

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Afrocentric Perspective on Social Environment and Psychosocial Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Psychosocial well-being is an important construct in environmental and social psychology; however, dominant constructions are primarily rooted in Western, individualistic approaches that fail to capture the complexity of culturally situated experiences of well-being in Africa. This article seeks to reconceptualise the social environment as a relational, cultural, spiritual, and historical context that shapes psychosocial well-being through an Afrocentric lens. The research is informed by an Afrocentric theory, African-centered psychology, and person-environment approaches. The research design is qualitative and conceptual, and it involves a reflexive thematic analysis of interdisciplinary literature from environmental psychology, social psychology, social work, and African studies. The research findings reveal that psychosocial well-being is constructed as a collective concept, significantly influenced by communal relationships, cultural and spiritual practices, Ubuntu as a moral guide, and the structural legacies of colonialism and socio-economic inequality. The research contributes to theory by extending the person-environment approach through the lens of Afrocentric epistemologies. The research also contributes to practice by offering insights useful to social work and advancing an inclusive understanding of psychosocial well-being through an Afrocentric lens centered on African worldviews.

Keywords: Afrocentric, Psychology, Well-being, Environment, psychosocial, ubuntu

1. Introduction

The psychosocial well-being of individuals has long been a major concern in social psychology and social work, with much scholarship exploring the impact of social, physical, and environmental factors on individual functioning^[1,2]. Within environmental and social psychology, the relationship between the individual and their environment has been viewed as dynamic and reciprocal, thus acknowledging the significant impact of factors beyond the individual on their behavior, identity, and well-being^[3]. Yet, the dominant literature has been informed primarily by Western epistemologies, emphasizing individualistic constructs of well-being and psychological functioning. Therefore, culturally constructed models of the social environment and psychosocial well-being, particularly those originating in Africa, have remained at the periphery of mainstream psychology^[4].

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There has been an increasing recognition of the limitations of universalized models of psychology, which have failed to sufficiently address the realities of people in the Global South ^[5, 6]. In the African context, psychosocial well-being is deeply embedded in communal, cultural, spiritual, and historical social environments ^[7]. From an Afrocentric viewpoint, psychosocial well-being is not constructed as an individual construct, as in the dominant understanding within Western psychology, but as a communal construct deeply embedded in social systems, shared values, and cultural continuity ^[8]. This viewpoint has challenged the dominant paradigms of understanding psychosocial well-being, which have focused primarily on individual distress and well-being, without considering the broader socio-cultural and structural factors. In environmental and social psychology, the term 'social environment' is generally conceptualised as encompassing relationships, networks, and spaces that impact behaviour and well-being [9, 3; see also Stokols, 2018]. Ecological and systems theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems Theory,' have also played an important role in the understanding of the various levels of environmental impact on human development ^[10]. Nevertheless, there has been some criticism that even these theories place the 'individual' at the core, conceptualising relationships as support systems rather than as integral components of identity and well-being ^[6]. Thus, the unique cultural constructs surrounding relationships and community have remained under-theorised.

Afrocentricity is an alternative perspective that can be used to understand the concept of social environment and psychosocial well-being. Afrocentricity is grounded in African epistemology; it centers the African in analysis, contrary to Eurocentric assumptions that have dominated knowledge production in psychology and other fields ^[11]. The Afrocentric perspective on the social environment is inherently relational and communal, encompassing extended family systems, kinship networks, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral connections ^[8, 12]. The human being is viewed as part of the relational environment; well-being is achieved through social connection with others. The Afrocentric perspective on the social environment is grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual recognition, and communal responsibility. Ubuntu philosophy is based on the understanding that the well-being of the individual is achieved through being part of the relational environment; the individual is recognized as being part of the community ^[13]. Ubuntu philosophy is also based on the understanding that the individual can achieve well-being by being recognized as a person among other persons; it holds that "a person is a person through other persons" ^[14, 13]. The Afrocentric perspective on the social environment holds that psychosocial well-being is achieved through community membership.

