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The The Pearl Effect: African American's Continuous Push for Well-Being

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Abstract

Consider this question: If happiness is found in the pursuit of a goal, could it be that an oppressed group, that is eternally in a struggle for something better, could have a subconscious and profound relationship with well-being? Is it possible that the human spirit finds ways to survive and thrive with pride regardless of the oppression? The spirit is unique. It survives independently of the oppression with no goal to emulate. Flourishing in the black community is long under-identified and misunderstood. This is primarily due to the lens from which history has analyzed it. Due to the white lens through which we see and judge most things, inequality prevails in America, and propagates a negative message of trauma for African Americans; that they are an oppressed group and nothing more. Even joy is exaggerated and misplaced as an aid to white supremacy through the mistral stereotype, a happy slave grateful for his or her inferior position in society. As Mia Bay (unpublished) asserts, this creates a problematic dichotomy of where African Americans fit in with the flourishing discussion. This paper offers a different lens through which to define thriving in the black community under a new trait, the 'pearl' or essence of an oppressed community. Furthermore, it offers an original theory, 'The Pearl Effect', which is an original term that I have coined to describe the capacity of individuals or groups to create something positive or of beauty in the face of insurmountable odds and oppression. It is exemplified by the African American community embedding their essence into positive institutions as a resilient act in the face of continuous oppression. It provides examples of the institutions that throughout history personified the Effect and created opportunities for the black community to exhibit the 'pearl' trait and experience flourishing, specifically the Black Church, the Harlem Renaissance, and Hip Hop.

Keywords

Disciplines

Community-Based Research | Inequality and Stratification | Other Psychology | Other Sociology | Race and Ethnicity | Social Psychology | Theory and Philosophy

The Pearl Effect:

African Americans Continuous Push for Well-Being through Positive Institutions

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Abstract

Consider this question: If happiness is found in the pursuit of a goal, could it be that an oppressed group, that is eternally in a struggle for something better, could have a subconscious and profound relationship with well-being? Is it possible that the human spirit finds ways to survive and thrive with pride regardless of the oppression? The spirit is unique. It survives independently of the oppression with no goal to emulate. Flourishing in the black community is long under-identified and misunderstood. This is primarily due to the lens from which history has analyzed it. Due to the white lens through which we see and judge most things, inequality prevails in America, and propagates a negative message of trauma for African Americans; that they are an oppressed group and nothing more. Even joy is exaggerated and misplaced as an aid to white supremacy through the mistral stereotype, a happy slave grateful for his or her inferior position in society. As Mia Bay (unpublished) asserts, this creates a problematic dichotomy of where African Americans fit in with the flourishing discussion. This paper offers a different lens through which to define thriving in the black community under a new trait, the 'pearl' or essence of an oppressed community. Furthermore, it offers an original theory, 'The Pearl Effect', which is an original term that I have coined to describe the capacity of individuals or groups to create something positive or of beauty in the face of insurmountable odds and oppression. It is exemplified by the African American community embedding their essence into positive institutions as a resilient act in the face of continuous oppression. It provides examples of the institutions that throughout history personified the Effect and created opportunities for the black community to exhibit the 'pearl' trait and experience flourishing, specifically the Black Church, the Harlem Renaissance, and Hip Hop.

Keywords: flourishing, Pearl Effect, pearl, essence, happiness, black, community, oppression, inequality, well-being, unique, African, American, church, Harlem Renaissance, hip hop

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Part I: Introduction

Oysters are unassuming aquatic creatures scattered throughout the world's oceans. They are as plentiful and diverse as the environments they inhabit (Adzigbli et al., 2019). In the more trivial sense, oysters are also a common appetizer choice at many restaurants. However, their most notable feature is an innate adaptive ability known as resilience because, despite uncontrollable changes and rough environmental conditions, oysters persist (Adzigbli et al., 2019). Not only do they persist but they create something beautiful and valuable.

Oysters naturally respond to extreme stressors by creating the coveted pearl, the only living creature with such an ability. The pearl increases the capacity of the mollusk to withstand enormous amounts of external stress. It shifts the oyster from just a biologically resilient species to the personification of resilience as well-being in the face of unrelenting stress. Positive psychology may describe the experience as post-traumatic growth, which is the process of growth and positive change after extreme adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). However, this is a process that does not simply resist but creates a sustained positive force to protect beyond the moment. It is actions beyond the resistance, beyond the presence of stressors that creates well-being (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). For the oyster, this gem protects it from environmental hazards that threaten the safety of its inner organs and creates something of beauty (Guo et al., 2015). More importantly, the pearl propels this modest mollusk forward as a revered symbol of elegance and culture. Oysters epitomize resilience, growth, and continuous thriving.

African Americans too have exhibited oyster-like resilience despite the oppressive environments that have threatened the well-being of the entire community throughout history. Like the protective layers of an oyster, a melanated coat protected a people from the harshness of the sun. More importantly however, like that of a mollusk, the persistence of a threat or in this

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case oppression, did not stop at the first line of protection. Therefore, the resilience too does not end at the outermost layer of a person. Individuals in the community have created pearls within themselves throughout history as innately as the RNA of an oyster instructs the creation of a pearl.

The 'pearl' is the African American community's essence, their character, their joy, their positive intentions, their magic- their reflection of God, created out of nothing during extreme oppression. The 'pearl' is the compilation of their best qualities and will be referred to as such in this paper. The 'oyster', the shell, into which African Americans embed their sacred 'pearl' is known as a positive institution. 'The Pearl Effect' will be known as a resilient process of embedding a community's essence, 'pearl', within a positive institution despite continuous oppression as a means of protection and thriving.

Positive institutions are specific social structures embedded in society created to promote well-being within individuals and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). They protect the 'pearl' to sustain the community and act as communal vessels for continual positive growth alongside continual oppression. A closely related term that captures the creation of positive institutions, specifically in the black community, is called black placemaking. Black placemaking is the way the African American community creates spaces in spite of oppression (Hunter et al., 2016). In other words, black placemaking is the verb, positive institution is the result. Amongst the many places or institutions in the African American community from which to choose that would illustrate this point are the black church, the intellectualism of the Harlem Renaissance, and the emergence of Hip-Hop.

Ultimately, it is not an institution alone that has fostered well-being in the black community. Rather it is the character, the 'pearl' of the black community and how the 'pearl'

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embeds itself into the institutions that have created well-being. In response to oppression, these

institutions not only reveal the resilience of a people but personify African American's natural

response toward continued well-being.

Personal Journey

This past year I have studied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania as

one of three African American students, an up year in the history of the program. Nonetheless, I

have gained tremendous insight about the universal application of constructs within the field.

Some of which I describe in this text like hive states, meaning, and mattering. However, I have

also personally experienced the blind spots of positive psychology. At times I have felt the

constructs did not consider my unique identity, cultural makeup, and historical context as an

African American. Furthermore, I found it difficult to see how the experience of the African

American community as a whole fit in. The subtle implications that positive psychology requires

access to a world in which I do not belong; that maybe happiness itself is a privilege.

What I seek to do here is to explore the constructs of resilience and post-traumatic growth

and to expose where the white community may have missed the ways in which the African

American community manifested these concepts in ways that could be missed. I will suggest the

most salient positive psychology traits of the community that manifest through positive

institutions: the black church, Harlem Renaissance, and hip-hop. Furthermore, the text will

provide a new construct, the 'pearl', to apply to the black community that leverages the positive

psychological traits that move African Americans from oppression to thriving. In this

examination of what allows the black community to thrive are some of the universal pillars of

positive psychology as well as a new theoretical framework that applies to all oppressed groups.

The goal is to simply highlight the necessity of investigating cultural uniqueness of these

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constructs through the lens of the African American community as it aids the field when

considering other groups throughout society.

African American Resilience

The history of oppression in the United States against African Americans is evident.

Nikole Hannah-Jones's (2019) Pulitzer Prize winning 1619 project chronicles the deep history of

oppression against African Americans in the United States. In it she profoundly states, "Our

democracy founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to

make them true" (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p.1).

The fight she discusses is one of continuous resilience: Resilience to endure a voyage in

bondage in 1619; Resilience to overcome the fabricated science to prove the inferiority of Black

people to white people, that undergirded the institution of slavery; resilience in the face of those

very same ideas shaping today's perspective on the psychology of Black bodies with a

persistence of deficit-based thought, rooted in the inferiority myths of the past (Villarosa, 2019);

resistance to the exclusionary nature of academia with the emergence of black voices like Robert

Val Guthrie, who worked to bring forward the African American point of view. His point of

view worked to debunk the oppressive narratives, and praises the existing black contributions to

the field (Defreitas, 2019).

As recently as 25 years ago, texts such as *The Bell Curve* persisted in suggesting black

intellectual lowliness (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). I propose that resilience not only has been

the preserver but the wellspring of growth through the creation of institutions that have allowed

well-being to permeate throughout the African American community in the face of oppression.

The history of Black community is rooted in a rejection of the narrative imposed on them and a

creation of a new identity from scratch. African Americans are genesis.

