

## Research Article

# Character Strengths and Virtues in Relation to Well-Being in Gay and Lesbian Individuals

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### ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional survey study was completed in which ninety-two self-identified gay and lesbian university students responded to online research instruments which assessed psychological well-being as well as character strengths and virtues. Participants were grouped using cluster analysis based on well-being scores and discriminant analysis was used to differentiate between groups based on two virtue factors (Interpersonal Strengths and Practical Wisdom). Results suggest that individuals with high autonomy and

low overall well-being score lower in interpersonal character strengths compared to individuals with balanced well-being. As interpersonal strengths are key to social support and thus to well-being for gay and lesbian individuals, further attention is warranted to study the relationship between autonomy, interpersonal character strengths, and social support in this population.

**MeSH Headings/Keywords:** Gay; Lesbian; Positive psychology; Psychological well-being; Character strengths

### Introduction

The intention of this study is to investigate the character strengths and virtues of gay and lesbian individuals and to see how those character strengths and virtues relate to the individuals' well-being. Positive psychologists have recently been studying this relationship in mainstream populations but sexual minority populations are often overlooked. This section will briefly discuss some basic tenets of positive psychology that inform this study, recent trends in the field of positive psychology, the importance of this line of inquiry to the sexual minority community, and the research questions that this study strives to answer.

### Positive Psychology

Psychologists recently noticed a trend in psychology that focused on negative emotions, psychopathology, and human deficits while excluding the promotion of positive human flourishing in all aspects of life. These psychologists and others began to research what makes life most worth living, and the field of positive psychology was born [1]. The leaders in this field describe positive psychology as "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" [2]. They have discovered that human thriving has much to do with an individual's strengths of character and positive subjective experiences that lead to life satisfaction, happiness, optimism, and well-being [3].

The study of virtue and character strengths is a key area under the study of positive traits. Flourishing and the pursuit of ideals are attained through virtue, while character strengths have more to do with day to day living [4]. Virtues are broad categories comprised of the various character strengths associated with it. Positive psychologists theorize that a virtue can be achieved through the frequent practice of its component character strengths (e.g., achieving the virtue of humanity by being kind, loving, and socially intelligent) [2]. According to

Peterson, et al. [5], the most widely studied six virtues and their 24 core character strengths in the field of psychology are: 1) Wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective), 2) Courage (authenticity, bravery, persistence, zest), 3) Humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence), 4) Justice (fairness, leadership, teamwork), 5) Temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation), and 6) Transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, religiousness) [5]. The birth of this classification theory has been acclaimed as it provides operational definitions of virtues and character strengths that allow empirical investigation of the constructs.

### Trends in Positive Psychology

A major trend in positive psychology research is the study of how character strengths relate to well-being. Hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity are consistently and robustly associated with life satisfaction [6] and therefore, positive psychotherapy (PPT) interventions include exercises which help individuals develop and nurture many of these core character strengths [7]. Researchers have also found that character strengths most highly associated with well-being vary according to culture. For example, gratitude is most highly correlated to well-being for U.S. populations while perseverance is most highly correlated to well-being for Swiss populations [8].

Researchers also emphasize the importance of studying the character strengths and virtues of various demographic populations as they relate to self-reported well-being and life satisfaction [9] as well as objective measures of functioning [10] across several life domains: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Though positive psychology is still a developing field, research regarding character strengths is being conducted across the United States and in many countries throughout the world [11,12]. Sample populations include college students [13], combat veterans [14], adolescents [15],

children [6], families of individuals with mental retardation [16], and more.

However, an important segment of the population has been mostly overlooked in positive psychology research on character strengths. Studies on the character strengths of ethnic minorities are few and far between, and there are very limited studies that focus on sexual minorities. As the emphasis on multicultural competency in mental health counseling becomes increasingly important, it is imperative to research the character strengths of minorities. In order to address the need for research in this area, this study focuses primarily on sexual minorities, specifically gay men and lesbian women.

### Statement of the Problem

Individuals who are of a sexual minority status face challenging circumstances in their day to day lives. Though society may be increasingly more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, the LGBT community continues to struggle against societal heterosexism and anti-gay prejudice, as exemplified in the recent legislative battles over marriage equality and also in the absence of federal protection against discrimination for LGBT individuals in the workplace. LGBT individuals, couples, and families face challenges that their heterosexual counterparts may not: lack of fundamental civil rights; discrimination in areas including housing, healthcare, jobs, places of worship, and more; rejection by family of origin; societal censure; the threat of physical violence; and the trauma that results from being the target of organized campaigns of defamation and hatred [17].

