

# Chapter 16

## Positive Psychology and Religion/ Spirituality Across Cultures in Africa, Asia, and Oceania



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Positive psychology (PP) developed into a mainstream psychology subfield about two decades ago. At that time, its emphasis on strengths, virtues, and well-being represented a fundamental shift in the way psychologists had traditionally approached science and practice (Downey & Henderson, 2021). Beyond the rebalance that PP has brought to the field's historic emphasis on psychopathology, PP has served as a bridge that connects psychology to other disciplines, partly because many PP concepts have historical roots in philosophy and theology. For example, the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—have been integrated into the *character and virtue* domain in VanderWeele's (2017) framework of human flourishing (see Ratchford et al., Chap. 4, this volume).

PP has also had an important role in linking subfields within psychology, most notably through its ties with the psychology of religion/spirituality (PRS). A direct indication of this is provided in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) groundbreaking work on character strengths and virtues, in which they classified *spirituality* as one of 24 universal character strengths. Many other character strengths in their classification scheme (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, humility) are emphasized by major religious/spiritual (R/S) traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam) as desirable attributes that

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**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at [[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10274-5\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10274-5_16)].

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promote personal transformation and support the development of virtuous character (Cowden et al., 2021a).

Despite the apparent conceptual threads that connect PP with the PRS, cross-fertilization between these subfields of psychology has been limited (Worthington et al., [in press](#); see also Davis et al., Chap. 1, this volume). To illustrate, a broad set of searches in the PsycINFO database for scholarly articles with titles and abstracts containing key terms in the PRS (i.e., *religion, spirituality, worship, pray, faith, sacred*) and several prominent R/S-relevant character strengths in PP (i.e., *altruism, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, humility, patience*) published during the last 10 years revealed that fewer than 5% of records intersected both PP and the PRS. Hence, growth in each subfield seems more often to have transpired independently rather than through cross-pollination of both subfields (Worthington et al., [in press](#)). The current chapter examines the degree to which this pattern is consistent across different world regions, focusing specifically on Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

This chapter is guided by the premise that *culturally responsive cross-pollination*<sup>1</sup> of PP and the PRS would enrich both subfields and contribute toward their greater scientific and societal impact. To stimulate and enhance culturally responsive cross-pollination of PP and the PRS outside the traditional boundaries of the West, the current chapter explores the extent of overlap between these two subfields in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. After briefly describing the historical background, demographic composition, and religious landscape of these three regions, we summarize the results of a systematic literature search of research that intersects PP and the PRS in each region. We discuss some of the ways culturally responsive cross-pollination of PP and the PRS could enrich clinical practice in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Lastly, we offer suggestions for expanding this overlap through culturally sensitive and methodologically rigorous research within these regions.

## Historical Background and Religious Landscape of Africa, Asia, and Oceania

Africa, Asia, and Oceania share sociopolitical heritages marked by foreign invasion, colonization, and intergroup conflicts, which have shaped contemporary societies within each region. Although many countries in these three regions face a similar range of social, economic, and political issues that are tethered to culture and history, each region also possesses unique features that are important for contextualizing patterns of research and for identifying potential areas in which scholarship at the intersections of PP and the PRS might contribute to addressing the needs of that

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this chapter, we define *culturally responsive cross-pollination* as the deliberate integration of differentiable scientific fields (e.g., PP and the PRS) in ways that are sensitive to the contextual particularities and needs of the cultures that those fields study or serve.

region. Selected population demographics and the religious composition of Africa, Asia, and Oceania are presented in Appendix 16.S1 (see Tables 16.S1 and 16.S2).

## *Africa*

The African continent is home to the second largest population of people in the world—1.4 billion people (almost 20% of the global population of 7.9 billion; see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S1). The genetic, cultural, linguistic, and phenotypic diversity in Africa is unparalleled, with over 2,000 distinct ethnolinguistic groups of people represented across the continent's more than 50 countries (Reed & Tishkoff, 2006). Although Africa was richly diverse before colonization by European nations, colonialism only added further complexity to human life in the region (Worthington & Cowden, 2017).