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History: Positive Psychology and African Americans

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology is the scientific study of well-being that stems out of the desire to shift clinical psychology from a misery-based perspective to a well-being point of view (Seligman, 2019). That is, to focus on the positive pursuits in life when misery is not all consuming as it may be during depression or oppression. The idea applies psychology to the everyday person. The primary focus of Martin Seligman's, the founder of Positive Psychology, along with his colleagues, was to answer the question: What makes life worth living? Positivity is not to be confused with Pollyanna, or excessively optimistic (Diener, 2003). In fact, the negative is arguably as crucial to the study of well-being as the positivity (Seligman, 2011).

Several theories around well-being reside underneath the Positive Psychology umbrella such as subjective well-being and I COPPE (Tay & Diener, 2011; Prilleltensky, 2016). Each framework works to define flourishing and to establish a roadmap to a life well lived. With each theory various researchers are focused on studying and developing subtopics within those frameworks, all of which point towards the positive as opposed to the negative.

One of the most prevailing theories of the field is PERMA: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2018). The PERMA model is one of the first roadmaps to well-being in positive psychology. It is a well-rounded attempt to capture the universal applicability of well-being (Seligman, 2011). These five elements facilitate a life of well-being or flourishing and are a culmination of several researchers' expertise in subtopics that focus on the positive.

In practice, Positive Psychology provides tools to be applied during everyday life. For example, engagement involves flow which is complete immersion in an appropriately challenging task to the point of losing sense of self and time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). While

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flow itself does not equate to well-being, it illustrates Positive Psychology's aim to positively

orient psychology. As a practice, flow can be achieved by attending a religious service or sitting

to paint for an hour or two. These types of experiences seem intuitive, but Positive Psychology

provides the scientific backdrop to prove their utility and role in well-being, therefore separating

it from advice or self-help.

Resilience and post-traumatic growth are but two of the many important constructs that

explore this scientific pursuit of well-being and the focal point of this paper. Resilience is about

persisting despite challenges, while post-traumatic growth is about the positive growth from such

experiences (Reivich & Shatté, 2002; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). While neither equate to well-

being by themselves, both constructs highlight misery as an essential launching pad for well-

being. The PERMA model serves as a positive foundation to experience resilience and post-

traumatic growth (Seligman, 2018). Though universality is the intent, I will highlight the blind

spots of the field through the African American community.

Positive Psychology & African Americans

Today African Americans make up a mere 4% of the professional psychologists'

workforce (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). This bodes negatively for an

accurate academic psychological depiction of the black perspective that would correct its

inaccurate, deficit-based past. Though positive psychology is shifting the psychology field to an

approach based in well-being, it still lacks cultural context (Defreitas, 2019). Again, it is a belief

in the universality of positive psychological traits, which ignores a community's history, culture,

and overall nuance cannot properly capture the essence of a community (Defreitas, 2019).

Ultimately, the limitations of the field of positive psychology can lead to misinterpretations of

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how positive psychological constructs such as resilience and post traumatic growth apply to the black community.

Historically, the psychological approach to African Americans has been deficit based, meaning a focus on the negative impact of oppression which places the individual and greater community on the negative end of the well-being spectrum (Cokley, 2020). Wholistically, positive psychology, which is the study of well-being that buffers against the inevitable negative of life and increases overall well-being, has worked to combat the deficit-based approach of the psychological field (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, positive psychology views the world primarily from a middle to upper class, white centric perspective (Defreitas, 2019). More specifically, psychological research suggests that the point of view of human behavior is Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, WEIRD for short (Chang et al., 2016). It stamps its traits as universal but ignores the cultural nuance of being other, or non-WEIRD, in a white dominant society.

To truly define terms such as resilience requires an understanding that it is defined and comes across differently across cultures. (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). African Americans will be the focus of a proposed culturally responsive analysis of well-being, meaning a consideration of cultural context in positive psychology and specifically that manifest in the black community. I will examine the unique historical backdrop, the framework of resilience and post-traumatic growth, outline well-being-based terms that are prevalent within the African American community and the subsequent positive institutions, and finally use these institutions as a critique and exemplar of a more expansive and culturally inclusive analysis of African American's continuous push for well-being.

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Framing: Resilience & Post Traumatic Growth

It is important to note that the framework of both resilience and post traumatic growth are limiting. Firstly, both terms focus on the individual and not the community. Furthermore, resilience is a term that focuses on "bouncing back" which means a return to the state prior to a specific adversity or traumatic event. Bouncing back is not a goal of the African American community, as the "state" or status quo includes a long list of extremely oppressive situations as described in the previous sections. More importantly, throughout history the conditions for black community to bounce back to, like slavery, are undesirable.

Post-traumatic growth is the process of growth after extreme adversity (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Linley & Joseph, 2004). This construct attempts to capture the African American communities' ability to grow and seemingly thrive despite their unchosen trauma and adversity. However, it still does not capture the magic of the community and the breadth even of the individuals within it. The questions to consider: How is it we have moved from oppressive circumstances to well-being? What is it about black people and their institutions that de-authorizes other people's visions of them and allows thriving? In the final sections of this paper, I will break through these limitations of the terms I outline and give my own theory that answers these questions.

In positive psychology we know that resilience is not enough for well-being as life is a continuum of highs and lows, languishing and flourishing. Resilience, the ability to adapt and persist despite challenges, simply lies on the spectrum as an act to continuously protect and propel (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Qualities of individuals and groups that foster resilience include self-efficacy, a religious orientation, an ethnic-racial identity as well as socialization, familial connection and support, and strong ties to the community (Defreitas, 2019). While resilience as a

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trait is not unique in African Americans, research tells us that it is a dynamic process influenced

by internal and external factors including stress, poverty, and supports like family and school

(Masten, 2016). Due to the stratification of society, these internal and external factors can

uniquely influence how resilience appears in the African American community. For example, if

an African American community is disproportionately impoverished this could require increased

resilience amongst the people. I would argue that the inequality indeed requires the community

to foster more resilience.

Converting resilience to well-being requires further action called post-traumatic growth

(PTG), which is the process of growth and positive change after extreme adversity (Tedeschi et

al., 2018; Linley & Joseph, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, this term will be reframed as

simply growth. Within these events, such as death of a child, rape, incarceration, etc. people

develop tremendous strengths bolstered by the experiences. What research shows us is that

despite these horrific events, that no doubt leave lasting scars, comes improvement in some

aspects of life that leads to well-being (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). It is not the trauma itself that

causes growth otherwise most of us would grow. Trauma is a part of life but is continuous for

some. It is the story we tell, the relationships we build, the view of the future, faith in something

greater like God, and the introspection that shifts a debilitating trauma to an opportunity for

growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Smith, 2017).

Applied to the African American community, relying on resilience alone does not equate

to thriving in the community. The growth also does not capture the breath of what has occurred

in the Black community. That is only found in the 'pearl', the deeper chambers of the human

being. This trait of the African American community has allowed them to thrive. They are not

their scars, but their smiles. They are not their pain, but their joy. They are not their oppression;

They are their spirits.

The atrocities are obvious. They have endured four-hundred years of enslavement,

lynching's, rape, dehumanization, and systematic oppression (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Social

epigenetics investigates the footprint of such historical traumas on human beings' generations

down the line. While the present research is relatively new and therefore limited, the

inheritability of traits from a sociological or biological standpoint is well established (Dubois &

Guaspare, 2020). Nonetheless, there is validity to the combined social and biological impact of

traumas on a people. It is difficult to imagine the weight upon the shoulders of African

Americans through the generations of trauma that continues to be passed on.

Part II: Literature Review

Elements of Resilience

The goal of this section is to define key concepts of positive psychology that are

exhibited in the African American community through their own positive institutions that are

used to foster resilience, growth and continued thriving for the entire community. It will provide

generalized definitions of positive psychology terms beyond resilience and post traumatic growth

and create a basis of knowledge to prepare the reader for the theory section later in the paper.

While these terms are usually presented as universal, they are not all encapsulating and

still miss the mark in capturing the essence of the African American experience. Their direct

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application is questionable as these terms were created and researched without the African

American community in mind.

Hive Psychology/Tribalism

Ants have survived as an adaptive species for upwards of 100 million years. Surviving

for such a period is likely correlated with high resilience (Wilson, 1987). However, we know that

resilience alone is not enough for thriving. Amongst the varied reasons for their survival is their

high utilization of eusocial behavior amongst their dense colonies subdivided around the world

(Wilson, 1987).

Eusocial behavior is an advanced social organization found amongst animals or insects.

This behavior alone is a feat in the insect community only replicated by a few species like social

bees, termites, and social wasps. Social species are amongst the most successful on earth. These

groups are intergenerational with a clear division of roles and relationships (Wilson, 1987).

Whether it's the underground tunnels of the ant or the hive of the bees, we find that these species

are not only high in resilience but also of growth that allows the group to thrive through the

millennia.