Researchers have discovered that sexual minorities who have experienced these and other heterosexist events experience negative consequences, including psychological distress [18,19], feelings of hostility and loneliness [20], and negative physical health consequences [21] which are all associated with lower overall well-being. These negative consequences of heterosexism may contribute to the fact that LGBT individuals seek psychological services at higher rates than the general population. LGBT people are more likely than other people in general to begin attending counseling and report having more therapy throughout the course of their lives than their heterosexual counterparts [22].

Despite the fact that LGBT individuals display the need and desire for competent counseling services, they have traditionally faced challenges when seeking therapy. The past view that homosexuality was a pathological and diagnosable disorder contributed to inadequate and even harmful psychological treatments for LGBT people [23]. After homosexuality as a psychosexual disorder was removed as from the DSM in 1973, studies have consistently called for the inclusion of affirmative therapies in the treatment of LGBT clients to repair the damage done by heterosexist attitudes that pervade society. Though LGBT research and therapy still tends to focus on the negative effects of oppression faced by sexual minorities, there are many researchers and practitioners who recognize the importance of strengths and positive aspects of being LGBT. Gay affirmative therapy is one approach designed to not only address the hardships faced by sexual minorities but also to promote the positive principles of psychosocial well-being and thriving [24].

Positive psychotherapy techniques could also be used in finding ways to help LGBT clients thrive.

Despite the fact that LGBT persons tend to face more threats to their well-being than individuals in majority populations, there are many LGBT individuals who thrive and flourish. How is it that some LGBT individuals are able to achieve an authentic, genuine sexual minority identity that they share with those who surround them, while others linger in the "closet" of secrecy and denial? Many sexual minority individuals thrive and lead full, happy lives, while others may suffer from debilitating consequences of minority stress. Some researchers have studied this topic, and have found factors such as resilience, social support, coping mechanisms, and internalized homophobia to be significant in the well-being of LGBT people [25,26]. A study on the mediators of the association between sexual identity disclosure and well-being found that those who were open with others about their identities reported greater well-being and that perceived social support was a consistent predictor of well-being for gay and lesbian participants [27].

Other studies have shown that internalized homophobia and expectation of discrimination are predictive of psychological distress and lower sense of well-being for gay and lesbian individuals [28,29]. Having a positive gay or lesbian identity and rejecting negative stereotypes have also been shown to support well-being for gay and lesbian individuals [30]. Though these studies are helpful and needed in order to understand the well-being of gay and lesbian individuals, they make no attempt to uncover the core characteristics that make it possible for gay and lesbian individuals to disclose their identities, elicit positive social support, become more resilient, or develop a positive gay or lesbian identity as defined by Moradi B, et al. [31] as the recognition, acceptance, and self-labeling of sexual values and mores, sexual needs and preferences, and preferred modes of sexual activities as relevant to one's self.

The dearth of research into the character strengths of gay and lesbian individuals creates a problem for mental health providers. Prominent researchers in the field of sexual identity studies assert that we do a disservice to sexual minorities when all of our research focuses on the negative outcomes instead of the strengths of those in the LGBT community [32, 33]. If practitioners are to encourage the learning and cultivation of the character strengths that will best help their sexual minority clients achieve well-being, they must know what those character strengths are in the first place, and in what ways they might work in conjunction to produce the highest level of well-being for an individual. While it may be true that some generalizations to gay and lesbian populations may be possible from studies on character strengths and virtues of the general population, it is also reasonable to believe that this population's experiences of minority stress necessitate the development of different character strengths or virtue groupings to achieve well-being. This study will add to the body of positive LGBT research by attempting to identify the groups of character strengths and virtues most closely associated with well-being in gay and lesbian individuals.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the gay and lesbian

population's well-being from a virtue and character strengths perspective, as well as examine the ways in which one's virtues and character strengths interact with each other to produce the highest levels of well-being, and discover possible differences in character strengths and virtues between groups of participants that have high levels of well-being and groups that do not.

However, positive psychologists tend to look at character strengths in terms of "signature strengths" and encourage the development of these strengths as independent characteristics. This theoretical idea has been criticized by those who would argue that character strengths do not work independently from one another, and that in order to truly flourish, individuals must employ character strengths in a complementary manner to make situationally best decisions, and take action toward the good in life. While an individual may have signature character strengths, it is the harmonious interactions of these character strengths with others which truly allow a person to thrive. This can be termed as practical wisdom, "the ability to make wise decisions about how to act in a specific situation to pursue what is good" [34]. For instance, if a person wants to pursue an intimate relationship as a way of flourishing in life, he or she must employ many different character strengths. The signature strength of love may play a large role in the success of the relationship, but without the strengths of integrity, kindness, generosity, humor, and others working in conjunction with the capacity to love and be loved, a thriving intimate relationship hardly seems possible. Therefore, in light of the virtue psychology viewpoint that emphasizes interdependence among the virtues and strengths, this research focuses on the interactions of character strengths, and how groups of complementary strengths relate to well-being.