African-centred scholars further highlight that psychosocial wellbeing should be viewed holistically, incorporating emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life ^[5, 12]. Well-being is linked to the assumption of meaningful social roles, cultural identity, and the maintenance of intergenerational continuity. Significantly, this perspective also highlights the long-term impact of historical and structural factors, such as colonialism, apartheid, and socio-economic inequalities, on the present experiences of psychosocial distress and wellbeing ^[15, 16]. These structural factors create social environments that have a powerful impact on psychosocial wellbeing, particularly among marginalised groups. In many African societies, social collectivism such as communal care, religious affiliations, burial societies, and informal support networks are critical in enhancing psychosocial well-being ^[17]. These social environments are protective systems that create conditions of belonging and meaning, particularly in the face of adversity ^[18]. However, factors such as urbanisation, migration, and socio-economic inequality are increasingly undermining social collectivism in Africa, thereby underscoring the need to develop contextual analyses that capture both change and continuity in African social environments.

The incorporation of Afrocentricity into environmental and social psychology offers a key opportunity to expand the theoretical understanding of the person-environment relationship beyond the dominant Western

tradition [8, 12]. This is because the Afrocentric perspective emphasizes the culturally constructed nature of the social environment and the importance of community, culture, and history in shaping psychosocial well-being. It also aligns with the broader decolonial project in psychology and social work, which aims to challenge epistemic injustice and create knowledge rooted in diverse cultural contexts [19]. In the context of social work practice, the Afrocentric perspective on the social environment and psychosocial well-being represents a key opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the field of environmental and social psychology in terms of the construction of a culturally rooted understanding of psychosocial well-being with particular salience in the context of Africa and the Global South. This article critically engages with the concept of psychosocial well-being from an Afrocentric perspective, which views the social environment as a culturally constructed, relational, and historical context that influences human experiences in Africa. In this context, the current article proposes an alternative framework for understanding the interplay between the person and the environment by emphasizing communal relationships and culture through meaning systems and spirituality. In this respect, the current article seeks to challenge the dominant individualistic models of psychosocial well-being that have long dominated environmental and social psychology.

The current article makes significant contributions to environmental and social psychology in several ways. Firstly, it extends the person-environment theory by incorporating Afrocentric epistemologies, thereby addressing the underrepresentation of African perspectives in mainstream psychological literature. Secondly, the current article seeks to contribute to the theoretical debate on psychosocial well-being by reconceptualizing the social environment as constitutive rather than supportive of well-being. Finally, this article seeks to contribute to decolonial and Global South literature by emphasizing historical and structural factors that shape psychosocial well-being in Africa, including colonialism and socio-economic conditions. In terms of its contribution to practice, the current article aims to provide social work and helping professionals with insights into the importance of culture and community in promoting psychosocial well-being and well-being more broadly.

2. Problem Statement

Despite longstanding recognition in environmental and social psychology that the relationship between individuals and their surroundings is dynamic and reciprocal, dominant conceptualizations of psychosocial well-being remain epistemologically tethered to Western, individualistic frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stokols, 2018). These mainstream models, while valuable, frequently position communal and relational dimensions as peripheral support systems rather than as core constituents of identity and well-being. Consequently, culturally situated understandings of the social environment, particularly those emanating from African epistemologies, have been systematically marginalized within mainstream psychological discourse (Ratele, 2018).

In African contexts, psychosocial well-being is profoundly embedded within communal relationships, spiritual practices, ancestral connections, and the philosophical ethos of Ubuntu, which holds that personhood and well-being are achieved through mutual recognition and collective responsibility (Nwoye, 2017; Mkhize, 2004). However, existing ecological theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, continue to place the individual at the center of analysis, thereby under-theorizing how relational and historical forces, including colonialism, apartheid, and persistent socioeconomic inequality, fundamentally constitute psychosocial outcomes in African settings. Moreover, rapid urbanization, migration, and structural disinvestment are increasingly eroding traditional African social collectivisms (e.g., kinship networks, burial societies, communal care systems), yet mainstream psychology lacks adequate contextual models to capture both the continuity and transformation of these protective environments (Freeman & Nkomo, 2016). This epistemic

gap not only perpetuates coloniality in knowledge production but also limits the relevance of social work and psychological practice across the Global South (Mignolo, 2011). Therefore, there is an urgent need to reconceptualize the social environment as a relational, cultural, spiritual, and historical construct through an Afrocentric lens centering African worldviews and the philosophy of Ubuntu to develop a more inclusive, contextually valid understanding of psychosocial well-being that challenges Eurocentric assumptions and addresses the lived realities of African individuals and communities (Ratele, 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is informed by an Afrocentric perspective, with primary reference to the theories of Afrocentricity, African Centred Psychology, and the relational model of person-environment interaction. Afrocentricity, as expounded by Asante ^[20], serves as the epistemological foundation of this study, placing African people, cultures, and worldviews at the epicentre of analysis. Unlike the dominant Western perspective, which constructs African culture, history, and social reality as deviant from the norm, Afrocentricity posits that they are legitimate and essential sources of knowledge. In this sense, Afrocentricity is a counter-hegemonic perspective that challenges the dominant Eurocentric worldview, rooted in individualism, objectivism, and universalism.