Similar prosocial behavior can be found as an ingredient of success for humans who

thrive. As Christopher Peterson (2006), a leading mind in positive psychology would say, others

matter. He even goes further to state that good relationships are the most important link to

thriving as they are a source of love, growth, protection, and health. Adversely, Emile Durkheim

(1897) discovered that suicide is related to isolate behavior making it a social problem. Those,

even within a culturally individualistic society like the United States are more likely to commit

suicide if not a part of a group (Smith, 2017). As the ants show us, others are an act of resilience

that help solve such desolation; others are a key ingredient to thriving.

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To that point, tribalism emerges as the more culturally specific version of what Peterson discusses. Tribalism is group loyalty or even bias to the point of exclusion towards others outside of the group (Sanou, 2015). It is human nature that comes from a need for group survival with the passage of beliefs and genes that ensure group fitness for generations (Clark et al., 2019). For African Americans, the practice is rooted in the African culture passed down from slaves (Mafeje, 1971). The exclusionary tendency too is rooted in slavery as a natural occurrence in response to the hate and abuse from other groups (Sanou, 2015).

Transcendence

Imagine floating in the ocean, the body can feel weightless. Buoyed by the waves, it takes the form of the water beneath the back. Soon one loses the distinction between themselves and the current as they stare off into the sun that seemingly transforms into a being. All is loud and all is silent in a chorus between the mind and the sea. A timeless liberation of thought and self as you melt into all that surrounds you. An unexplainable connection, maybe even divine. Then in an instant, a reconnection to the present as the body becomes heavy and you feel the polarity atop the cool ocean and beneath the heat of the sun. (From Walt Whitman as described by William James in 1902).

Transcendence, which serves as an umbrella term, involves experiences along a spectrum from minor moments like losing yourself in a new song to highly transformative experiences like a deep connection with a sacred being or oneness with everyone and everything around you like floating in the ocean (Yaden et al., 2017). Other terms that capture these experiences include flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), state of mindfulness, peak experiences, religious and spiritual experiences (James,1902), and closely related expressions of the sacred (Pargament et al., 2005). Each of these elicits a sense of unity, time is untraceable, and self is reduced. Some may think of self as your being, soul, or consciousness.

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Hive State

However, for the purposes of this text we will focus on transcendence as "hiveishness" or a "hive state", which is a strong state of relatedness where a group of people temporarily transcend their sense of individual self and experience a merged sense of collective self (Haidt et al., 2008). This means to take that tribe and create transcendent experiences amongst them, like that which one may experience in a black church or a room of creatives during the Harlem Renaissance. In a hive state, individuals forgo self interest in favor of a cooperative and cohesive "one for all, all for one" mentality that works for the good of the group. To spark this mentality and allow people to transcend self-interest and merge with the collective, a "hive switch" must be flipped (Haidt, 2012).

A "hive switch" can be movement, more specifically synchronous movement like dance, rhythmic clapping, or even a lunchroom ensemble with beatboxers, knuckle to Table drums, and cheers from peers.

"One band, one sound" as famously stated by the fictitious band director of the movie *Drumline*, captures the key to success of any band and a peek into what a hive switch looks like in practice: to be, move, and sound as one giant unit (Stone III, 2002). The militaristic precision of the rhythm and harmonies, cadence-calling as well as the synchronous movement create a hive state within the band and for the onlookers enjoying the performance. They appear to be one entity just accompanied by music and dance. What both groups experience is a lost sense of the personal, an increased sense of well-being, a surge of positive emotions like joy and laughter, as well as increased feelings of intergroup trust (Haidt et al., 2008). Multiplied amongst hundreds, even thousands of people this hive state can be incredibly transformative.

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William James (1902) teaches us that within transcendence also comes peace. Though unity and peace are fleeting, they intertwine with resilience and growth. As discussed previously, others help foster resilience. Therefore, seeking transcendence is an act of resilience. The subsequent space of unity and peace is the growth we experience even for a micro-moment. The connectedness is healing. Zooming out to the group, religious institutions, and the religions within them are major spaces for transcendence to occur. Emile Durkheim, as described by Kent Pargament et al. (2005) sees religion as a fundamental need for people as it unites them under an agreed upon worldview. It is itself transcendent, the beliefs mystical. Transcendence experienced as a group connects back to a hive state as the catalyst; religion and its spaces are simply the vessel for everyone to protect their peace and grow together.

The positive institutions that I will describe in more detail later are where the tribes congregate and create a "hive state". It can be argued that this sort of social behavior is heightened, and the collective transcends oppression. Like the frame of a new building, this transcendent state of hiveishness, insulates the community. This is a huge push toward well-being that allows for growth. The prosocial, tribal relationships as well as the eventual hive state are ever present components of the institution's success.

Mattering & Meaning

In the desolation of the holocaust, Viktor Frankl (1946/2006) survived beyond all reason. He describes how he watches as friends and foes become lifeless vessels under the hopelessness before their predictable deaths. Specifically, Frankl describes a friend who uses the imagined end of the war to inspire his own survival, only to be proven wrong and die shortly after his loss of hope. In this Frankl asserts the importance of a strong *why*, one that endures beyond a date on a calendar. Zora Neale Hurston (2018) paints a similar portrait in her ethnography of one of the

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lone survivors of the last ship in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. On the surface it is a life summed

up by suffering. Through his eyes, his life is full of meaning. He created a community, a church,

and his own home.

In the forward of Hurston's novel, Alice Walker eloquently asserts a summation of what

Hurston captured, "That though the heart is breaking, happiness can exist in a moment, also. And

because the moment in which we live is all the time there really is, we can keep going" (p. xii).

Here resilience is foundational, the resolve to keep going, while meaning emerges as the catalyst

for such resistance. It is the line straddled between heartbreak and happiness of a moment.

Positive emotions like happiness, pleasure, and joy can be fleeting (Fredrickson, 2009).

Meaning is more profound. Meaning is about impact on the world and moving with purpose to

something greater based on a set of beliefs and values (Prilleltensky, 2016). Meaning is closely

related to well-being because it is about the balance between joy and suffering. It involves time,

energy, and sweat equity that does not always equate to positive emotions (Smith2017) Meaning

can be seen in the dedication to something as simple as a flower, as in *The Little Prince* by

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, or the persistence of pushing a boulder up a hill as is the case for

Sisyphus (De & Woods, 2018). The struggle becomes the meaning while the fleeting happiness

becomes a welcomed addition (Smith, 2017).

Mattering is feeling valued and adding value through internal and external validation. It is

a feeling of usefulness and recognition of our utility (Prilleltensky, 2016). A sense of value is

cultivated through the collective, the relationships, and community in which one resides

(Prilleltensky, 2005). Equally as important, it comes internally from self-affirmation. It is about

others and self, recognition, and impact (Prilleltensky, 2016). This is a fundamental aspect of

psychological well-being in humans. Feeling that you do not matter has potentially negative

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outcomes to both an individual and their community (Prilleltensky, 2019). The goal of the

holocaust, slavery, and overall oppression is to kill mattering within a person and within

communities.

One constant about groups with resilience is their ability to create community. It becomes

a necessity for survival. As discussed, tribalism and hive states are staples of successful resilient

communities as they foster growth. Meaning and mattering are embedded within institutions

because they are essential aspects of a community. Again, 'The Pearl Effect' protects the group's

resilience and ensures the presence of their best qualities, like meaning and mattering, regardless

of the oppression experienced. While the people are the source, the institution is the cultivator.

Positive Relationships

The smoke clears and it is now utterly apparent that the twin towers have fallen. Sirens
engulf the city as people scattered amongst the rubble, first responders despondently approach
the chaos as the stench of death bleeds into their focus. Soon after, a group of people is found
laughing on a train despite just experiencing one of the most traumatic collective events to grace
American soil, 9/11 (Smith, 2017).

T*he* ability to experience joy in the depths of despair is found in others whether a stranger

or intimate bond. These bonds create that immediate connection even within a negative event

amidst the struggle to be resilient or crumble in despair. I am going to contend that it also caused

them to grow.

There is arguably nothing more important to cultivating well-being and thriving than

positive relationships (Peterson, 2006). They are a source of mental and physical well-being.

They provide social support, love, and lessen our inclination for taking our surroundings for

granted (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Generally, people list marriage and family life or other positive

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relationships as the key to personal flourishing (Reis & Gable, 2003). It even transcends cultural

difference as a consistent source of life satisfaction across countries and continents. Positive

relationships as they relate to life satisfaction are an essential component of the constructs

discussed previously: resilience, growth, hive states, tribalism, meaning, and mattering. This is

because most of what is positive in life involves others (Seligman, 2011). To take from

Christopher Peterson (2006) again, others matter tremendously.

We innately crave each other as a part of a need for positive interpersonal relationships

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Others are a form of self-preservation to ensure safety, food, water,

and other essentials. Relationships were an evolutionary necessity to maintain our species, ever

since the first sign of prosperity in the Paleolithic period (McMahon, 2018). Community and

positive relationships are at the core of our survival, otherwise other species would have made us

extinct. Together we were strong. Positive relationships are also a form of growth as there is a

tendency to adopt characteristics from a close and positive interpersonal relationship as if they

are the person's own (Aron et al., 1991).

