

College of Health Sciences

Psychological, Social and Demographic Predictors of Womanist Identity Development

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ABSTRACT

We assessed psychological, sociological and demographic predictors of womanist identity development in college and community women (N=238). Stepwise linear regressions highlighted significant and disparate influences of political ideology, age, SES, sexual orientation, depression, and multiple aspects of moral injury at the Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization stages of womanist identity.

BACKGROUND

Womanism (Walker, 1983; Brown, 1989) is an intersectional approach to feminism. The Ossana, Helms & Leonard's (1992) womanist identity development model moves from an externally to internally sourced definition of womanhood. Inspired by Cross's (1971) and Atkinson, Morten & Sue's (1979) racial identity development models, Ossana, Helms & Leonard's (1992) model contains four stages:

- 1- <u>Preencounter</u>: women conform to society's stereotypical gender roles and unconsciously think and behave in ways that devalue their in-group.
- 2- Encounter: women question their previously accepted values and beliefs of the Pre-encounter stage after experiencing alternative ways of being and living.
- 3- Immersion-Emersion: women reject society's patriarchal definition of womanhood.
- 4- <u>Internalization</u>: women internalize a positive view of womanhood. They reject society's patriarchal definition of womanhood and develop an internal one.

Moral injury results from experiencing transgressions against "deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009) and betrayal by a person in legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation (Shay, 2014). This extend moral injury research to women's experiences in a sociopolitical environment which threatens women's rights and tacitly endorses harassment.

We hypothesized that psychological factors — specifically aspects of moral injury, sociological factors — especially political ideology and assault, and demographic factors including age and SES would predict women's scores on different stages of womanist identity development.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

A total sample of 238 community (n=149) and college (n=89) women participated. Community women received a \$10 Starbucks gift card and college students received course credit. The study was conducted online. After reading and agreeing to the informed consent letter, participants completed the demographic and study questionaries listed below. The Creighton University IRB approved the study procedures. Missing data were replaced using the series mean methods such that all N = 238.

Measures

- Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001) includes 9 items with 4 Likert options (0-3) to measure depression. Scores range from 0 to 27. A cut score >14 suggests a level of moderately severe depression requiring psychological treatment.
- Overall Anxiety Severity & Impairment Scale (Campbell-Sills et al., 2009) includes 5 items with 5 Likert options (0-4) to measure anxiety symptoms and severity. Scores range from 0 to 20. A cut score of 8 suggests the presence of a diagnosable anxiety disorder.
- Womanist Identity Attitudes Survey (Ossana, Helms & Leonard, 1992) includes 43 items with 5 Likert options (1-5) to assess aspects of the womanist identity development model stages. Each item is associated with a separate stage, and each stage subscale is scored by summing subscale items and dividing by the number of items. An individual receives a score for each of the four subscales ranging from 1 to 5.
- Moral Injury Symptom Scale-Civilian Version (Koenig, Ames, & Pearce, 2019) includes moral injury subscales for Betrayal, Guilt, Shame, Self-condemnation, Loss of Religious Faith/Hope, Loss of Trust, Loss of Meaning & Difficulty Forgiving. The MISS-C also has subscales for Religious Struggles and Moral Concerns which were omitted due to data collection error on some of these items in the community sample. Higher subscale scores indicate reporting more of that facet of moral injury. Score ranges are as follows: Betrayal= 3-30, Guilt=4-40, Shame= 2-20, Self-condemnation= 10-100, Loss of Faith/Hope= 2-20, Loss of Trust= 4-40, Loss of Meaning= 4-40 and Difficulty Forgiving= 7-70.
- Demographics Questionnaire assesses age, education, self-reported SES, sexual orientation and race. Sexual orientation and race were made into dichotomous variables for the regressions. Women indicated their personal and familial political ideology on a 7-point Likert scale where 1=extremely liberal and 7=extremely conservative, degree of spirituality on a 4-point Likert scale where 1=not spiritual and 4=very spiritual, and history of physical and sexual assault (no = 0, yes = 1). See mean (standard deviation) and frequency tables to to the right as appropriate for interpretation.