Towards the latter part of the nineteenth century CE, many European nations were competing with one another over the potential economic benefits of colonial expansion in Africa. By the end of the so-called Scramble for Africa in the early twentieth century CE, almost all of Africa was controlled by Western European empires that were dominant at the time (e.g., Britain, Belgium, France). During that unprecedented period of expansive colonization, conflicts arose between indigenous groups and colonial powers, who often used military force to gain control of territories or overcome resistance to colonial rule (Pakenham, 1991). Throughout Africa, indigenous citizens were forced to live under a foreign rule of law that was repressive and authoritarian. Colonialists also imposed arbitrary territorial borders that partitioned ethnic groups and placed ethnically fragmented populations under a single system of governance, thereby disrupting traditional ways of living and leading to tensions between ethnically distinct indigenous groups (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2017). Even though colonial rule in Africa ended in the 1970s, the artifacts of nearly a century of large-scale colonization have shaped many challenges (e.g., inequalities, fragile intergroup relations, political instability) that continue to impact much of the African continent (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2014).

Colonialism also precipitated a marked shift in the ethnocultural dynamics of Africa. The influx of Europeans, Indians, Chinese, and other non-native Africans altered the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the region. Even when African countries acquired independence, many of the people who had come to Africa during colonization stayed, and their descendants remain a part of the demographic configuration of Africa. The Western ideas, values, and belief systems that were introduced through foreign invasion permeated native societies and expanded the sociocultural fabric of Africa. For example, traditional African religions were dominant in the region before the colonization of Africa (Aderibigbe, 2015). However, during colonial expansion, many European empires (e.g., Britain) integrated the proselytism of Africans into Christianity as part of the vision they had for the region. Today, approximately 50% of Africans identify as adherents of the Christian faith (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S2). About 40% of the African population affiliates

religiously with Islam. Christianity is concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, whereas Islam is most prevalent in Northern Africa. Although traditional African religions are in the minority on the continent, they continue to influence the religious lives of many people in Africa. One way this occurs is through religious syncretism, which is perhaps most poignantly illustrated by the growth of independent Christian denominations that fuse indigenous R/S with Christian theology (Cowden et al., [in press](#)).

## *Asia*

Asia is the world's geographically largest and most populous continent, with approximately 60% (nearly 4.7 billion) of the global population living in the region (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S1). Asia can be geographically divided into five subregions: East Asia (e.g., China, Japan), Central Asia (e.g., Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), Western Asia (e.g., Israel, Turkey), South Asia (e.g., India, Sri Lanka), and Southeast Asia (e.g., Indonesia, Singapore).

The Asian region is a diverse cultural landscape that has been shaped by a complicated history of dynastic cycles, regional conquests, transcultural encounters, and periods of colonial rule (Murphey & Stapleton, 2019). Of particular relevance to the contemporary status of societies within Asia is the so-called Silk Road, a network of trade routes that emerged near the second century BCE and connected Asia from east to west (and even south into India). Commerce and migration through these pan-Asian routes influenced parochial cultures and exposed local people to alternative religions. For example, Buddhism emerged in Northeast India around the sixth century BCE and later spread to Central and East Asia, in part through monks who began to travel along the trade routes (Foltz, 2010). Another key period in the history of Asian culture was European colonialism, which occurred between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries CE and permanently embedded Western influences, ideas, and religious beliefs into the culture of many nations and territories in Asia (e.g., India, the Philippines). Legacies of colonialism continue to have residual effects on the sociopolitical environments in historically colonized parts of Asia. A contemporary illustration of this phenomenon is the tension and conflict that recently transpired in the former British territory of Hong Kong (now part of China), over concerns that a newly proposed legislature would undermine territorial independence from the Chinese government.

