3) the 'cultural grounding' and meaning of each (person and environment) must be culturally understood in order to fully understand the interactive relationship between persons and mental health.

Imagine, if you will, that health is divided into quadrants (see Figures 1 and 2) formed by the intersection of the person (as cultural agent) and the environment (the imposing cultural agency).

**Figure 1**.

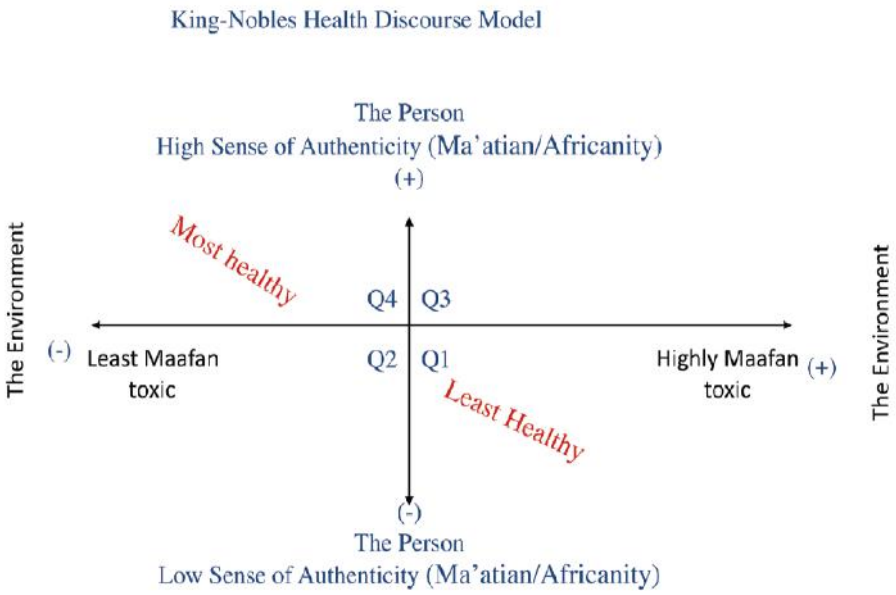
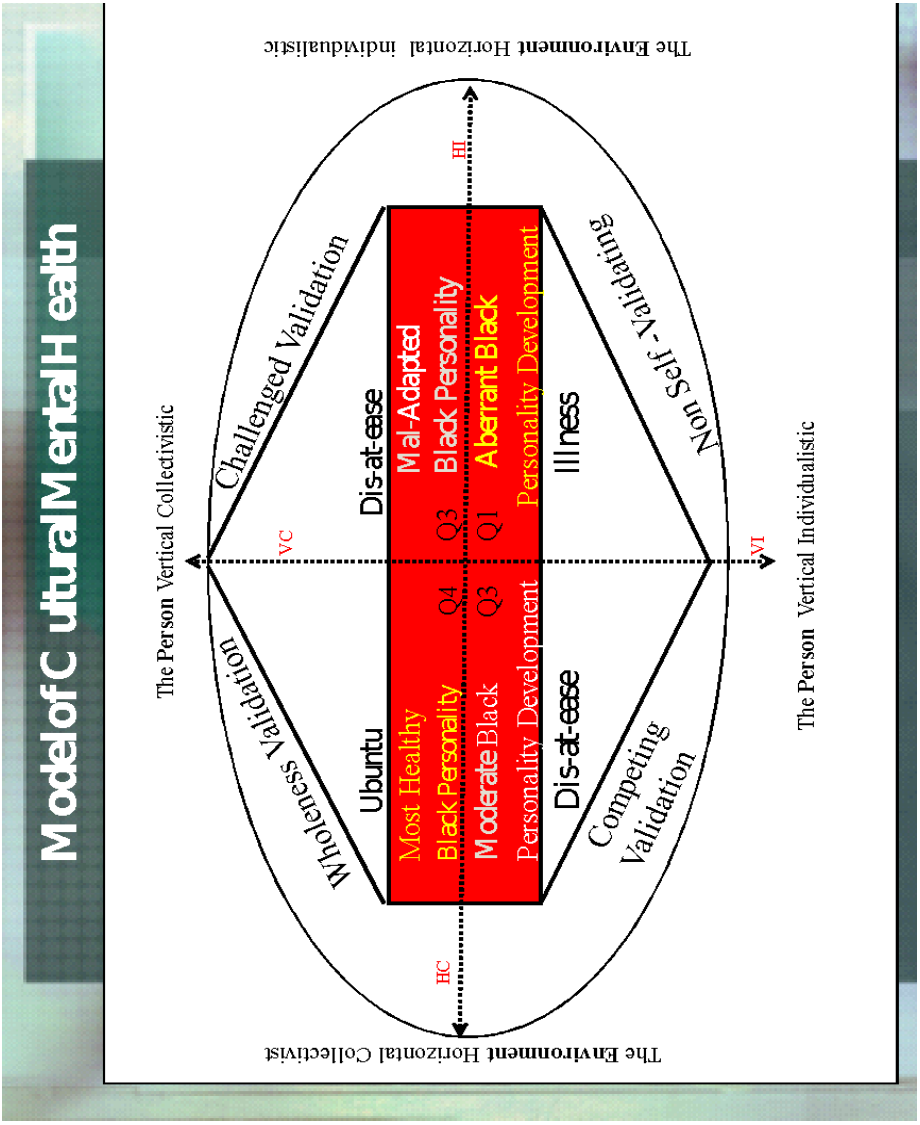


**Figure 2.**
**Model of Cultural Mental Health**



Cultural dimensions examined in early studies by Baldwin and Hopkins (1990) that revealed cultural differences in worldviews, with African American college students endorsing African *utamawazo* and white college students endorsing Eurocentric *utamawazo*. Similarly, Rubin and Belgrave (1999) examined time orientation and revealed that European American college students were more likely to use mathematical time orientation when arriving at events, whereas African American college students utilised relative time orientation when attending events. It has been argued that one can be a collectivist on one occasion, and be an individualist on another. This sort of code switching allows individuals who are collectivist, to exist in a predominantly individualistic environment (Gelfand & Dyer 2000). The same may not be true in reverse when individualists exist in a collectivist culture. This would explain, for example, white Africans in South Africa maintaining their individualistic values, traditions and ethos, while existing in a dominant collectivist culture.