Cognitively, there develops an attachment or possessing of sorts within a positive

relationship (Aron et al., 1991). We need each other. Attachment theory captures this idea which

is based on a replication of our maternal relationship as infants (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is

built through feelings of trust and a style of response to a partner that is positive and reassuring

(Gable et al., 2006). For example, if a partner shares great news, a positive relationship requires

an enthusiastic and supportive response. This strengthens that attachment and creates well-being

within the bond. This attachment is rooted in the popular term love, whose definition and utility

regarding well-being varies depending on the who you ask. Robert Nozick (1989) for example

states that love means that one's well-being is intertwined with someone else. It is driven by a

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desire for *we*, which speaks to attachment theory and our innate desires to be connected to another (Nozick, 1989). Others connect love with affection. Positive relationships with affection create oxytocin which reduces stress throughout the body and mind (Reis & Gable, 2003). A popular example of how this works describe a story about a sick spouse diagnosed with a terminal illness, who lived years beyond the prognosis largely due to the care of his partner. The optimistic partner literally built antibodies within her spouse's fading body that benefited him and allowed him to live longer (Seligman, 1991).

The connection between resilience and positive relationships cannot be overstated. The deep bonds provide lessons for the group through natural emulation. We become who we are around (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The affection, love, and joy bolster the resilience within individuals and furthermore the growth of the group.

Arguably there is no better place for the development of positive relationships than organized institutions. Ultimately our friends, mentors, and romantic relationships come from our schools, churches, organizations, mutual ties, and now social networks/media. It is others that allows us to continue. Therefore, positive relationships too become an essential quality of a resilient community striving to experience thriving despite oppression

Positive Deviance

In the Spring of 1955, a young 15-year-old black girl and her friends boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama right across the street from then modest theologian, Dr. Martin Luther King's church. Excited because of an early release from school, they sat down toward the back of the bus as required by law for blacks at that time. Soon the bus filled, and the next white passenger was left standing. The bus driver forcefully traveled to the young black girls' seats to demand them to give up their seats for the white passengers - as was the norm. All but little Claudette Coven reluctantly abided by the demand. She on the other hand sat firmly, refusing to give up her seat until two police officers slapped her books to the floor and carried her to a

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squad car. After a few hours in an adult jail the girl was released, and life seemingly returned to normal. Nine months after that incident a black seamstress named Rosa Parks too refused to give up her seat (Rumble, 2018). Coven's action sparked a movement, starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King. Parks became the face of the movement.

As a darkskin teenager who soon became pregnant, Claudette Coven did not meet the criteria to be the acceptable face of a movement (Rumble, 2018). Nonetheless, in many ways she was a positive deviant. First as a woman in a male dominated society, then as a black woman in a white society, and finally as a teen standing up to adult figures. If her biological traits weren't enough, her actions should have been. She acted defiantly to stay seated despite the law and social norm of giving up her right to accommodate the white passengers. In many ways though, this is the epitome of positive deviance. Positively, it sparked the actions of Rosa Parks, which sparked the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr. as a leader, and finally the Civil Rights movement as the force we know it as today. Claudette Coven exemplified positive deviance.

Positive deviance is defined as a positive act, characteristic, or belief that is intentionally nonnormative, meaning contrary to the current social structures, norms, and even laws of the dominant group (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004; Scarpitti & Mcfarlane, 1975). As discussed previously, the dominant group and therefore normative behavior is based on the male, white middle class. Furthermore, white supremacy is the belief that white is the superior race - a foundational belief of the United States according to W.E.B. Du Bois (1968). Whiteness determines the typical behaviors of society, and deviance therefore is determined by the behaviors contrary to the norm. Therefore, positive deviance is a form of equity - a way for the oppressed to even the playing field through mobilization (Marsh et al., 2004). Positive deviance is defined as such based-on intentions not outcome. Whether the deviance was successful or not

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does not disrupt the claim of positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). It is behavior

characterized as honorable by those witnessing it and inspires emulation (Scarpitti & Mcfarlane,

1975).

There is an interesting relationship between resilience, growth, and positive deviance.

Resilience gets one back to equilibrium; that is, a state before adversity (Reivich & Shatté,

2002). Growth allows for well-being to develop as one moves beyond adversity - to a space that

protects against future events by bolstering resilience (Seligman, 2011). Positive deviance an act

of resilience and growth. It goes against the grain and faces adversity head on to create change.

Additionally, it is an act of growth as its goal is to prevent future adversity from occurring.

At its best, as in the case with Claudette Coven, it moves to create or inspire change even

beyond the individual towards the community. It is contagious as others want to emulate it

(Scarpitti & Mcfarlane, 1975). At its core, positive deviance is a rejection of the white supremist

based definition of a community, its traumas, its history, and lives of the people. Conversely, it is

a creation of an identity autonomous of those structures and formed despite them.

Part III: Theory

Our Positive Institutions as Our Protection

Black Placemaking & 'The Pearl Effect'

Black placemaking and 'the pearl effect' are important verbs to keep in mind. Black placemaking is the unique way in which the African American community creates positive institutions as places to cultivate thriving (Hunter et al., 2016). This process occurs throughout the history of the black community, such as the black church, the Harlem Renaissance, and hip-hop.

'The pearl effect' is an original term that I have coined to describe the capacity of individuals or groups to create something positive or of beauty in the face of unsurmountable odds and oppression. It is exemplified by the African American community embedding their essence into positive institutions as a resilient act in the face of continuous oppression. That

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essence is known as the 'pearl', a product which holds the best qualities of the community. It takes the positive psychological terms described previously a step further to capture the uniqueness of creating environments of wellbeing, art, and things of beauty despite living under oppressive circumstances.

Together, positive institutions and the 'pearl' within them allow the African American community to thrive. Positive institutions are specific social structures embedded in society created to promote well-being within individuals and communities such as schools, religious organizations, workplaces, and families (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These terms capture the innovation of a community who self-defined amidst oppressive circumstances in ways that are beautiful, just as the pearl of an oyster is created under difficult circumstances and is marveled at by the world.

The Black Church

Intro

The black church is the first formal institution, like the shell of an oyster, in which 'the pearl effect' occurs within the African American community. The black church is embedded with a new construct called the 'pearl'. The 'pearl' here is a protector, guided by spirituality and an eternal connection to a power greater than self. For the black community this is God. 'Pearls' are molecular, invisible like the signals that trigger the creation of the pearl of an oyster. A 'pearl' lives within the oppressed. Resilience, growth, meaning, mattering, positive relationships and positive deviance are great, but not enough. 'The pearl effect' is the ability to leverage those qualities to re-create identity and an ecosystem stripped from them by the outside world. It is an ecosystem that allows a community to thrive when the environment forbids their existence. For

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African Americans, 'Pearls' are born out of oppression. However, slavery frames 'the pearl effect' uniquely for African Americans especially in the context of the black church.

The Foundation

The birth of the black church, not to be confused with a physical space, can be thought of as an underground positive institution (Raboteau, 2004). This is because the creation of a physical space was illegal. It was born in slavery. Despite this reality, the black community persisted in practicing their faith in hiding for decades. A church, a shack, or a field, the 'pearl' was present. The physical space was but the shell of an oyster embedded with the beauty of a people clinging to preserve their language, culture, folklore, music, and traditions. In this preservation lived the 'pearl'.

The need for 'pearls' originated in the Middle Passage of the mid 1500's, which was the middle destination of a three-part voyage where ships filled with spices, fabrics, weapons, and other resources traded their cargo for human beings to be transported to the New World as slaves (Lovely, n.d.). Characterized by its brutality, innumerable black lives were lost during the voyages. Here, African Americans first exhibited their incredible resilience to survive.

As if the resilience to endure the physical abuses of the voyage wasn't enough, those who survived were greeted with the horrors of slavery. They were stripped of their African cultures, languages, familial ties, traditions and more. Their position as slaves was maintained by instilling fear. Isolating them physically and culturally was thought to prevent any unifying efforts that would lead to them escaping slavery (Raboteau, 2004). During this period, the white supremist perspective emerged as dominant. African Americans were forced to submit or face death which was an utter attempt to annihilate the spirit of a people; to use their empty vessels, their bodies, as hammers, nails, and saws to build a new white world.

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The spirit of the black community was forced to survive in the deepest chambers of their psyche and became the sole conservator of life before and toward the future as a community. The spirit of the community was characterized by resilience, growth, and well-being despite oppression. Here 'pearls' began to rise to the surface as an indestructible positive force within the black community as slavery took hold. 'The pearl effect' of the black church was still unable to occur in formal physical spaces.