African Centred Psychology is the second theory that informs the theoretical framework of this study. It provides culturally relevant constructs of the self, well-being, and psychological functioning. African-centered psychologists assert that the self is fundamentally relational and embedded in the interconnected systems of family, spirituality, and ancestry ^[8, 12]. In this sense, psychosocial well-being is defined as a state of balance and harmony between the individual and the social environment, rather than as an individual state of being. Psychological distress is not constructed as an individual pathology but rather as a pathology in the relational, cultural, or structural environment. This perspective aligns with theories of environmental and social psychology that focus on person-environment interaction. The framework is further informed by relational and ecological perspectives, particularly Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which describes human development as occurring within nested social systems that range from interpersonal relationships to socio-political structures ^[10]. Although the ecological systems theory offers a useful framework for understanding multilevel environmental influences, this study employs a critical Afrocentric adaptation of the model. Rather than understanding culture as a contextual factor within the model, the framework locates culture as foundational to all levels of the social environment. This allows for an integrated understanding of the interplay between historical, structural, cultural, and relational factors in psychosocial wellbeing in Africa.

Integral to this theoretical framework is the philosophy of Ubuntu, which serves as a normative and ethical framework to inform understanding of social environments and psychosocial well-being. The philosophy of Ubuntu highlights the importance of interconnectedness and collective responsibility, and is premised on the notion that one becomes a person through one's relations with others ^[14, 13]. In this theoretical framework, therefore, social environments are not seen as passive entities but as dynamic entities that facilitate meaning-making and belongingness. The application of this theoretical framework in this research study is evident in how psychosocial well-being and social environments are conceptualised and analysed. In this research, psychosocial well-being is not seen as an individualistic outcome but as an emergent phenomenon shaped by various conditions. Similarly, social environments are multidimensional entities encompassing interpersonal relations, community networks, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and other socio-historical realities. This framework, therefore, provides a basis for analysing and understanding psychosocial well-being and social environments within the context of collective realities and meanings.

In applying this theoretical framework, the study adopts a culturally reflexive approach that recognises the socio-political realities shaping social environments in African contexts. Structural conditions such as poverty, inequality, colonialism, and apartheid are understood as constitutive elements of social environments rather than peripheral influences on psychosocial well-being^[15, 16]. From this perspective, psychosocial well-being is conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical, economic, cultural, and relational forces, encompassing both resilience and vulnerability^[18, 10]. This approach challenges individualized and ahistorical understandings of wellbeing by situating psychological experiences within broader systems of power and social organization. Furthermore, the framework informs the study's interpretive lens by privileging African-centred constructions of wellbeing, including belonging, dignity, social harmony, and the fulfilment of socially embedded roles^[8, 12]. Experiences of distress are therefore examined in relation to disruptions in social connectedness, communal support systems, and relational obligations, rather than through narrowly individualized diagnostic categories^[21, 5]. In this way, the Afrocentric framework facilitates an interpretation of psychosocial well-being as relational, collective, and culturally situated. By integrating Afrocentricity, African-centered psychology, ecological perspectives, and Ubuntu philosophy, the study advances a coherent conceptualization of wellbeing as a socially embedded process grounded in communal interdependence and mutual recognition^[20, 13, 22]. This theoretical integration extends environmental and social psychology beyond individual-focused paradigms and enhances the study's relevance to social work practice and other helping professions committed to culturally responsive, contextually grounded interventions^[23].

4. Literature Review

The scholarly interest in the interrelation between social environment and psychosocial well-being has been well established in environmental and social psychology research. The studies, both contemporary and pioneering, underscore that psychosocial well-being emerges through a dynamic interplay between individuals and their social, physical, and organizational environments^[9, 3]. Social environments, including family systems, community networks, organizational contexts, and even broader socio-political environments, have been found to significantly affect mental health outcomes, coping mechanisms, and social functioning. The research in this area underscores the positive role of social support, social cohesion, and community connectedness in fostering psychosocial well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations.