Similarly, Jagers and Mock (1995) found that children of African ancestry demonstrate communalistic or collectivist attitude, and less competitive, individualistic attitudes when compared to their European counterparts. Further study by Kernahan, Bettencourt and Dorr (2000) revealed differential relationships for allocentrism (collectivism) and individualism between African American and European American students, respectively. While research (Salami, Walker & Beach 2017) has clearly demonstrated that worldview differences exist, with African Americans adhering to more African psychic energy and cultural disposition, contemporary social scientists continue to marginalie these results by argumentatively focusing on diversity that exist within African people and their cultures and simply give in to the so-called complexity of what the African American culture has become (Nobles 2006). Nevertheless, a different cultural psyche persists and has been exposed in conscious perspective taking and cognitive thought patterns.

Sinha and Tripathi (1994) identified individualistic tendencies in Japan, a culture typically recognised as a collectivist society. In a recent study, East-Asian Canadians differed in positive attribution towards self when interacting with the use of Asian language as they demonstrated both positive and negative affect than when using Western language demonstrating inverse relationship with more negative affect (Perunovic, Heller & Rafaeli 2007). However, research examining affective states as influenced by cultural expression has yielded implications contradictory to culturally normative

expectations (Ashton-James, Maddux, Galinsky & Chartraud 2009). Asians and Westerners who experienced positive affect expressed values and behaviours that were less consistent than their prescribed cultural interdependent and independent self-construal (Ashton-James, Maddux, Galinsky & Chartraud 2009). These empirical findings support the multidimensional nature of both the individual–collective construct (Triandas 2001), and reveal potential challenges to one's mental health (King & Nobles 1995).

This difference in cultural perspective-taking has also been captured in neural psychological research, which has demonstrated core neural psychological functioning that differed between subgroups existing within the same society. Recent study (Van Bavel, Packer & Cunningham 2008) examining neural substrates and group biases revealed amygdala activity among African Americans tends to reflect increased processing for in-group members, whereas amygdala activity among whites reflects increased processing of negative stereotypes toward African Americans. That is, self-categorisation ignited greater neural activity for African Americans, whereas out-group response increased neural activity for whites. This may suggest that psychological and cognitive mechanisms are motivated by social, cultural context and innate neural activity and its impact on behaviour. This provides empirical evidence for sentiments towards Mexicans, Muslims and Black populations in the US.

The research cited in this study indicates a psychocultural functioning of dimensions and reflects innateness or *visceral cultural traits* related to racial identity. The research also demonstrates geographical, historical, sociolo-gical, political, biographical, and generational change and is influenced by processes of socialisation, internalisation, and accommodation that should be considered in the investigation of psychological functioning. Connecting persons of African descent to their cultural roots may influence their psychological health (Adeola & Perry 1997).

## Conclusion and Suggested New Directions

From past research, people from an autonomous social reality may not have what it takes to decipher someone else's activity when contrasted with people from a reliant social point of view (Wu & Keysar 2007; Perunovic Heller & Rafaeli 2007; Ashton-James, Maddux, Galinsky & Chartraud 2009). Herein lies the need to consider an epistemological shift that is counterintuitive to

western orthodoxy. Social scientists of African descent may be more responsive to cultural contexts than to out-group cultural contexts. Previously mentioned research has captured different neuronal activity, in brain localisation with different cognitive perceptual performances attributable to associated cultural content and context (Van Bavel, Packer & Cunningham 2008). This certainly calls for a culturally differentiated understanding of human behaviour and psychological functioning, which may serve as identifying vital markers in distinguishing a more accurate account of mental activity and behaviour. Adequately locating culture as an intricate and innate function of psychic energy allows scholars and researchers to infer how *inter*-individual variance may be less of importance than *intra*-individual variability (Perunovic, Heller & Rafaeli 2007).

Mainstream psychology has not infused cultural components into its field. Identifying positive processes and outcomes from within a specific cultural worldview can expand our understanding of what is lacking and aid in the process of building upon what is in place for future intervention and prevention efforts. Additionally, this may lend support to the need for inclusion of other philosophical and psychological practices/theories as universal to all human beings. This author will offer a theoretical framework to be discussed in a second treatise on cultural psychology and mental health to serve two important intellectual functions:

(1) it will unite different perspectives and scholarship of similar themes within the field; and
(2) introduce the concept of *ubuntu* as a model of mental health.

This endeavour will articulate how African episteme and cosmology lay the framework for universal conceptual models within cultural psychology and expound on the psychological nature of humanness, *ubuntu*, as defined by people of African descent, while applying subjective ideals of cultural structured thought patterns to well-being and psychological functioning. Thereby, it is recommended that adoption and utilisation of formal definitions of cultural psychology be used. The incorporation of an African centered psychology may lend understanding to the dynamic manifestation of culture in the psychological analysis and application of theories. African centred psychology instills the understanding of thought and action as related to everything in the universe and a key aspect to mental health (Nobles 2006).

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