All five of the major world religions (i.e., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) originated in Asia. It is also the birthplace of numerous other religious traditions (e.g., Confucianism) that are localized to parts of Asia. Hinduism is the oldest and second largest mainstream religion in Asia (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S2), although its footprint is limited to specific countries in South Asia (e.g., India, Nepal). Buddhism is especially prevalent in China, Japan, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and several Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Cambodia, Malaysia). Islam emerged in the seventh century CE and became the primary religious tradition

in the subregion of Western Asia, where most of the world's Islamic adherents live today. Large Muslim populations also exist in countries within Central, South, and Southeast Asia, owing to the eastward spread of Islam that began with early Islamic conquests in the seventh century CE and has continued to the present (through commerce and migration). Even though Christianity arose in Western Asia and maintains a presence throughout Asia, today it is a minority religion throughout most of the Asian continent. More people in Asia are religiously unaffiliated than in any other region of the world, and a majority of these unaffiliated people live in China (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S2).

## *Oceania*

The Oceania region is comprised of 14 independent countries that are divided into four main subregions: Australasia (i.e., Australia and New Zealand), Melanesia (e.g., Fiji, Papua New Guinea), Micronesia (e.g., Palau, Guam), and Polynesia (e.g., Tonga, Samoa). Oceania has the smallest population among the six inhabited continents, with fewer than 50 million people living in the region (< 1% of the global population; see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S1).

The first inhabitants of the region are said to have arrived by sea from different regions of Asia, bringing along their indigenous religious beliefs and practices that had sustained them for thousands of years (Swain & Trompf, 1995). It was only around the seventeenth century CE that Dutch and Spanish explorers arrived in the region. The establishment of colonies in Oceania led to more explorations by European settlers (who wanted to see this new stretch of lands). Some of the first settlers were British convicts who were transported from Britain and Ireland to the new colony of Australia, both as a punishment for their crimes and as a chance for them to build a new and more positive life. Shortly after European settlers made Oceania their home, the so-called “Australian Gold Rush” (which began around the middle of the nineteenth century CE) opened these colonies up to the world (Monaghan, 1966).

Alongside these historical developments and migratory experiences are the continuities and changes that have characterized the R/S life of the region's indigenous people and new settlers. Before the arrival of immigrants from Asia and Europe, Pacific Islanders in the region practiced their own Polynesian religions. Small island nations in Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia worshiped their family and village gods, but European settlers brought their Christian faith to the new colonies. After the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was abolished in 1966, trade with Asia opened doors for new settlers, many of whom practiced Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism) or Islam. By that time, the influence of European settlers—many of whom came as Christian missionaries in the company of colonial powers—helped Christianity become the dominant religion in the region. Over the years, many indigenous groups have abandoned their traditional religions and belief systems to embrace Christianity (Ernst, 2012). Although Christianity remains the

dominant faith tradition in Oceania (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S2), the region has seen a recent decline in Christian adherents (Bouma & Halafoff, 2017). The dynamics between colonialism, culture, and ongoing migratory processes have continued to shape the religious landscape of Oceania. This complexity makes a compelling case for studying the role of R/S in the region.

## Method of Review

We performed a literature review to collate and descriptively map empirical research that has intersected PP with the PRS in the regions of Africa, Asia, and Oceania during the last three decades. Three sets of database searches (one for each region) were conducted in PsycINFO to identify relevant peer-reviewed scholarly articles that were published between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 2020. We searched for records with titles or abstracts that contained keywords associated with religion/spirituality (i.e., *relig\**, *spirit\**, *worship\**, *pray\**, *faith*, *sacred*) crossed with a combination of recognized regional/subregional terms (e.g., *Africa*, *Northern Africa*, *sub-Saharan Africa*) and the names of specific countries where there are research-intensive universities. The official name of a country was included in a regional search if it had at least one local university listed in the World University Rankings.<sup>2</sup> The number of country names that were included in each regional search was higher for Asia (32) compared to Africa (10) and Oceania (2). Nonempirical articles (e.g., reviews, conceptual or theoretical articles, perspectives, viewpoints, commentaries), empirical articles that did not intersect PP and PRS, and topically relevant empirical articles that did not include at least one sample from a geographic region of interest were excluded from this review.