However, it has been noted that a large part of the literature, even within contemporary research, continues to be informed by Western epistemological traditions that privilege individual agency, autonomy, and psychological processes. The concept of psychosocial well-being is often measured through individual-level outcomes, including life satisfaction, emotional states, or psychological resilience, with social environments serving as contextual factors that either support or hinder individual functioning^[24]. Such approaches, it has been noted, fail to adequately capture collectivist worldviews and ignore the concept of well-being as embedded within social contexts, particularly in non-Western societies^[21, 6]. Consequently, experiences of distress and psychosocial well-being in African societies have been interpreted through a conceptual framework that does not adequately reflect the region's social realities.

However, to address some of these limitations, Global South and decolonial scholars have emphasized the need for a culturally sensitive approach to psychosocial wellbeing that situates it within broader social, structural, and cultural contexts^[5, 19]. African research, particularly, has shown that psychosocial wellbeing is deeply embedded within social relationships, communal living, spirituality, and shared cultural values^[12, 8]. Thus, the concept of self, as a psychological construct, does not emerge as an autonomous entity but rather as deeply embedded within social relationships and communal obligations. The interrelation between psychosocial well-being and social belonging, therefore, becomes quite apparent. Another way in which

Afrocentric scholarship contests dominant psychological paradigms is by arguing that African experiences should be examined through African-centered epistemologies rather than deficit-based comparisons with Western cultures [20]. Afrocentricity focuses on culture, group identity, and historical awareness as key factors in psychological functioning. In this body of literature, psychological distress is often seen as resulting from social disconnections, cultural alienations, and oppressive social conditions, and not simply as an individual dysfunction. This perspective has major implications for how social environments are conceptualized, moving beyond individual adaptation to social groups and social harmony.

The philosophy of Ubuntu plays a major role in African scholarship on wellbeing and social relations. The philosophy of Ubuntu highlights the importance of interconnectedness and sociality, and asserts that individual well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of others [14, 13]. Empirical studies have shown that Ubuntu-based practices, such as communal care, group decision-making, and shared rituals, act as protective factors against psychosocial risks in the face of poverty, violence, and social inequality [18]. However, scholars have also noted that social change, urbanization, and economic marginalization are increasingly threatening traditional communal ways of life, thereby creating new psychosocial risks. Within the discourse of social work, there is an emerging understanding of the value of culturally responsive, community-based practice for psychosocial well-being. African-centered social work scholars have argued that practice models based on individualism, characteristic of Western society, are often not aligned with clients' lived experiences and, in fact, pathologize culturally normative coping strategies [23, 25]. Research on practice has indicated the value of interventions that utilize community networks, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based support structures. This supports the need for theoretical frameworks that conceptualize the role of the social environment in relation to psychosocial well-being.

Although environmental and social psychology have recognized the role of culture and context, Afrocentric perspectives are not represented in mainstream theory and research. There is a lack of literature on integrative theoretical frameworks that conceptualize the role of the social environment and psychosocial well-being from an Afrocentric perspective while engaging with person-environment theory. This is particularly relevant, as issues of structural inequalities, historical trauma, and exclusion are common in many African countries. A culturally responsive conceptualization of the social environment could be particularly valuable in addressing issues of exclusion and marginalization.

4.1. Afrocentric vs Western models of psychosocial support

Whereas Western psychosocial models tend to foreground the individual, measuring well-being by life satisfaction or resilience and treating family or community as external "support," Afrocentric models start from a relational, collective self. In African-centered thought, the person is understood through the philosophy of Ubuntu, often expressed as "I am because we are," emphasizing interdependence and relational identity (Metz, 2017; Ewuoso & Hall, 2019), in contrast to the Western individualist paradigm rooted in autonomy and self-definition (Christopher, 2018). In practice, this means that African families and communities are seen not just as context but as constitutive of well-being. Kinship systems in many African societies remain organized around extended family networks, where identity and social belonging are defined collectively rather than individually (Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2021). Child-rearing and caregiving are similarly communal. Social norms emphasize collective responsibility for children, with extended families and community members actively involved in upbringing, especially in contexts of vulnerability such as orphanhood (Sherr, Cluver, Betancourt, Kellerman, & Richter, 2017; Cluver et al., 2020). By contrast, Western societies rely more heavily on nuclear families, formal services, and individual coping strategies. In the African model, Ubuntu or both emphasizes shared obligations, empathy, and mutual care, where psychological well-being is a collective

responsibility (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019; Waghid & Davids, 2020), whereas Western approaches tend to emphasize autonomy and self-reliance.