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Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1. Preencounter - WIAS	-																					\perp		
2. Encounter - WIAS	.130*																							
3. Immersion-Emersion - WIAS	128*	.454**	-																					
4. Internalization - WIAS	.011	047	314**	-																				
5. Betrayal – MISS	.089	.074	.336**	.004	-																			
6. Guilt - MISS	.154*	.303**	.320**	.019	.416**	-																		
7. Shame - MISS	.138*	.156*	.255**	.031	.406**	.525**	-																	
8. Loss of Meaning - MISS	031	.043	039	047	.104	.007	082	-																
9. Loss of Trust - MISS	.004	021	035	013	.095	039	113	.382**	-															
10. Self-condemnation - MISS	.055	.264**	.310**	016	.284**	.220**	.230**	.454**	.336**	-														
11. Difficulty Forgiving - MISS	.085	.201**	.163*	050	.128*	.151*	.187**	.351**	.280**	.474**	1													
12. Loss of Faith - MISS	.026	.006	058	023	036	057	057	.444**	.364**	.454**	.513**	-												
13. Depression - PHQ	.129*	.034	.137*	.153*	.251**	.284**	.376**	256**	331**	.002	100	397**	-											
14. Anxiety -OASIS	.076	.075	.065	.129*	.170**	.284**	.358**	276**	273**	017	038	362**	.770**											
15. Age	089	166*	158*	058	.121	145*	032	.223**	.286**	.090	.092	.231**	382**	371**	-									
16. Degree	081	011	050	122	.053	078	050	.263**	.287**	.113	.089	.214**	429**	399**	.623**	-								
17. SES	030	152*	241**	.050	147*	131*	118	136*	040	142*	022	022	074	001	.025	065	-		_ = =					
18. Personal Political Ideology	.271**	213**	406**	.069	064	035	.015	038	.035	101	030	029	.080	.102	047	090	.169**	-						
19. Family Political Ideology	.198**	004	137*	.121	.048	.037	.166*	017	.041	.061	.037	.021	.133*	.093	054	009	.125	.504**	-					
20. Spiritual	.078	.018	030	002	037	.030	.151*	.047	010	067	017	014	.071	.077	.009	.037	.064	.218**	.207**	-				
21. Physical Assault	.005	.103	.121	.057	.247**	. 150*	.110	.065	031	.102	.055	014	.107	.094	.112	.138*	.016	029	.083	.075	-			
22. Sexual Assault	.029	.064	.122	048	.150*	.010	.096	.122	049	.170**	.042	.116	002	.007	.072	.150*	110	162*	153*	046	.271**	-	= = =	
23. Sexual Orientation	070	022	. 201**	.070	.216**	.167**	.217**	.064	086	.250**	.057	035	.349**	.224**	120	042	154*	116	127	082	.203**	.109	-	
24. Race	088	.040	.124	062	.106	.067	.039	.018	064	004	.000	.032	.132*	.011	087	072	095	147*	102	.058	046	057	067	-

RESULTS

We conducted stepwise linear regression analyses for all variables of interest on each stage in the womanist identity model. Standardized β s are reported allowing comparisons of the relative strength of the variables.

Preencounter (R^2 =0.10, $F_{2, 235}$ =13.10, p<0.001) was significantly predicted by a conservative personal political rating (β =0.28, p<0.001) and feelings of guilt (β =0.16, p=0.009).

Encounter (R^2 =0.20, $F_{4,233}$ =12.91, p<0.001) was significantly predicted by a *liberal* personal political rating (β =-0.21, β =0.001), guilt (β =0.24, β <0.001), self-condemnation (β =0.25, β <0.001), younger age (β =-0.18, β =0.002), and heterosexual orientation (β =-0.17, β =0.006).

Immersion-Emersion (R^2 =0.38, $F_{7,230}$ =21.62, p<.001) was predicted by a *liberal* personal political rating (β =0.36, p<0.001), guilt (β =0.13, p<0.033), self-condemnation (β =0.27, p<0.001), younger age (β =-0.16, p=0.003), betrayal (β =0.21, p<0.001), loss of meaning (β =-0.18, ρ =0.003), and SES (β =-0.12, ρ =0.029). Immersion-Emersion is associated with being politically liberal, younger, and having feelings of self-condemnation and guilt. New predictors to surface in Immersion/Emersion include feelings of betrayal, lower SES, and an *increased* sense of meaning in life.

Internalization was significantly, but not well predicted (R^2 =0.023, $F_{1, 236}$ =5.65, p=0.018) by depressive symptoms (β =0.15, p=0.018).