The database searches that were performed for each region yielded a combined total of 2,296 records (Africa:  $k = 377$ ; Asia:  $k = 1,732$ ; Oceania:  $k = 187$ ). After examining the titles and abstracts of the records within each region, 310 articles were retrieved for further screening. We then reviewed the full texts of those articles, which resulted in the exclusion of 181 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Metadata (e.g., title, year of publication), key details about the research context (e.g., country of origin, purpose), methodology (e.g., research design, sampling approach), participants (e.g., sample size, age), and primary results were extracted from the articles that were retained.

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<sup>2</sup>The World University Rankings provide a comparative performance index of research-intensive universities located around the world. Rankings are based on five domains of performance, two of which—*research* and *citations*—each contribute 30% to a university's overall performance score (Times Higher Education, 2019).

## **Results of the Review**

Across the three regions, a total of 128 unique articles met criteria for inclusion (one article met criteria for inclusion in both Africa and Asia). The largest proportion of these articles was from Asia ( $k = 64$ ), followed by Africa ( $k = 44$ ) and Oceania ( $k = 21$ ). A complete reference list of articles included in this review can be found in Appendix 16.S1.

### ***Publication Activity***

Research intersecting PP and the PRS within Africa, Asia, and Oceania has grown exponentially over the last 30 years. More than 65% of the articles that met the criteria for inclusion in each region were published in the last decade. Close to 5% of scholarly articles were published in the 15 years between 1990 and 2004. Oceania had a higher percentage of publications written by scholars from a single country in its region (approximately 80%) compared to Africa (around 30%) or Asia (about 50%). Less than 5% of the publications in each region came from collaboration among researchers from multiple countries in the same region. Asia had the highest number of publications involving collaboration with nonregional scholars (roughly 20%). More than 50% of the publications in Africa were authored entirely by non-African scholars (primarily US researchers). Authorship solely by nonregional scholars occurred less frequently in the other regions, particularly in Oceania, where it was rare for publications to be authored exclusively by researchers outside that region.

Almost 50% of the publications in the Africa region acknowledged a funding source that supported the research; roughly 60% of those sources were tied to authors affiliated with universities outside Africa. Less than 20% of studies in Asia and Oceania acknowledged a funding source. Funding sources in each region were diverse. For example, studies in Africa were supported by local universities, national and regional funders (e.g., South Africa's National Research Foundation, African Development Bank), and nonregional universities and foundations (e.g., Michigan State University, John Templeton Foundation).

### ***Research Context and Methodologies***

For each region, over 75% of articles involved samples from a single country in that region. When multicountry samples were recruited, studies mostly consisted of samples from countries outside the region rather than within the region. The percentage of studies that targeted the general adult population was higher in Africa (about 35%) compared to Asia and Oceania (almost 20% each). Africa had the

highest percentage of publications with adult clinical samples (approximately 25%), where many studies were linked to critical public health issues in the region (e.g., HIV/AIDS). Asia was the region with the largest proportion of studies focused on university students (roughly 35%). Oceania had the highest number of studies sampling religious adherents (nearly 30%), whereas Africa had the lowest (< 10%).

More than 50% of the publications in each region used quantitative designs, with the highest number found in Asia (approximately 90%), followed by Oceania (about 75%). Asia had the largest quantity of cross-sectional studies (almost 85%); by comparison, in both Africa and Oceania, roughly half the studies were cross-sectional. Fewer than 15% of studies in each region used longitudinal designs, most of which were conducted in the Oceania region. Fewer than 10% of studies in each region used experimental designs (e.g., randomized controlled trials). Approximately 35% of studies within Africa employed qualitative approaches, which were used less frequently in Asia and Oceania. Fewer than 15% of scholarly articles in each region used mixed methods (see Tsang et al., Chap. 8, this volume).

In each region, less than 30% of studies used probability techniques to sample participants. Across regions, more than 70% of quantitative studies used nonprobability sampling, and approximately 20% of cross-sectional studies used probability sampling. Although sample sizes varied considerably across studies in each region, the Africa region had the highest percentage of articles with sample sizes of over 500 (about 45% of studies). In each region, at least 60% of studies with low sample sizes ( $\leq 50$  participants) used qualitative or mixed methods designs. Nearly all studies in Asia and Oceania included both male and female participants, whereas about 20% of studies in Africa had unigender samples. Over 75% of studies in each region sampled only adults. Young adults aged 18–35 years were sampled most frequently, whereas children below age 10 years were sampled most rarely.