4.2. Case studies of community-centered support

Empirical evidence confirms that community-based, Afrocentric approaches can uniquely bolster well-being. In post-genocide Rwanda, community-based psychosocial interventions that integrate collective storytelling, cultural practices, and group healing processes have been associated with significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms, alongside improvements in social cohesion (Verduin et al., 2018; Ng, Harerimana, & Kaiser, 2021). Similarly, evaluations of community-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programs in conflict-affected settings such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Nigeria show high participation rates and strong outcomes. Group-based interventions, in particular, have demonstrated substantial reductions in psychological distress and improved functioning, often outperforming individual therapy in terms of accessibility and cultural relevance (Bangpan et al., 2017; ICRC, 2020). Other case studies highlight the protective value of kinship systems. In Zimbabwe and similar contexts, children raised in family- or community-based care environments show significantly lower engagement in risky behaviors than those in institutional care, largely due to the presence of social support, supervision, and culturally grounded values (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2018; Dziwa, Nyamaruze, & Mawarire, 2019). These findings reinforce the role of Ubuntu-oriented care in promoting resilience and reducing vulnerability. Likewise, studies across sub-Saharan Africa show that during crises such as illness or bereavement, extended family networks and community members routinely mobilize support, including shared caregiving and resource pooling, which strengthens coping and social resilience (Cluver et al., 2020; Theron et al., 2021).

4.3. Conceptualization of the Study

Guided by the literature, this study conceptualises psychosocial well-being as a collective, relational, and culturally embedded construct that emerges from the dynamic interaction between individuals and their social environments. In contrast to approaches that treat the social environment as a passive backdrop to individual functioning, this study positions the environment as constitutive of well-being itself, encompassing relational, cultural, spiritual, and structural dimensions ^[9, 10]. Psychosocial well-being is therefore understood as an outcome of harmony, belonging, dignity, and social interconnectedness within these environments, rather than solely as an individual psychological state ^[8, 12]. Within this conceptualisation, the social environment operates across multiple, interrelated domains. At the relational level, it includes family systems, kinship networks, peer relationships, and community structures that provide emotional support, social identity, and collective care ^[15, 5]. From a cultural and spiritual perspective, the social environment encompasses shared values, beliefs, rituals, and meaning-making systems that shape understandings of selfhood, suffering, and healing within African contexts ^[20, 13]. Structurally and historically, the social environment is shaped by socio-economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and the enduring legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and inequality, which continue to influence access to resources and experiences of dignity and marginalisation ^[16, 23].

In this model, psychosocial well-being is not viewed as the outcome of individual coping capacities alone; rather, it is strongly influenced by the quality and nature of the social environment. Well-being is enhanced within environments characterised by inclusivity, reciprocity, cultural continuity, and collective responsibility, while it is diminished in contexts marked by fragmentation, exclusion, and structural violence ^[22, 18]. Experiences of distress are therefore interpreted as indicators of relational breakdowns or structural constraints, rather than as evidence of individual deficit or pathology ^[21].

The study is grounded in an Afrocentric conceptual orientation that centres African worldviews, values, and lived experiences in the understanding of social environments and psychosocial well-being. Ubuntu serves

as the guiding philosophical principle, integrating notions of relationality, morality, and wellbeing, and emphasizing the interdependence of personhood and collective life^[14, 13]. While this conceptual model aligns with environmental and social psychology perspectives on person-environment interaction, it extends these frameworks by incorporating culturally specific meanings of environment, well-being, and social responsibility [3, 9]. Integrating Afrocentric theory, African-centered psychology, and environmental perspectives, the study advances a conceptual framework centered on collective well-being, embeddedness, and contextuality. This framework provides a culturally grounded basis for rethinking psychosocial wellbeing, its research, and its promotion in African contexts, and offers important implications for culturally responsive social work practice and research^[25, 23].