Variable	М	SD	Variable	n	%
Pre-encounter - WIAS	2.01	0.41	Degree/Level of Education		
Encounter - WIAS	3.15	0.36	High school graduate	35	14.7
			Some college but no degree	122	51.3
Immersion-Emersion - WIAS	2.68	0.50	Associate degree in college (2-year)	8	3.4
Internalization - WIAS	4.12	3.20	Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)	42	17.6
Betrayal - MISS	14.77	6.25	Master's degree	24	10.1
Guilt - MISS	18.03	7.48	Doctoral degree (PhD, JD, MD)	7	2.9
Shame - MISS	8.63	4.80	Socioeconomic Status (SES)	_	
1 TO CONTROL OF THE PROPERTY O	23.03	8.02	Poor	6	2.5
Loss of Meaning - MISS			Middle	117	49.2
Loss of Trust - Miss	22.40	6.08	Upper middle	104	43.7
Self-condemnation - MISS	54.42	13.89	Upper Company Company	11	4.6
Difficulty Forgiving - MISS	40.87	8.90	Sexual Orientation	107	82.8
Loss of Faith - MISS	11.50	3.92	Heterosexual Orientation other than heterosexual	197 41	62.6 17.2
Depression - PHQ	10.26	8.06	Homosexual	3	1.3
Anxiety - OASIS	10.87	4.83	Bisexual	34	14.3
Personal Political Ideology	2.73	1.57	Other	3	1.3
C.			Prefer not to answer	1	0.4
Family Political Ideology	4.30	1.69	Race		
Spirituality	2.52	0.84	White	189	79.4
Variable	n	%	Race/Ethnicity other than White	49	20.6
Physical Assault		,,,	Multiracial	17	7.1
No	155	65.1	Black or African American	5	2.1
Yes	83	34.9	Hispanic (Latino/Latina)	13	5.5
Sexual Assault			Asian	10	4.2
No	174	73.1	Native Alaskan/Hawaiian/American	2	0.8
Yes	64	26.9	Other	2	0.8

DISCUSSION

Womanist identity development (Ossana, Helms & Leonard, 1992; Carter & Parks, 1996) is a fluid and inclusive process (Moradi, Yoder & Berendsen, 2004). We believe our study is the first to identify the role of moral injury in reaction to an oppressive sociopolitical environment along with other psychological and sociological predictors in womanist identity development.

Women scoring high in Preencounter typically conform to stereotypical gender roles and may accept male dominance. *Conservative* personal political ideology and feelings of guilt were significant predictors of the Preencounter stage. Perhaps a conservative political ideology suggests complacency with a patriarchal system and limited value placed on women's rights as well as moral injury reflected in self-blaming guilt. Interestingly, Prencounter was positively correlated with Encounter and negatively correlated with Immersion-Emersion.

Women scoring high in Encounter have likely experienced situations that initiate internal crisis and bring gender discrimination directly into their awareness. We found that Encounter was significantly predicted by two aspects of moral injury - guilt and self-condemnation. This stage also sees a shift to *liberal* political ideology, which is more consistent with awareness of inequalities in women's and less advantaged people's rights. Interestingly, heterosexual orientation was associated with being in the womanist Encounter stage; perhaps LGBTQ+ women identified more with their sexual identities than womanhood at this stage. Younger age was also a predictor of the disruption associated with Encounter, which may be explained by younger women's acute awareness of their surroundings as they navigate their identity. Encounter was strongly and positively correlated with Immersion-Emersion suggesting the similarity of these disruption driven stages of identity development.

Women scoring high on Immersion-Emersion reject a patriarchal definition of womanhood and desire affiliation with other self-affirming women. Similar to Encounter, Immersion-Emersion was associated with being politically liberal, younger, and with continued moral injury aspects of self-condemnation and guilt. New predictor variables first significant in Immersion-Emersion included feelings of betrayal - likely by others and systems that devalue women, lower SES (which heightens awareness of social inequalities) and *increased* meaning in life, which may be driven by one's sense of freedom in rejecting a patriarchal definition of womanhood and joining forces with other like-minded women. Immersion-Emersion was the only stage significantly correlated with Internalization. The relationship was inverse, which is reasonable as this stage involves inner turmoil and Internalization inner peace.

Finally, women with high scores on Internalization have developed an internal and positive definition of womanhood. As an individualized experience, Internalization was not well predicted by our study variables. Only depression was significant, perhaps reflecting a bit of sadness (but no longer guilt, self-condemnation or other aspects of moral injury) as women who are secure in their womanist identity face the realities of discrimination and work to support one another. Future research should explore concrete ways to help women (perhaps especially older women) develop a positive gender identify free of guilt and condemnation as well as examine moral injury resultant not just from PTSD qualifying traumas, but also from persistent discrimination, harassment, and devaluation based on gender and in other marginalized groups.