## *Topical Emphases*

We synthesized information about the scope, purpose, and main findings of the included articles, to provide a topical overview of PP and PRS research in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Due to regional distinctions in emphases, findings are presented by region.

### **Africa**

**Well-Being** In the Africa region, almost 60% of the reviewed studies focused on well-being. Slightly more of those studies addressed aspects of eudaimonic well-being (primarily meaning in life) compared to those that focused on hedonic indices of well-being (predominantly life satisfaction). Although research on well-being was common, less than 5% of studies applied a holistic approach to well-being by assessing functioning across several core domains of life. Almost 25% of studies on



well-being also focused on other thematic areas of PP that emerged during our review (i.e., character strengths and virtues, positive adaptation). The most frequently studied populations were university students, adult samples with medical illnesses, and adherents of major religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam).

Approximately 30% of the African studies on well-being were intersected with religiosity. Operationalizations of religiosity ranged from broad (e.g., multidimensional assessment capturing beliefs, practices, and commitment) to narrow (e.g., a single-item measure of religiousness). About 30% of studies focused on specific aspects of R/S life that routinely form part of conceptualizations of religiousness (e.g., religious importance, religious beliefs, religious practices), with slightly fewer addressing spirituality. Religious affiliation formed a central part of nearly 25% of the studies on well-being. A small number of studies examined religious service attendance, religious coping, or perceptions of religion or its teachings.

**Character Strengths and Virtues** In the Africa region, nearly 30% of studies examined character strengths and virtues alongside PRS concepts. Half of those studies focused on hope, with the rest examining prosocial behavior, forgiveness, or love. Almost 70% of the studies on character strengths and virtues also addressed aspects of well-being (e.g., meaning or purpose in life) and positive adaptation (e.g., coping, resilience). Only one study investigated multiple character strengths or virtues.

Many studies on character strengths and virtues addressed specific aspects of R/S life. The most common was religious practices (roughly 40%), whereas religious affiliation, belief in God or the divine, faith, perceptions of God or the divine, and religious beliefs appeared less frequently. Only one study focused broadly on religiousness, and three studies investigated spirituality. Three studies examined the intersections of character strengths and virtues with religious coping. None of the studies reported on religious service attendance, but one study addressed the topic of religious community.

**Positive Adaptation** About one-fifth of the region's articles studied the intersections of religiousness/spirituality with processes and outcomes indicative of positive adaptation. Close to 75% of those studies examined intersections between religiousness/spirituality and coping; the remainder centered on resilience or personal growth. Half of the articles assessed overall religiousness/spirituality, although many also assessed specific aspects of R/S life (e.g., religious affiliation, R/S beliefs, religious practices, faith, perceptions of God or the divine). A few studies explored religious coping as part of the broader coping process.

## Asia

**Well-Being** In the Asia region, more than 70% of studies examined some form of well-being alongside R/S concepts. At least half those studies emphasized specific indices of hedonic well-being (e.g., happiness or satisfaction with life), and around

one-third applied a broader conceptualization of subjective well-being (e.g., quality of life). Approximately 10% of articles reported findings based on measures that broadly captured specific dimensions of well-being (e.g., psychological well-being). A similar proportion of studies addressed aspects of eudaimonic well-being (e.g., meaning or purpose in life). Close to 10% of studies investigated facets of well-being in conjunction with specific character strengths or virtues. Studies on well-being most often sampled students. However, some studies sampled older adults or adherents of major world religions (e.g., Islam, Judaism).