A defining component of the black church was religion. Religion was varied within the community. This was a consequence of the intentional separation of slaves from similar regions and familial connections. Islam, Christianity, ancestral worship, and Catholicism were found throughout plantations in the South as early as the 1500's (Gates, 2021). This predates the infamous 1619 transatlantic slave trade (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The black community saw differing religions as different ways to worship the same God (Gates, 2021). This stems from an early understanding from slaves that if they were to endure slavery positive relationships were more important than the different religious perspectives.

Underground

Under a large oak tree by the river, a group of slaves gather in a circle. One elderly man begins to pat his hands rhythmically on a broomstick. Another sings short lines as a group responds in unison as a call-and-response. Soon the circle of men and women dressed in white linens and head rags begin to shout and move the circle counterclockwise to the melody. A slight hitch is added to the movement with accompanying arm sways and the strategic crossing of feet (Rosenbaum et al., 2012).

This practice is called ring shouting. It is a practice with roots in Africa. In fact, it is the oldest African American performance tradition that survived in America (Rosenbaum et al.,

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2012). It was a spiritual practice and one of the first renditions of the black church. Within the

melodies were biblical messages and the movement which made a visceral connection to others

and God. Without formal space to practice and no physical remnants of the religion and

traditions, the black church emerged in America through song and dance. Here a group of

oppressed African America's, facing the horrors of slavery and who had just survived the

brutality of the Middle Passage, created a space that alleviated their pain.

Profound transcendence, a hive state, was found amongst the participants of the ring

shouts due to the deep connection they felt to each other and the sacred (Yaden et al., 2017). In

this the sacred was God, who at this point in history was a composite figure based on different

religions (Gates, 2021). However, none of those different religions mattered in this space. They

chanted and shouted to God, bouncing energy off each other with every movement and call-and-

response. Even amongst white slave masters, who often used this tradition for entertainment, the

black community still found the magic of that space (Rosenbaum et al., 2012). In those moments,

the black community transcended the brutality and dehumanization of slavery. It was a secret

moment of peace and connection.

The ring shouts involved secret communication where slaves offloaded the misery of

slavery. They sang of their hope for a better future even if that was only found in death

(Raboteau, 2004). A person calls, "Wade in the water to my knees" then the others respond, "I'm

gonna pray until I die" (The McIntosh County Shouters, 1984). It was the underground black

church, hidden in plain sight that created moments of well-being in all the terror. Thus, the

beginning of 'the pearl effect' occurs in this first iteration of the church, ring shouts. The 'pearl'

of the African American community found its first home.

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The slaves' diverse practices and ring shout outlets became problematic. Evangelicals and slave owners alike were at a crossroads as the spirituality of slaves became evident in the New World. On one hand they were pulled to Christianize the slaves who they saw as heathens and savages. Slavery was initially justified on that basis with the promise of evangelization (Godwyn, 1681). On the other, Christian slaves meant equality. So, race was used as a justifying construct to baptize slaves but maintain their inferior status.

The 'pearl' of the black community began to formalize around Christianity. Slaves could join their master's churches and sit in separate sections and even spread the word amongst each other. Slave codes and laws like Negro Slave Act of 1740 were established to control the ways in which slaves worshiped (Sirmans, 1962; Densu, 2008). This meant they were prohibited from gathering, were intentionally kept illiterate, and those who could read were exposed to selective scripture.

White people even went as far as to extract parts of the Bible to prevent any rebellion by slaves. They were denied access to Old Testament stories like the Exodus which told of the oppressed Israelites, led by Moses, rising against the oppressor. Instead, slaves were forced to hear about a meek and docile Jesus. Nonetheless, slaves were now converted to Christianity in hoards. Since Christians were not permitted to enslave other Christians, the concept of white supremacy and the inferiority of the slave emerged as the excuse and justification to continue to enslave African Americans (Raboteau, 2004).

While illiteracy prevented a strict adherence to the word, slaves learned to improvise. Ring shouts were replaced by underground black churches. Since Sabbath, Sunday, was a day off for slaves they were given a day a week to practice their spirituality and further institutionalize

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the black church within the black community. These more formal institutionalizations were praise houses. Praise houses were small wooden homes built by slaves on plantations with an open interior to allow space for ring shouts (Poole, 2016). As the black church as a space was formalized, 'the pearl effect' took hold to further protect the community.

Leaders of the African American community became those who secretly read the bible. Often it was their master's wife or the secret abolitionist tutors of the slave owners' children who taught them to read (Gates, 2021). Orators like George Leile extemporaneously spread the word of God, a God that was now in African Americans' image and in their voice. The style was infused with song and dance style of ring shouts and the new stories found in Christianity (Rosenbaum et al., 2012).

The black community remained resilient again in the face of oppression. It is no coincidence that praise houses emerged after the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1850. The small praise houses, which were a physical downgrade from the large Methodist and Baptist churches forming amongst freedmen or slaves who bought their freedom, remained a tremendous outlet for the majority community who remained enslaved (Gates, 2021).

George Leile, like other freedmen, used his status to eventually establish the First African Baptist church of Savannah, Georgia in 1773 (Holmes, 1964). Richard Allen, another freedman, established the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. His preaching style inspired a movement of empowerment, civil rights, freedom, a spirituality defined by racial difference rather than religion (Gates, 2021). Jarena Lee, a woman who too bought her freedom, traveled 150 miles by foot to deliver sermons (Billingsley, 2003). As more and more African Americans bought their freedom or escaped, they had not only a formal place to gather but the inspiration that helped move them from survival to thriving.

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In this new version of the black church, meaning and mattering emerged as defining elements of the 'pearl'. Meaning, because God was autonomous of the white man, and instead became a true representation of themselves. The positive deviance of African Americans practicing Christianity in their own way simply compounded the meaning within the 'pearl' and subsequently the churches. Songs that used to emphasize secret meeting spots now spoke of liberation, based on stories of Exodus, about the oppressive Pharaoh and about Moses who led his people out of Egypt (*Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments: King James Version.*, 2010).

Mattering came to light through the sermons of community leaders, the pastors like George Leile, Richard Allen, and Jarena Lee. These former slaves emphasized community under faith. Mattering to God was mattering to self above all else. They were able to invent a spiritual world that promoted resilience and growth outside of oppression (Gates, 2021). The black church was unafraid of the public spotlight. Black people were emboldened by the meaning and mattering instilled in them. The 'pearl' of the community gained more traction as these strengths were bolstered.

Revolution

Denmark Vesey stood in front of his growing congregation, now the second largest African Methodist Episcopal Church. Song, dance, and rhythmic movement form a hive state within the space as everyone transcends the day's worries. As usual It created a deep connection more profound than the words of his sermon (Johnson, 2020).

For reasons outside of comprehension, Vesey was accused of starting an uprising. In 1822, he and 34 other men were led to their deaths the very same day the accusations were made.

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He was executed by white southerners and his church burned to the ground in Charleston, South Carolina (Johnson, 2020).

Blatant oppressive moments such as with Vesey, triggered a more zealous commitment by the black community to the already established black church. Racists reacted brutally and swiftly to African Americans' attempt to thrive in yet another attempt to smother the African American spirit. Throughout the South rebellions and perceived rebellions were forcefully put down, and innocent men and women were killed by lynch mobs as occurred with Vesey. These actions were backed up by decades long customs and laws like the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed for the forceful recovery of escaped slaves and whatever actions were necessary to keep the slaves under white control. These actions were not only to annihilate black people but to annihilate the black church, a symbol of a strength they could not understand, a 'pearl' they could not reach even with flames. Thus, the black church is forced underground, back to the praise houses on plantations and the 'pearl' hidden (Poole, 2016).

However, on the heels of the Civil War these spaces now spread messages of the Israelites. They dreamt of emancipation and formal freedom, though the black church provided it to its members spiritually and mentally for centuries. W.E.B. Du Bois (1968) described it as the "magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew scripture". It was a message of freedom to come, as the civil war begins. Spirituality merged with politics and education, as the basements of praise houses, black Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches alike began to house schools where members were taught to read and write (Gates, 2021).

The Epicenter

In the heat of the Civil War, President Lincoln met with leaders of the black community to discuss the future. These leaders were all leaders of various types of black churches. The black

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church emerged as the institution to represent the community, not the freedmen baker nor the white abolitionist, but a pastor. Out of that meeting came the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which freed the slaves and enabled them to serve in the Union army (Masur, 2010).

Lincoln's decision to emancipate the slaves was based on strategy not a benevolent commitment to the humanity of African Americans. Despite knowing that fact, African Americans still fought alongside their oppressors. Thousands of black soldiers filled the front lines. The 'pearl' was ever-present. So much so that others noticed, "these quaint religious songs were to the men more than a source of relaxation; they were a stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven" (Higginson, 1867, p.1). Their faith formed in the black church was a catalyst for putting in the minds of black soldiers and leaders the freedom of the community ahead of any animosity toward the white man.