### Research Questions

1. Is it possible to group participants into two or more clusters that reflect their levels of psychological well-being in terms of subscale scores on the Scale of Psychological Well-being (SPWB)?
2. Is it possible to discriminate well-being clusters in terms of one's virtues reflected in one's character traits defined in terms of subscale score of Bipolar Character Strengths Scale (BCSS; i.e., interaction between character strengths)?

### Methodology

This study was guided by the desire to apply concepts from positive psychology to the field of LGBT research by exploring the character strengths and virtues of gay and lesbian individuals and examining how the pursuit of a virtuous life relates to levels of well-being. Since this population has been largely underrepresented in positive psychology research, and since LGBT research tends to focus on the negative aspects of the LGBT experience, this study is especially needed and relevant.

The research questions at hand focus on clustering gay and lesbian participants into groups based on scores derived from well-being instruments, and seeing if there was a difference between groups in terms of virtue. The study was designed to measure the virtues of a sample of gay and lesbian individuals with BCSS, and well-being as measured by SPWB. This section covers information regarding the study's sample, instrumentation, and statistical analyses.

### Sampling

This study focused on only gay men and lesbian women. While some research on sexual minority populations is inclusive of all sexual minorities due to the common experiences all LGBT people share (e.g., stigma, societal prejudice and discrimination), some researchers have argued for sensitivity to the within-group differences in the LGBT community when choosing sample populations [28, 31, 35]. While there are similarities of experience for all members of the LGBT community, it could also be argued that bisexual and transgender people face unique circumstances that may affect character strengths and well-being. Bisexual individuals often face marginalization and stigma from both the mainstream heterosexual community and the LGBT community, who may see the bisexual individual as a gay person who is trying to avoid what may be a difficult coming out process. Transgender people face unique developmental and medical considerations not faced by gay or lesbian individuals. In order to obtain clear results that are highly generalizable, this study recruited participants who self-identify as a gay man or lesbian woman from two national universities in the mid-west United States during the fall semester of 2009. A total of 132 individuals responded to the call for participants, and 92 of those responded were retained after the data cleaning process.

### Instruments

**Demographic Questionnaire:** A demographic survey gathered the following information: age, gender, race, sexual orientation, education level, current occupation, and income. These demographic items were chosen in part to ensure that the subjects met the requirements to be included in the sample, and to examine possible limitations based on diversity (or lack of diversity) within the sample.

**Scales of Psychological Well-Being:** The Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB) consists of 42 items on six subscales reflecting six areas of psychological well-being. The definition constructs measured by SPWB subscales are as follows: [36].

- **Autonomy:** level of self-determination, self-regulation, and independence; ability to resist social pressures.
- **Environmental Mastery:** competence in managing everyday affairs; ability to manage surrounding context; sense of control over external world.
- **Personal Growth:** positive development over time; openness to new experiences; sense of realizing one's potential.
- **Positive Relations with Others:** capacity to relate to others in intimate, affectionate, empathetic manner; understanding of the give and take of human relationships.
- **Purpose in Life:** competence in goal-setting and directedness; ability to make meaning and purpose out of life circumstances.
- **Self-Acceptance:** attitude toward self, regard toward one's own good and bad qualities, satisfaction with past life.

Respondents rate statements on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). Responses are totaled for each of the six subscales, with approximately half of the responses being reverse scored. For each subscale, scores range from 7 to 49. A

high score indicates that the participant is functioning at a high level in this area of well-being, while a low score indicates that the participant struggles to feel comfortable with that particular concept. Ryff C [10] reported good internal consistency for the subscales ranging from .86 to .93. The test-retest reliability for the subscales ranged from .81 to .88 [37]. Initial validity was established by correlating the measure with measures of positive and negative functioning. Positive associations were found between happiness and life satisfaction, as measured by single-item indicators and the Life Satisfaction Index [38], and all psychological well-being (PWB) dimensions. The severity of depressive symptoms as measured by the Zung Depression Scale [39] and the Center for Epidemiologic Study Depression Scale [40] were negatively associated with all PWB dimensions [36].