About 60% of studies on well-being intersected with the PRS via the superordinate construct of religiousness. Like in Africa, operationalizations of religiousness varied from narrow (e.g., single-item index of self-perceived religiousness) to broad (e.g., multidimensional measure of intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation). Nearly 10% of studies assessed spirituality. Roughly 20% of articles explored specific R/S dimensions, such as R/S beliefs, religious commitment, and prayer. Studies on perceptions of God or attitudes toward religion were uncommon. Approximately 10% of studies focused on religious affiliation. A smaller number of articles explored religious support. Associations between religious service attendance and well-being were rarely investigated. Other topics that were examined infrequently included mysticism, spiritual transcendence, and spiritual distress.

**Character Strengths and Virtues** Less than one-fifth of publications in the Asia region focused on character strengths and virtues. Several character strengths or virtues were represented across those studies, including forgiveness, hope, gratitude, and altruism. Roughly 60% of the studies that examined the intersection of R/S with character strengths and virtues assessed overall R/S. The other studies assessed certain R/S dimensions (e.g., R/S beliefs, participation), usually centering on dimensions of religion rather than of spirituality.

**Positive Adaptation** A small proportion of studies (around 10%) in the Asia region addressed topics of positive adaptation. About half of those studies emphasized R/S coping as part of navigating the impact of negative life events. The other studies explored the role of R/S in fostering adaptive psychological functions or attributes (e.g., emotional regulation) that could support recovery from adversity or trauma.

## Oceania

**Well-Being** In the Oceania region, close to 60% of studies on PRS and PP examined aspects of well-being. More than 70% of these articles focused on subjective well-being. The remainder assessed other indices of well-being, including life satisfaction, psychological well-being, or R/S well-being. Fewer than 20% of studies examined the role of overall religiousness/spirituality in promoting well-being, but many others (approximately 40%) examined specific R/S dimensions (e.g., religious affiliation, religious identity). Almost 30% of the articles explored the salience of religious coping in enhancing or sustaining well-being. One study examined the

link between spiritual and subjective well-being. All studies on well-being recruited participants living in either Australia or New Zealand.

**Character Strengths and Virtues** About 25% of studies in the Oceania region examined the intersection of R/S with character strengths and virtues. Most of them (roughly 60%) examined connections between prosociality (e.g., charity, altruism) and either R/S affiliation or R/S identity. These were also the most methodologically rigorous studies from the region. The remaining studies investigated compassion or forgiveness, usually in association with spirituality.

**Positive Adaptation** Nearly 25% of studies examined processes and outcomes of positive adaptation. Almost all centered on the role of R/S in coping with adversities (e.g., migration, health problems) and building psychosocial resilience. One study specifically examined religious coping and its link with stress-related growth, whereas another explored the connection between R/S well-being and styles of psychological adjustment. Many of the studies focused on migrants and religious minorities (e.g., Muslims) at the margins of societies in that region, with some also emphasizing spiritual considerations in healthcare.

## Discussion

During the last decade, the regions of Africa, Asia, and Oceania have seen encouraging growth in research that cross-pollinates PP with the PRS. This trend suggests there is great potential for further development of research that intersects these two subfields. In the sections that follow, we synthesize and discuss the findings of our review. We also offer suggestions for further cross-pollinating PP and the PRS, hoping that doing so would lead to each subfield's greater scientific and societal impact in Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

### *Reflections on the Findings*

In all three regions, research on R/S and indices of well-being predominated topically. Across the reviewed studies, scholars used a variety of frameworks to operationalize well-being (e.g., eudaimonic, hedonic). Studies on well-being largely emphasized a single dimension of well-being (e.g., life satisfaction). Across regions, assessing well-being using a holistic, multidimensional approach would help advance understanding of the linkages between religion/spirituality and well-being. Similarly, it was rare for studies in any of the regions to examine aspects of R/S well-being alongside other dimensions of well-being. Many R/S traditions emphasize R/S well-being as an integral part of living a fulfilling life, and it is likely that even a comprehensive measure of well-being will be unable to provide a complete

picture of well-being if the R/S dimension is not also assessed. Research that integrates R/S well-being and other dimensions of well-being would advance scientific understanding of the nature and determinants of well-being in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Such integration could contribute to the development, refinement, and application of culturally responsive mental health treatment approaches that intersect PP and the PRS in these contexts. Research along these lines would do well to be grounded in integrative theories that can provide an overarching framework for bringing together PP and religion/spirituality (e.g., existential PP or PP from the viewpoint of a single R/S tradition; see also Davis et al., Chap. 18, this volume).