The final evolution of the black church saw it become not only the epicenter of spirituality, but of black life (Gates, 2021). It was a sanctuary of resilience, growth and thriving within the black community birthed out of necessity for community, meaning, mattering, positive relationships, cultivation of talents, and most importantly inspiration for positive deviance. Almost a century after emancipation the faceless black roundtable with Lincoln evolved to political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Despite their differing beliefs they both were products of the black church. They used their foundation in the church to preach black power in the footsteps of all the orator predecessors like Nat Turner, Adam Clayton Powell, Richard Allen, and others (Frazier, 1986). Even today, the first black President, Barack Obama, was successful due to his involvement in the black church as shown by his spiritually driven campaign slogan *hope*.

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In God, African Americans redefined suffering and understood that all things were possible through faith. Faith that African America's too could return from damnation, be splintered upon a cross, crucified in the blazing sun, and rise. Rise defiantly with love, togetherness, and hope of a better future that wishes not to exclude but improve and above all else, thrive (DuBois et al., 1995; Baxter et al., 2019).

Next, growth began to occur as faith was expanded into Christianity and spirituality was given new legs. Tribalism and hive states defined the first formal forms of black churches as ring shouts and other practices in the fields and by the rivers of plantations. It became a common theme throughout every evolution of the black church. Then meaning and mattering set in as fundamental components of the black church. African Americans created themselves from scratch through a spiritual image of God. Not a religious God, rather one that rejected the white supremist narrative under oppression, rooted in the Islamic, Christian, and ancestral practices of the African ancestors prior to slavery. The stained glass of the First Black African Church, one of the first black run formal churches, was lined with images of black saints and a black God.

Finally, positive relationships and positive deviance place the black church into its final form. In this final form, the black church was no longer a secret, hidden in the cabins and ring dances of slaves. Now the black church was led by freedmen and became an autonomous space that worked to build up the African American community (Gates, 2021). The relationships between African Americans within their positive institution uplifted their relationship to their families, offered them formal education, leadership in politics and in the community (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). Ultimately, the 'pearl' embedded into the black church allowed the entire community to thrive within the space because of the reciprocity of the space the black community created for themselves.

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Positive deviance underscored it all as they defied the laws and norms of the land and established community through the church. As men and women were continuously killed, raped, and spaces were burned, the black community rebuilt and fought back. Their connection to a higher power strengthened their interconnectedness and helped them go against the docile messages taught to them (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). A wholehearted and difficult rejection of the definition placed upon them because of the understanding that faith makes a way out of nothing, therefore so did they.

Conclusion

With each setback the community persisted and created. Positive psychological and sociological constructs are limiting when applied to the evolution of the black church because they miss the beauty in the process and product of what African American creates in its positive institutions like the black church. It does not consider history. This is not typical resilience or post-traumatic growth because the adversity never goes away. With that, everything from hive states to transcendence, to positive relationships have nowhere to go. To simply stay within an individual is not enough when facing continuous oppression. The black church becomes that home. 'The pearl effect' allows for this home to harbor all the wonderful qualities that correlate to thriving. The 'pearl' is the product that ensures the black church remains a positive space.

The African American not only feels their own but of all the ancestors who struggled and died before them. The songs, the dances, the chants, food, etc. (draw the picture) and the scripture are plugins to the spiritual. A life source to keep going when everything around you oppresses and works to kill you physically, mentally, and spiritually.

The Harlem Renaissance

Intro

"*Poetry is religion brought down to earth and it is of the essence of the Negro soul"* (Barnes, 1925).

The Harlem Renaissance was the second example in which the 'pearl' of the black community embedded itself. As a positive institution, the Harlem Renaissance was defined by expression through the humanities: poetry, theatre, jazz, essays, news articles, sculpture, paintings, and fiction (Lewis, 1994/1995). The 'pearl' again was the artistic expression of the community. Here the art represented a more tangible representation of the community's essence compared to the intangible spirituality expressed in the black church (Barnes, 1925). Think of the artistic expression within the Harlem Renaissance as harvesting the pearl from an oyster to showcase its beauty for all to see. Within the art, or 'pearl', is the expression of the community's

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response to adversity, and its resilience, growth, transcendence, meaning, mattering, positive

relationships, and even positive deviance.

The art of the Harlem or Negro Renaissance was therefore the ultimate embodiment of

the black community's traits of resilience and growth and a mirror to their trauma. In this it was

especially representative of a new collective joy and the tension within the community to

maintain it (Barnes, 1925). Art and essence almost became synonymous because, as this paper

outlines, it was African American nature to practice expression. In the Harlem Renaissance lived

a record of the expression, the essence, the 'pearl', to be passed down within the community and

shared with the world. The Harlem Renaissance was the beginning of a public display of the

'pearl' that would interestingly attract the white consumer in hordes as society blended black and

white. The art of the Renaissance was also lessons for the world about humanity, applicable to

groups outside of African Americans. This period is simply the next vessel, the next shell, to

harbor African American excellence.

Migration

1917 marks the transition into the Harlem Renaissance, which was framed around the end

of reconstruction and slavery at the end of the 19th century. Post slavery society is violently

segregated in a new oppressive and at times equally as brutal period called Jim Crow (Smethurst,

2011). Everything from which schools to attend, to which entrance to use at a restaurant is either

racially segregated or completely barred from the black community. At this time African

Americans received intentionally inferior resources like tattered old books in schools, unfiltered

water flowing through the showers and water fountains of the community, and even aged

produce within the grocery stores (Stern, 2021). However, it was evident that the black

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community did not stop at resilience. The community exhibited tremendous amounts of resilience as the promise of freedom was replaced by slavery with a new name, Jim Crow.

Systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South created extremely oppressive circumstances. Breaking the rules meant the lynching of black bodies and burning of black churches forcing the 'pearl' back within the deeper chambers of the community. In a profound example of taking resilience to growth, the community decided not to simply endure but to resist the treatment by moving out of the South. Thousands of African Americans moved out of the lynch mob South into northern cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York in search of better opportunities. This was known as the Great Migration (Tolnay, 2003). The Great Migration was a pure tribalistic response to the oppression they experienced. In the North, African Americans were seen as human beings and not slaves. For the first few decades of the 20th century, they created strong communities in Harlem, New York and the "New Negro" is born (Locke, 1925).

Black Excellence: The New Negro

As much as the Harlem Renaissance was a natural explosion of expression in all facets of art, it too was an intentional play to recreate the identity of the black community. Renaissance pioneer Alain Locke (1925) describes it as a rehabilitation of the black community from demeaning nature of slavery. The community whose resilience seemed innate now attempts to face and analyze their present while also growing as a community to leave the slave image behind. This analysis leads to a period of intense tribalism and positive relationships as the community again redefines itself. However, this time with tremendous enthusiasm as the community portrays the tremendous meaning of the era through art.

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Renowned Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes (1922) captured in his poem "Mother to Son" the struggle of resilience and growth within the community. The poem described a generational push forward through a mother speaking to her son, encouraging him not to fold under the tacks, splinters, and torn boards that society has thrown at the black community.

> Well, son, I'll tell you:
> Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
> It's had tacks in it,
> And splinters,
> And boards torn up,
> And places with no carpet on the floor—
> Bare.
> But all the time
> I'se been a-climbin' on,
> And reachin' landin's,
> And turnin' corners,
> And sometimes goin' in the dark
> Where there ain't been no light.
> So boy, don't you turn back.
> Don't you set down on the steps'
> Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
> Don't you fall now—
> For I'se still goin', honey,
> I'se still climbin',
> And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (Hughes, 1922)

Hughes' poem became one of the earliest and most eloquent celebrations of the constructs of resilience and growth. The Red Summer, a series of twenty-six race riots throughout the country in 1919 is the immediate antecedent and therefore became the ultimate tipping point where African Americans decided to express and transcend their experiences. The 'pearl' began to show its face through the arts like Hughes's poem as a portal for the world into the African American struggle and essence. In 1919, the first stage of the Renaissance, Claude McKay (1919) stamped the official beginning of the Harlem Renaissance with his poem that details the events of Red Summer and the resilience of his community.

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The term "New Negro" came to capture the American negros' transition from the sentiment described in Hughes (1922) poem. The brightest "new negros" known as the Talented Tenth congregate in Harlem under the tutelage of thought leaders, Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois as an act of tribalism (Washington & Dubois, 1903/1970). Together poets, writers, and other artists documented the era and expressed the essence of the community: their adversity, their character, their beauty, their fear, their future. Harlem became the hub of African American culture and community (Lewis, 1994/1995). Harlem was the location, but the Renaissance became the 'pearl' that nestled itself to a new outlet for thriving.

Jazz

The ability of the community to transcend the negative perception from slavery and recreate their identity once again, lived in their essence or 'pearl'. The 'pearl' worked to create a voice from scratch through every mode of art in a perfect expression of what it was to be black in America. Jazz served as a pure and authentic musical backdrop of expression in the Harlem Renaissance that released the emotions of the black community like steam of a burning tea kettle. Jazz was in direct contrast to the Talented Tenth., a group of the brightest and wealthiest African Americans post reconstruction as deemed by W.E.B. Dubois (Washington & Dubois, 1903/1970). While the Tenth expressed the 'pearl' through intellectual art like writing and painting, jazz musicians expressed themselves through a lighter evolution of the negro spirituals and ring dances of slavery time. The musicians were mostly illiterate so their improvisation in Harlem was the personification of joy completely autonomous of musical structure (Johnson & Wolfson, 1930).