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design with an underpinning epistemology of Afrocentricity^[26, 27]. Instead of relying on empirical research methods to obtain data, this study employed a critical interpretive analysis of existing literature from various academic sources. This research design was considered appropriate for this study due to its aim of promoting theory and reconceptualizing psychosocial wellbeing from an Afrocentric perspective^[28, 29]. Relevant academic sources published between 2000 and 2024 were systematically searched across Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science using keywords such as social environment, psychosocial well-being, Afrocentricity, Ubuntu, and African-centered psychology. Other seminal works that formed the foundation of the theory of Afrocentricity were included to ensure a rich and robust theory was employed in this study [30, 26, 31]. The analysis of the data was conducted through a reflexive, thematic interpretive method^[32], with an underpinning epistemology of Afrocentricity^[27]. Relevant literature was examined to determine dominant conceptualizations of the social environment and well-being, areas of convergence and divergence between Western and African-centered conceptualizations and theories, and commonalities regarding themes such as relationality, collectivism, and contextuality. The Afrocentric perspective was employed to inform inclusion criteria and interpretation, ensuring that African worldviews and experiences were privileged over Western ones^[33, 28]. To ensure a rigorous methodology was employed in this study, all sources were critically examined to determine their relevance to theory and their ability to inform person-environment relationships and to promote a deeper understanding of the concepts and themes under investigation.

6. Findings of the study

From the reviewed literature, four interconnected themes emerged that characterize an Afrocentric understanding of the social environment and psychosocial well-being^[12, 34]. These four interconnected themes speak to the ways in which psychosocial wellbeing is constructed as a collective, relational, and culturally embedded phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, spiritual, and structural environments, rather than individual psychological states.

Psychosocial well-being as relational and collective is the first major theme that emerged from the literature on Afrocentric and African-centered thought. The literature on Afrocentric thought consistently presents psychosocial well-being as rooted in social connectedness, interdependence, and reciprocal relationships within families, kinship systems, and communities^[34]. Unlike the dominant Western thought that grounds psychosocial wellbeing in individualism, self-actualization, and personal autonomy, Afrocentric thought grounds it in the concept of the individual as an entity inseparable from their social environment^[12]. Well-being is therefore constructed as a collective phenomenon that is sustained through reciprocal obligations to one another. The disruption of social relationships, as experienced through family fragmentation, social

exclusion, or the breakdown of community systems, is consistently presented as the major cause of psychosocial distress ^[35].

The second major theme that emerged from the literature on Afrocentric thought is the centrality of culture and spirituality to psychosocial well-being. The literature on Afrocentric thought indicates that culture, spirituality, values, beliefs, and traditions are integral to the social environment, which plays an important role in promoting psychosocial well-being ^[36]. Afrocentric thought is clear that spirituality is not constructed as a separate entity; rather, it is an integral part of the social environment. Cultural continuity and engagement in communal rituals are presented as important for promoting psychosocial well-being, especially in times of adversity ^[34]. The disruption of cultural continuity and the delegitimization of indigenous knowledge systems are presented as leading to feelings of alienation, loss of identity, and poor psychosocial well-being ^[35]. The philosophy of Ubuntu, as a moral and psychosocial construct, also emerged as a third theme. Ubuntu is consistently portrayed as an ethical and psychosocial construct that influences social behaviour, social relationships, and psychosocial well-being ^[37, 38]. The literature indicates the significance of Ubuntu-informed social environments, which support dignity, recognition, and social harmony, and reinforce feelings of social belonging and communal worth. Well-being, in this construct, is associated with feelings of being seen, recognised, and supported within one's social community. Conversely, the lack of Ubuntu-informed social environments, driven by factors such as urbanisation, socio-economic inequalities, and social fragmentation, is associated with increased psychosocial risk and compromised communal support systems ^[39].