**Bipolar Character Strengths Scale:** Bipolar Character Strengths Scale contains 24 testing items divided into two virtue categories: Interpersonal Harmony and Practical Wisdom. Interpersonal Harmony factor consisted of eight character strength items including kindness, forgiveness, fairness, love, social intelligence, teamwork, humor and spirituality, and measures “Character friendship” discussed as a relationship that differentiates itself from pleasure or social exchange friendships. Character friendships are based on the recognition of what is worthy or valuable in the other person, and in life, and the commitment to seek those things which are worthy and valuable together in the context of the relationship. In character friendships, pleasure and advantage are natural byproducts as the friends pursue shared goods. In fact, Aristotle, whose philosophies provide a basis for much of virtue theory, considered friendship to be the best way for an individual to actualize virtue and pursue what is good [34].

Practical Wisdom factor consisted of ten character strengths items, and includes love of learning, modesty, appreciation of beauty and excellence, perseverance, wisdom, judgment, gratitude, prudence, self-regulation, and honesty. Practical wisdom is an important concept in virtue ethics. Instead of viewing each character strength as an independent factor that can be developed on its own, virtue psychology sees character strengths as acting in conjunction with each other to help a person make the best choices according to context [34]. Thus, this factor represents the virtues that would best act in conjunction with each other in order to facilitate a wise and practical decision making process. Individuals who possess this combination of character strengths may use their love of learning and appreciation of beauty and excellence to pursue good goals for their lives, and then the achievement of those goals is facilitated by their ability to persevere, to be prudent and self-regulating, to maintain an attitude of gratefulness, modesty, and honesty, and to use wisdom and judgment in how much and in what context they apply these character strengths.

BCSS employed bipolar rating scale with pairs of opposites or antonyms anchoring the extreme poles of each scale often adjective pairs such as good-bad. Scores ranged from -3 at the negative end of each scale to +3 at the positive end, with 0 in the middle neutral position. Ratings of -3 on negative end to +3 on positive end were changed to 1-to-7 scores for each of the 24 individual positive character strength items for purposes

of the present study. Polarities are reversed on some of the items in order to reduce response set problems, and are thus reversed on scoring. Higher scores on each item are indicative of higher and more positive self-perceptions of that character strength. Internal consistency reported in a previous study with people with chronic illness and disabilities were .84 and .83, respectively. In the current study, internal consistency measures for both subscales were .81, indicating a good reliability.

### Procedure

Upon IRB approval, an online survey was developed that included an introductory information section, demographic data questionnaire, and a self-report questionnaire consisting of the two instruments used in this study. A link to the survey was sent to LGBT Student Support Services Offices at participating universities for distribution to members of their support group listservs. These agencies also sent out two reminders to their listservs approximately 10 days and 15 days after the initial email distribution.

The introductory information included a statement explaining the purpose of the research, an invitation for the individual to participate, a statement that participation is voluntary, and contact information for both the investigator and supervisor of the project. At the end of the introductory information, the participant was required to consent to participate by checking the appropriate box (agree or disagree) before continuing to the demographic questionnaire. No identifying information was associated with any of the completed questionnaires in order to maintain anonymity of the participants. Participants were informed of the opportunity to obtain a summary of the research findings. All data material was kept secured by the investigator. The estimated amount of time required to complete the online questionnaire was between 15 and 20 minutes, depending on individual differences among participants.

### Analysis and Results

Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 17.0 for Windows. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, cluster analysis, and discriminant analysis to test research questions. Descriptive statistics were computed for all independent and dependent variables in order to examine the shape of distribution, central tendency, and dispersion. Means, standard deviations, and percentages were used to summarize demographic characteristics of participants. The data was screened for missing data and outliers. Missing data was handled with the replacement-with-means method.

### Descriptive Statistics

Participants in the study were adults between the ages of 18-30 who were enrolled in at least one university course and self-identified as gay or lesbian. The majority (56.5%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 20; nearly 70% were freshman, sophomore, or junior undergraduates; over half were female (57.6%); and the wide majority identified as Caucasian (80%). A wide variety of academic majors were reported, with the most heavily represented being Business and Education oriented majors (15.2% for each category). Results are described in detail in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics for Age, Sex, Race, Grade Level, and Major.