The black community found their transcendent hive states within this style of music. The autonomy of the music led to the freedom of the dance. It was an opposite reaction to the

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oppressions of slavery as an attempt to redefine the image of the black community. Within the

clubs and around the factories, the community lost themselves in the rhythms of jazz just as the

musicians lost themselves in the spontaneity of this creative expression. While the ring dances of

the 17th and 18th century created hive states that alleviated oppression, jazz created hive states

of joy (Rosenbaum et al., 2012). The 'pearl' within each free note, is unpredictable and non-

replicable.

Joy also evokes the tremendous meaning jazz created. Langston Hughes describes jazz as

the inherent expression, "the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul –" (Hughes, 1926).

Furthermore, Hughes' describes jazz as the voice outside of a need to please white or black, or

just art cataloging the daily life of African Americans. Meaning is in that ability to create, to

document, and to add value and feel valued by a community of all people who look like you

(Prilleltensky, 2019).

Emancipation of the Mind

The final stage of the Renaissance, roughly 1926-mid 1930, fully aimed to express

African American just as they were, living life as all other races but with an understanding of the

unique oppressive circumstance. However, the emphasis was no longer the pain nor the joy

rather social consciousness. The goal was to document (Lewis, 1994/1995). Artists such as

Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman in an act of positive deviance

rejected the use of art as a means to equality with whiteness (Hurston, 1942). Instead, they

moved toward contemplating the beauty of their own identity as African Americans through an

artistic lens. They, and other young members of the Harlem Renaissance, elevate even higher

from the freedom of their predecessors as they have no concern about the stereotypes, a need to

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show the race as perfect, or even a need to represent the race. They were artists, proudly black, and proudly individual as well.

There was a new, two-fold version of tribalism amongst the newly emancipated minds. First, the positive relationships between artists which were built around a mutual respect and reverence that they expressed in their art. Second, the sharing of their art on public record so that all of Harlem may too experience and be connected. This creates an exchange of meaning between artists and black people of the community. The artist added value to the community and the community felt valued as their lives were authentically documented in art.

The early decades of the 20th century too were the beginning of African Americans who were born free. Hughes and Hurston were in their twenties and were born into the Great Migration tribe. Their minds were shaped by the Renaissance. They landed into the post reconstruction thriving of a community despite oppression. They weren't asked to prioritize freedom like their ancestors. Instead, there was a more weightless prioritization of positive relationships, meaning, mattering, deviance, and expression in the community. While oppression existed, spaces like the Harlem Renaissance pushed it to the background of this autonomous artistic space.

Conclusion

During the Harlem Renaissance, the black community again exhibited a tremendous ability to thrive amidst oppression. African Americans refused to accept just being resilient, which is a resistance but an acceptance of circumstance. African Americans tap into their essence, the 'pearl' within them with spirituality as their expressive foundation. The bravery to face the worst events a community can experience and decide to embrace the pain and the joy. Though oppression did not create the 'pearl', slavery and Jim Crow did force a response. They

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were extreme stressors to a community who responded by creating another positive institution, the Harlem Renaissance. In the migration to the north is the tribalism of the community. The initial excellence of the Talented Tenth's expression exhibits an attempt to transcend and recreate identity away from the slave archetype. In direct contrast, jazz creates transcendence, hive states, and collective movement through improvised musical scores and dances. Meanwhile, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston provided the final evolution of the Renaissance (Lewis, 1994/1995). They show the tremendous meaning, mattering, and positive relationships the humanities can create if presented authentically.

Hip Hop

Intro

If the black church is spiritual and the Harlem Renaissance intellectual, then hip-hop is the combination of both. Due to its composite nature, hip-hop cannot be pigeonholed as just music, rather it was an entire cultural movement (Alridge & Stewart, 2005). For this text, hip-hop is the last example of a positive institution to harbor the essence, the 'pearl', of the African American community. This positive institution, this 'pearl', has the depth of ring dances with the flare of an 18th century Baptist church sermon (Rosenbaum et al., 2012); it has the verbiage of a W.E.B. Dubois essay and symbolism of a 1920's Langston Hughes' poem (Lewis, 1994/1995). Furthermore, it has the improvisation of a praise house sermon and the rhythm and spirit of a jazz set.

The culture of hip-hop chronicled a new era of oppression while inspiring liberation and tribalism in the African American community. Resilience, growth, transcendence, meaning,

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mattering, positive relationships and positive deviance lived within the graffiti, dancing, DJ turntables, and lyrics of emcees and rappers (Price, 2006). The 'pearl', born of oppression, brought those qualities together to create a culture and an institution, hip-hop.

Before Hip-hop

Immediately preceding the hip-hop era, the African Americans were in a struggle for civil rights. The Civil Rights Movement created leaders who believed in positive deviance for racial progress. Attorney Thurgood Marshall led the 1954, *Brown vs Board of Education* case that made the desegregation of schools unconstitutional (Library of Congress, 2010). Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emerged immediately after preaching nonviolence with the Montgomery bus boycott (Smith, 2019). Conversely, Malcolm X preached black empowerment by any means necessary without appeasing the white oppressors along with Black Panther Party Chairman Fred Hampton who too believed in community conjoined with self-defense ( ). With a combined pressure from all civil rights approaches in the black community, President Kennedy eventually passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which officially ended legal segregation. Over a decade of positive deviance and community organizing seemingly paid off.

However, upon a closer look, the 1950's and 1960's were filled with the terrorization of the black community. Emmett Till was maimed and lynched for whistling at a white woman in 1955 ("The case of emmett till," 1955; Franklin, 1955). Nine students were spit on and harassed as they entered a newly integrated school in Little Rock, Arkansas (Goldzwig & Dionisopoulos, 1994). The Ku Klux Klan bombed a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 killing four young black girls (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, as was Malcolm X during a speech in 1965, and Martin Luther King Jr found his end on a balcony in 1968 (Library of Congress, 2010; King Jr., 1965; Sokol, 2018).

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The juxtaposition of the progress and the brutality of this era is a necessary framework for understanding the need for a new positive institution for African Americans. Ultimately, the brutality left a tremendous vacancy within the black community. The black middle class of the Harlem Renaissance left inner cities following the great depression. As a result, black neighborhoods like Harlem and the Bronx became disproportionately poor and increasingly segregated (Lewis, 1994/1995). Gang culture emerged out of desolation and the black community seemed to be forgotten. Hip-hop godfather Gil-Scott Heron criticized white America with his famous lines, "The revolution will not be televised" meaning white American did not care about the downfall of the African American community (Lamotte, 2014). Oppression took a new face, indifference, and once again the community would need to make a way out of nothing.

Hip-hop was a necessity, an innate reaction, a 'pearl' forming against extreme stress to hold and protect the beauty of a community. The cultural movement was the latest shell to properly deal with the heartbreak of seeing progress legally but continuing to live in a community terrorized by white supremacy. The pure resilience of a community to turn to each other for support and the magic of their 'pearl' or essence that allows for an institution like hip-hop to emerge is something to admire.

Breakbeat Culture

Seven miles long, one of America's worst neighborhoods, Bronx, New York, birthed hip-hop as a positive institution in the 1970's. With the backdrop of poverty and continued systemic racism, hip-hop started with a new phenomenon called Disc Jockeys [DJ's] (Shabazz, 2021). DJs like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa created hive states in block parties all over the Bronx with a new style of music. They put vinyl records on twin turntables: one with

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the popular neighborhood song of the week, the other a mainstream soul or funk record. With

this combination, they created the breakbeat.

The breakbeat is a "break" from the main song with a moment of instrumental, usually

percussion from a funk or soul record, looped periodically as the popular song continues. As an

expansion to the originality, "breaks" even took the name of the song they sampled

(Christodoulou, 2020). The originality of this style is reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance,

which speaks to the ability of the black community to grow and evolve their abilities.

Emcees

DJs were accompanied by emcees. Emcees were most notably the positive relationship

builders of the culture, the liaison between the DJ and his or her audience to break the tension of

early gang culture within hip-hop. They were hype men or women who used shout-outs to create

energy. Specific shout-outs to gang leaders signaled to the audiences that any tension between

various gangs needed to be pushed to the side. Soon, DJing became so popular that gang

members formed hip-hop crews instead of gangs. Leaders of gangs like the Latin Kings became

popular DJs and their friend became their emcee (Rhodes, 2003).

Emcees yelled out a lyric into the microphone as the audience stared at a nearby friend to

shout the other half back (Price, 2006). That violent gang culture was replaced by the positive

relationship to hip-hop. Regardless of someone's neighborhood within the Bronx, everyone

could relate to the music. Even for just the night, close bonds formed amongst enemies and

strangers alike.