A majority of the populations that reside in all three regions are adherents of a major world religion (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism), each of which values similar character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Hence, we were surprised that disproportionately few publications in each region intersected character strengths and virtues (e.g., altruism, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, love) with the PRS. Character strengths and virtues that have been examined extensively in the West (e.g., humility, wisdom) received little attention alongside R/S concepts in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Character strengths and virtues are a bridge that connects R/S values and ideals with other areas of PP (e.g., well-being), which suggests remarkable expansion in both PP and the PRS could be achieved if research on character strengths and virtues increased in the future (see Ratchford et al., Chap. 4, this volume).

Limited expertise in the PRS within Africa, Asia, and Oceania may be influencing the apparent lack of research *depth* in these regions. This deficiency in depth can be characterized by a lack of comprehensiveness, complexity, and methodological rigor in research at the intersection of PP and the PRS in these regions. Of note, research in all three regions has tended to overlook the potential “dark side” of religion/spirituality by focusing almost entirely on the positive aspects of religion/spirituality. Considerable research in the West has now explored the phenomenon of R/S struggles (i.e., tensions, strains, and conflicts about sacred matters), with some evidence suggesting that R/S struggles can lead to psychological and spiritual growth (e.g., Exline et al., 2017). If scholars in Africa, Asia, and Oceania were to examine the full spectrum of R/S experiences more deliberately, scientific understanding of linkages between R/S and many PP concepts (e.g., meaning in life) would be greatly enhanced.

Although the thematic area of positive adaptation is represented in research on PP and the PRS within Africa, Asia, and Oceania, the emphasis was largely on coping and resilience. Few studies went beyond the role of religion/spirituality in facing distress or remaining psychologically buoyant while navigating adversity. Further research is needed to understand how religion/spirituality might facilitate personal growth or otherwise enable people to thrive in response to negative life events, particularly studies focused on forms of distress (e.g., suffering) that many R/S traditions emphasize as having the capacity to bring about personal or R/S transformation (Cowden et al., 2021b). For example, culturally responsive research that cross-pollinates PP and the PRS in these three regions could expand the corpus of empirical literature on suffering by providing additional insight into how non-Western

worldviews shape perspectives on suffering, responses to suffering, and adaptive processes that enable people to transcend suffering. More generally, research that draws on both subfields to develop an understanding of R/S growth following hardships, challenges, and adversity could provide a foundation for interventions, public health initiatives, and policies that address key social issues in each of the three regions (Long & VanderWeele, Chap. 25, this volume).

We found that, in all three regions, research intersecting PP and the PRS either emphasized or was conducted with samples from major world religions. In each region, traditional or indigenous religions that are in the minority (but have played an important role in shaping local culture and the R/S life of contemporary societies) were underrepresented, particularly in Africa and Oceania. Traditional or indigenous religions often espouse a worldview that is fundamentally different from that of major religious traditions. For example, harmonious interdependency between the living and the spirits of deceased ancestors is a central part of many traditional African religions. Among adherents of these religions, when mental and physical health difficulties occur, those difficulties are often interpreted as being rooted in disruption to that harmony (Cowden et al., *in press*). There is much that the subfield of PP could gain by understanding aspects of the human experience that are prioritized by traditional or indigenous religious belief systems, many of which remain (in some form or another) part of the R/S lives of people who live in the regions of Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

### *Considerations for Practitioners*

Increased cross-pollination of PP and the PRS could enhance the competence and effectiveness of mental health practitioners who draw on PP in their work. More than 80% of people in Africa, Asia, and Oceania are adherents of a R/S tradition (see Appendix 16.S1, Table 16.S2), which can have an important influence on how people view, interact with, and make sense of the world. For example, R/S can shape how clients understand well-being, prioritize certain aspects of well-being, and interpret and face potential threats to well-being (e.g., suffering). Practitioners who explore and attend to the culturally embedded R/S attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of clients are likely to acquire a more holistic understanding of the people they are serving. In the process, practitioners would be better equipped to implement personalized treatment approaches that are more culturally responsive and tailored to the needs of clients.