A fourth theme emerged, highlighting the significance of historical and structural factors in shaping social environments and well-being. The findings indicate consensus within the literature that psychosocial well-being in Africa cannot be understood without referencing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism, apartheid, and socio-economic inequalities ^[35, 28]. These structural factors, like environmental factors, shape social environments, limiting access to resources, disrupting communal life, and reinforcing social exclusion. Afrocentric scholarship reconceptualises distress as a rational response to adversity, rather than individual pathology ^[40]. Nevertheless, the literature also points to communal coping strategies employed within constrained social environments, indicating the significance of cultural values, social cohesion, and indigenous coping mechanisms in mitigating the effects of structural adversity ^[12]. The findings, therefore, indicate that psychosocial well-being, as an Afrocentric construct, is produced through the dynamic interplay of relational, cultural, spiritual, and structural environments ^[34]. The social environment, therefore, is not simply a context for well-being, but a constitutive factor of well-being. These findings therefore indicate the importance of a culturally informed reconceptualisation of psychosocial well-being within environmental and social psychology, with significant implications for social work practice ^[28].

7. Scholarly discussion and contribution

The present study's findings support and expand the Afrocentric and African-centered literature in conceptualizing psychosocial wellbeing as fundamentally relational, collective, and socially embedded. The salience of relationality and collective well-being in the present study's findings is consistent with the longstanding tradition of critique of individualistic models of well-being that dominate Western social and environmental psychology [21, 6]. While person-environment theories recognize the importance of social context, the Afrocentric literature reviewed in the present study makes a more robust claim: that social relationships are not simply contextual supports but rather integral components of personhood and wellbeing. This perspective is also consistent with the African-centered psychology literature, which argues that the self is constructed through participation in social and communal life rather than through individual autonomy per se [8, 12]. The embedded nature of psychosocial wellbeing within social relationships also directly challenges

dominant psychological approaches that place stress and distress within the individual's cognitive or emotional processes. This Afrocentric approach to understanding psychosocial distress as a disruption to social systems is also consistent with ecological and systems approaches to understanding stress, but with a unique cultural nuance^[10, 5]. This approach to understanding psychosocial wellbeing also challenges environmental and social psychology to move beyond individual outcomes as a means of understanding wellbeing, to consider the quality and stability of social environments as a means of fostering or undermining wellbeing.

The importance of culture and spirituality, as highlighted by the findings, also directly challenges dominant psychological approaches to understanding wellbeing, which have traditionally secularised culture and spirituality, treating them as of no importance or influence^[18]. This challenge by African-centred scholars to dominant psychological approaches is also consistent with other approaches that view culture and spirituality as vital to social processes^[12]. This challenge to dominant environmental and social psychological approaches to understanding wellbeing is also highlighted by the fact that culture and spirituality emerged as means of fostering psychosocial wellbeing, particularly in contexts of material deprivation and social inequality. Ubuntu has also emerged as an important moral and psychosocial construct that brings together social relations and experiences of well-being. This resonates with existing scholarship that views Ubuntu as an ethical construct and social practice that promotes dignity and social responsibility^[14, 13]. The findings also show that Ubuntu-influenced social environments are conducive to psychosocial well-being by promoting social recognition and belonging. This resonates with social psychological theories of social identity and social recognition and their importance to psychosocial wellbeing^[22]. The loss of Ubuntu social practices and values due to urbanization and social fragmentation underscores the dynamic and precarious nature of social systems, a concern that has been expressed in much of the social research in Africa today^[16].

The role of historical and structural factors in psychosocial well-being has also emerged as an important theme in the findings. This resonates with decolonial critiques of psychology that emphasize the need to account for historical and structural factors in understanding psychosocial well-being and social experiences^[15, 19]. The findings have shown that Afrocentric perspectives are correct in their assertion that psychosocial well-being and experiences of distress cannot be fully understood without reference to the historical impact of colonialism and apartheid on African social environments. This perspective resonates with social work and critical social psychology's commitment to social justice and structural factors in understanding social experiences and psychosocial wellbeing^[23]. Perhaps most importantly, the findings have shown that collective resilience is an important feature of African social environments. This underscores the need to look beyond the structural factors that constrain African social environments and to focus on how they can draw on their culture and social solidarity to foster psychosocial well-being. This resonates with social work and social psychology's need to look beyond deficit and pathology and to focus on the strengths and capacities of African social environments. This perspective has also challenged deficit and pathological views of African social environments and culture, views that have dominated social and environmental psychology's understanding of Africa and Africans.