Break-dancers

The "break" practice also gave way to the emergence of break-dancers who would fill the

dancefloors in front of DJs with a brand-new style of dance completely improvised to match the

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rhythm of the "breaks" (Vasil, 2020). As the break-dancers spun on their heads, flipped, and

freeze posed, hive states emerged (Rhodes, 2003). Hive states occur when a group of people lose

sense of self and feel as one (Haidt et al., 2008). Hordes of people cheered around the dancers,

DJs managed the turntables, and emcees jumped and screamed. Everyone lost their sense of self

and time in block parties, clubs, and parks all over the Bronx. Each "break" worked to transcend

the black community temporarily out of their project housing, away from the violence, and

pulled them into the tribe of hip-hop.

Graffiti Culture

Graffiti was not invented by hip-hop, but it was transformed by hip-hop from mere spray

paint on a wall to the language of the culture (Rhodes, 2003). The permanence and artistry of

graffiti allowed for secret communication within the culture that was open for all to see but only

understood by those who knew hip-hop. Teenagers across the city sprayed their tags, graffiti

artist name, on any surface they could. Eventually these tags morphed into building sized murals

on the sides of buildings, under highways, and in alleyways. With murals, the messages were

more symbolic than literal with the intent to carry a deeper meaning about the culture (Rhodes,

2003).

Artists expressed for expression's sake, not monetary gain. The identity of the artist was

only known to those within the culture. It was creating an expression of mattering and belonging.

Adding value to a community through art. Each mural or tag was a statement that the culture and

the people within it existed despite the world's indifference toward them. Because of the

popularity within the culture, mattering was found in feeling valued by the community. The

ultimate sign of appreciation was if the graffiti artist's style was imitated (Alridge & Stewart,

2005).

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Furthermore, graffiti was an example of positive deviance as an intentionally misunderstood act. Viewed by those outside the culture as vandalism, graffiti was beauty in neighborhoods forgotten or abandoned by society. In black cities like the Bronx, abandoned buildings were turned into art galleries and traffic jams into art shows (Rhodes, 2003). Even more so, it was a tremendous shift in how the youth expressed frustration compared to the gang culture of the past. Another option for kids with few outlets to express their essence, their 'pearl'.

Public Diaries – Rap Music

Since black neighborhoods were not improving structurally or economically, emcees transitioned into the forefront of hip-hop culture as rappers. Stylistically, emcees evolved from the black church with profound messages for their people accompanied by incredible improvisational skill. Now instead of ring dances or negro spirituals, the rhythms of turntables accompanied the words. Hip hop was as other positive institutions, messages and empowerment to its people.

Cornel West (2005) stated that hip-hop is about the dissemination of knowledge. Up until the late 1970's, hip-hop was mostly underground. It was only visible to the culture. Run-D.M.C. changed that by bringing the music to the mainstream thus opening the door to future rappers to spread knowledge. Rakim, Ice Cube, KRS-One, Nas, Jay Z, Tupac, Roxanne Shanté, Lauryn Hill, Lil Kim all gave voice to the African American people. They used rhyme and rhythm to give life lessons, paint pictures of poverty, chronicle stories in the hoods, and overall speak on their reality. Tupac Shakur famously stated:

"Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right/ 'Cause both black and white are smokin' crack tonight/ And only time we deal is when we kill each other/ It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other." (Tupac, *Changes*, 1992).

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In the footsteps of Gil-Scott Heron, the rappers like Tupac lyrics critiqued society's indifference toward the black community. Simultaneously, they offered harsh self-portraits of the realities of black inner cities (Lamotte, 2014). His words bluntly exposed the evils of the crack epidemic of the 80's and 90's while simultaneously condemning violence and promoting peace within the African American community. Their honesty provided meaning and mattering to an unheard community. Meaning by chronicling the events of the hood or inner cities across the United States. Mattering by giving black people confidence when the world stepped on them.

The honest emcee exposed the 'pearl' of the community more blatantly than ever before and was rewarded with popularity. However, as the white consumer fell in love with the culture, similarly to what occurred in the Harlem Renaissance, rappers' public messages became more deeply encoded.

Word play emerged through extreme metaphor, similes, and imagery which worked to hide hip-hop culture in plain sight in ways only African Americans could relate because it spoke of experiences and oppression only, they knew intimately. This allowed the culture to be celebrated but still partially obscure to those outside of hip-hop culture. A modern example:

"Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA

Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA

I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA

I got hustle, though, ambition flow inside my DNA

I was born like this, since one like this, immaculate conception" (Lamar, DNA, 2017)

Kendrick Lamar seemingly painted a self-portrait of his genetic makeup. While he has loyalty, royalty, and joy he also has cocaine, poison, pain inside his DNA. This was an allusion

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to the crack epidemic he was born into as his predecessor Tupac depicted, but also of the power of the black community. He illustrated the nuance and innate nature of the 'pearl' in the African American community. This song specifically garnered global popularity, sitting top 3 of the Billboard charts for 20 weeks. I could recite the lyrics word for word. His album won the Pulitzer Prize, the first hip-hop artist ever to win the award (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2018). The irony of his critical acclaim was in the time it took for hip-hop to be recognized. Almost 50 years into the culture, a hip-hop artist earned the award, a reminder to African Americans of the self-sustaining purpose of hip-hop (Flanagan, 2018; Carmichael, 2018). A positive institution to withstand and thrive alongside oppression, not to be accepted by the oppressors.

Conclusion

Still, hip-hop in all its variety is difficult to capture. Even today it continues to evolve as mainstream media imitates and monetizes it. Hip-hop cannot be duplicated because the essence of the culture lives within those who are a part of it, the black community. This positive institution is an evolution of the 'pearl' as it continually protects the community despite continuous and forceful oppression. Positive psychology does its part to capture moments within the institution like the hive states created by DJs and their emcees or the positive deviance of graffiti culture, but it lacks the cultural specificity and depth to capture the psychology of hip-hop.

The constructs of positive psychology are limited when it comes to understanding 'the pearl effect' because they are indifferent to the circumstances that create it. Constructs like resilience and post-traumatic growth can be applied to "a moment in time" situations that impact the individual or a community but are more limited when trying to understand a community under persistent and historic stress due to oppression. To understand the culture of hip hop

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requires a separate analysis, even more in-depth than I have done so here. It requires an

understanding that positive psychology captures moments, not an entire people, not African

Americans.

Recommendations

Positive psychology and its constructs have been an important addition to academic

thought. It has provided a significant reframe that prioritizes our smiles, relationships,

community, passions, interests, mind, body, and soul, all packaged under the term well-being.

However, it too has its blind spots. How do resilience, post-traumatic growth, transcendence,

hiveishness, tribalism, meaning, mattering, positive relationships, positive deviance, and more

appear differently in the African American community as well as other oppressed groups? Are

the constructs different? Has the question even been explored? My assertion is that the constructs

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do appear different, specifically in the African American community. Hopefully my new terms continue to roll the ball in the direction of equity and challenge the overall white centric school of thought within and beyond Positive Psychology.

The African American community did not just adapt to slavery, Jim Crow, and other oppressive systems. They created something new and distinct for themselves. They evolved throughout history and therefore their well-being journey must be compared to themselves with oppression as the dependent variable not to groups whose experiences frankly don't compare. Here are a few recommendations I believe will help:

1. Positive Psychology should question the white bias within their own constructs to ensure equity in application to a wide variety of groups

2. Consider the historical context that may influence how constructs manifest within a group

3. Lean into the unique nuance of various groups as they inform the field as a whole

4. Provide evidence if indeed all groups do fit under the same umbrella of terms

5. Reframe oppression through well-being

6. White researchers, applied psychologists, and thought leaders must prioritize research about African American and other oppressed communities, not with a diversity hire but with doing the work themselves

Conclusion

The oyster appears to one of the many aquatic species that exist on earth. At most it prevails as a dinner delicacy or its pearls a coveted piece of jewelry, both to be consumed in society without a second thought. However, those labels completely ignore the journey, the history, the genetics of the oyster whose most coveted feature, the 'pearl', is a product of stress. In pain the oyster creates beauty. 'The pearl effect' is an allegory to all oppressed groups as each has an uncanny ability to create beauty in similar stressful situations. If nothing else, this text is a

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call to action to consider how all that we hold true regarding well-being could uniquely manifest in a community; how a specialized analysis of one community reveals truths across all groups.

Although each community or person reacts differently to oppression, the black community continuously pushes beyond the limitations of the positive psychological structures. It is the job of practitioners and researchers to shed the white-supremist lens and consider a new layer for which communities like African Americans, under continuous oppression create thriving. The hope is that the black church, the Harlem Renaissance, and hip-hop illustrate universalities within its uniqueness that can be applied to other groups and expand the field. The 'pearl' and 'the pearl effect' are terms that capture that uniqueness of the African American community as a process and product of beauty within oppression. Continuing to paint with a wide brush perpetuates the hierarchal white supremacy structure. Regardless, African Americans continue to persevere and thrive despite it all.

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Appendix

If We Must Die
by Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?

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Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!