Practitioners in Africa, Asia, and Oceania might consider strengthening R/S competencies through resources that offer training and guidance about providing mental healthcare that is responsive to clients' R/S beliefs, practices, needs, and values. A growing number of training programs are available to build R/S competencies (e.g., the Spiritual Competency Training in Mental Health program), but it will be important for practitioners to be prepared with R/S competencies that are relevant to the culture and context in which they provide services. Development of

R/S competencies needs to be encouraged and supported by professional psychology bodies in countries within each of these geographic regions.

As PP practitioners in each region pursue an enriched clinical approach through cross-pollination with the PRS, there may be value in harnessing spiritually integrative treatment approaches to facilitate therapeutic change. One promising model is integrative meaning therapy (Wong, 2010), a holistic approach that intersects PP, clinical psychology, and existentialism. A central tenet of integrative meaning therapy is that R/S is an essential part of being human, and R/S is recognized as a powerful resource that clients can mobilize to transcend the challenges of life toward more complete flourishing. Integrative meaning therapy also has a multicultural orientation that makes it an appealing model for use in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. Although integrative meaning therapy may not be a suitable treatment for all clients, it does highlight the potential for PP and R/S to be integrated coherently into practice to support clients from different cultures and contexts.

### *Suggestions for the Next Wave of Research*

If the next wave of research that intersects PP and the PRS in Africa, Asia, and Oceania is to have a substantive impact both locally and internationally, at least two important developments in research practice are needed. First, the rigor of quantitative research traversing these two subfields must be increased in each region. Most publications in each of the three regions reported findings from quantitative cross-sectional designs, a methodological approach that makes it difficult to establish the direction of cause and effect. Consistent with calls to strengthen the science of both PP and the PRS (see Gallagher & Lopez, 2021; VanderWeele, 2021), future research that cross-pollinates these subfields would benefit from carefully designed longitudinal studies grounded in frameworks for causal inference. That could substantially improve the methodological rigor and causal conclusions that can be drawn from quantitative research intersecting the two subfields (see also Tsang et al., Chap. 8, this volume).

Second, well-designed research programs are needed to build a stream of culturally responsive empirical evidence that cross-pollinates PP and the PRS, as well as to facilitate theoretical advances that apply to the societies within each region. In Africa and Asia, where many publications were authored exclusively by scholars outside each region, local researchers who form collaborative partnerships with well-established international scholars could acquire expertise in designing and implementing systematic programs of research. Collaborations with nonregional scholars could also enrich the existing body of evidence germane to each region, particularly when researchers from outside the region have expertise in a particular phenomenon that is of shared interest. For example, several studies in the Oceania region focused on migrants from countries in Asia (mainly Western Asia) but were authored entirely by researchers residing in Oceania. International research collaborations that merge regional knowledge of culturally appropriate research

methodologies with sophisticated quantitative approaches to conducting research are likely to provide a useful balance of mixed-methods evidence that is sensitive to the sociocultural dynamics of each region and meets international standards of research excellence.

## Conclusion

To catalyze, expand, and strengthen culturally responsive cross-pollination of PP and the PRS in non-Western contexts, we evaluated the extent of existing overlap between these two subfields in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. During this process, we discovered that relatively little research exists at the intersection of PP and the PRS in each of these geographic regions. Even when relevant research has been conducted, the internal and external validity of the findings has been limited by weaknesses in the utilized methodologies. Although the current body of literature in each region might lack quality and depth, that means there are numerous opportunities to pursue high impact, culturally responsive research that cross-pollinates PP and the PRS. We encourage researchers and practitioners to take advantage of what the subfields of PP and the PRS have to offer one another and integrate them in ways that are sensitive to the cultural and contextual nuances of Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Greater cross-pollination of PP and the PRS in each of these regions could have important implications for transforming the scientific and societal impact of psychology, both locally and internationally.

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