Largely, the results suggest that incorporating Afrocentric perspectives into environmental and social psychology provides a more holistic, contextual understanding of psychosocial well-being. Conceptualising the social environment as relational, cultural, spiritual, and historical, this study extends the person-environment theory beyond the boundaries of individualistic paradigms. For social work practice, the findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive community-based interventions that address issues of social cohesion, cultural identity, and inequalities. The above discussion thus supports the argument that Afrocentricism not only provides culturally specific alternatives but also has significant theoretical contributions to global debates on the environment and psychosocial well-being.

8. Implications of the study

The implications of the research findings are significant for social work practice, particularly for culturally responsive, community-based interventions. An Afrocentric perspective on psychosocial well-being encourages the social worker to look beyond the individualized, deficit-based approach to client assessment and to view the client as part of a complex relational, cultural, and structural environment. Social work practice should focus on strengthening family and community networks, promoting community coping strategies, and validating indigenous cultural and spiritual practices as viable sources of psychosocial support. Social work practice in Africa and the Global South is encouraged to adopt community-based approaches consistent with the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasize mutual care, social cohesion, and collective responsibility.

The research findings have important policy implications, particularly for developing social policies that acknowledge the critical role of the social environment in promoting psychosocial well-being. Social policies that are consistent with Afrocentric principles should promote community-based initiatives, strengthen social infrastructure that supports collective living, and protect indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. This includes developing policy initiatives to address issues such as poverty, housing, and social exclusion, which are major obstacles to community-based living. Social welfare policies should break away from the narrow, individualized approach to service delivery and promote multi-level interventions that strengthen families, communities, and social networks. Adopting Afrocentric perspectives in policy formulation and implementation can promote more equitable, culturally responsive, and sustainable approaches to psychosocial well-being and social development.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings and theoretical insights of this study, the following recommendations are offered for social work practice, policy, and future research. Firstly, social work education and professional training programs need to include Afrocentric and African-centered approaches as integral components of the curriculum. This requires critical engagement with concepts such as Ubuntu, communal wellbeing, and indigenous knowledge systems in order to equip social workers with culturally responsive critical thinking tools. Incorporating Afrocentric approaches into training is likely to improve social workers' capacity to holistically assess psychosocial well-being and to design interventions congruent with clients' cultural values and social environments.

Secondly, future social work practice is encouraged to focus more on community-based interventions that are likely to enhance social cohesion and relational support systems. Social work interventions that draw on support from existing community structures, such as extended family, faith-based organisations, burial societies, and support groups, need to be formally acknowledged and supported within the broader service delivery system. Social workers are encouraged to work with community leadership and traditional structures to design interventions that enhance cultural continuity and collective resilience, align with Afrocentric approaches, and promote sustainable psychosocial wellbeing. Thirdly, policymakers are advised to consider adopting Afrocentric-informed policy guidelines that acknowledge the social environment as a crucial factor in psychosocial well-being. This may involve formulating policies that address inequality and invest in social and communal infrastructure, especially for marginalized social groups. It may also involve formulating policies that integrate service delivery across the social welfare, health, education, and community development sectors. This would create a social environment that promotes people's well-being. Lastly, further research is recommended to build on the Afrocentric and decolonial perspectives in environmental and social psychology. This may involve empirical research to explore the lived experiences of Afrocentric-informed understandings of the social environment and well-being across different African societies and social groups.

It may also involve comparative research to explore the similarities and differences between Afrocentric and Western conceptualisations of wellbeing. This would add depth to the theoretical understanding of the subject and inform the formulation of Afrocentric-informed interventions.

10. Conclusion

In this regard, this article has made an important contribution to an Afrocentric understanding of social environment and psychosocial wellbeing by highlighting the relational, cultural, spiritual, and structural aspects of human experience in Africa. Through engagement with Afrocentric theory, African-centered psychology, and environmental and social psychology, this study has shown that psychosocial well-being is not an individualized psychological construct but a collective, socially constructed process constituted through significant relationships, cultures, and historical realities. The findings of this study have significant implications for dominant individualistic models of wellbeing and universalized models that fail to consider person-environment interactions from culturally grounded perspectives. The integration of Afrocentric theory with environmental and social psychology has significant implications for decolonial and Global South scholarship. The findings of this study have significant implications for social work and well-being practices. Ultimately, understanding the social environment as a constituent of psychosocial wellbeing provides a more inclusive and contextually grounded foundation for conducting research, practice, and policy to address psychosocial wellbeing challenges in Africa and other collectivist societies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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