	n	%		n	%		n	%
<b>Age</b>			<b>Race</b>			<b>Major</b>		
18	14	15.2	White	76	82.6	Business	14	15.2
19	22	23.9	Black	6	6.5	Education	14	15.2
20	16	17.4	Hispanic	5	5.4	Political Science	9	9.7
21	9	9.8	Asian	3	3.3	Social Sciences	8	8.6
22	7	7.6	Other	2	2.2	Arts	6	6.5
23	4	4.3				English	6	6.5
24	4	4.3	<b>Grade Level</b>			Natural Sciences	5	5.4
25	2	2.2	Freshman	28	30.4	Social Work	5	5.4
26	5	5.4	Sophomore	17	18.5	Languages	4	4.3
27	3	3.3	Junior	19	20.7	Music	4	4.3
28	1	1.1	Senior	9	9.8	Healthcare	3	3.2
29	1	1.1	Master	13	14.1	Theology	3	3.2
30	4	4.3	Doctoral	6	6.5	Undecided	3	3.2
<b>Sex</b>						Communications	2	2.1
Male	39	42.4				Journalism	2	2.1
Female	53	57.6				Math/Engineering	2	2.1
						General Studies	1	1.1
						Women's Studies	1	1.1

## Results

### Cluster Analysis of SPWB

In order to answer research question 1, hierarchical agglomerative cluster analysis with Ward's method was used. The analysis grouped participants in such a way that maximized their among-groups variation while minimizing within-group variation – that is to say, members of each group are as similar to each other as possible while at the same time as different from members of the other groups as possible [42]. The participants were clustered on the basis of their profiles of scores on the six SPWB subscales (Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Personal Relationships, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance). The agglomeration coefficients that were found for the last 10 levels in the clustering hierarchy are reported in Table 2. Upon examination of the changes in coefficients, three participant clusters were identified. There was a relatively large jump in moving from the second to the third level (34.620), indicating lower cluster homogeneity at the next level in comparison to the smaller changes at the immediately preceding levels (23.485 and 20.992). Thus, there was relatively little loss within cluster homogeneity at the levels which preceded the level with three clusters, with a fairly large drop-off in homogeneity in going from two to three clusters. Thus, the level with three clusters was selected as the optimal partition. Table 2 provides a summary of agglomeration coefficient changes.

The first cluster consisted of 44 participants. This group had intermediate scores on all well-being domains (i.e., autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, personal relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance), except for the personal relationships subscale, on which they scored the highest. The participants in this cluster seemed to be experience a balanced sense of well-being, with especially positive personal relationships; therefore, this group was labeled “balanced well-being”.

The second cluster consisted of 30 participants. This

**Table 2:** Agglomeration Coefficient for SPWB Cluster Solution.

N. of Cluster	Agglomeration Coefficient	Changes
10	91.323	5.817
9	97.14	7.324
8	104.467	10.076
7	114.543	13.191
6	127.734	16.971
5	144.705	20.992
4	165.697	23.485
3	189.182	34.62
2	223.802	72.949
1	296.751	

cluster's participants scored highest in autonomy relative to the other clusters, but scored lowest on every other subscale. Thus, this cluster of participants appeared to have high autonomy but low quality of life overall, and was labeled “high autonomy, low well-being”.

The third cluster consisted of 18 participants, the smallest of the three clusters. This cluster scored lowest on autonomy in relation to the other clusters, but highest on each other subscale except for personal relationships, in which participants had intermediate scores relative to the other clusters. This cluster appeared to have the lowest sense of autonomy, but overall high quality of life in other areas of well-being. Therefore, this cluster was labeled “proper autonomy, high well-being”. The means and standard deviations are reported in Table 3 for the six SPWB subscales.

### Discriminant Analysis

In order to assess whether the participants' well-being clusters could be differentiated on the basis of their scores on the virtue factors, discriminant analysis was used. More specifically, SWPB cluster memberships served as the group variable,

**Table 3:** Means and Standard Deviations for SPWB Subscales.

		Cluster I	Cluster II	Cluster III
SPWB Subscale		(balanced)	(high autonomy, low WB)	(proper autonomy, high WB)
		(n=44)	(n=30)	(n=18)
Autonomy	Mean (SD)	4.211(0.738)	4.678(0.655)	3.875(.588)
Environmental Mastery	Mean (SD)	4.289(0.862)	3.714(0.848)	4.639(0.546)
Personal Growth	Mean (SD)	5.239(0.606)	5.024(0.636)	5.246(0.625)
Positive Relations	Mean (SD)	5.257(0.625)	4.061(0.819)	5.045(0.544)
Purpose in Life	Mean (SD)	4.696(0.787)	4.542(0.406)	5.384(0.418)
Self-Acceptance	Mean (SD)	4.494(0.784)	3.900(1.07)	5.215(0.426)

and scores on the two virtue factors (Interpersonal Strengths and Practical Wisdom) of BCSS served as the discriminating variables. Discriminant analysis is a statistical technique used to study the differences between two or more groups of participants with respect to several variables simultaneously [43]. The objectives of discriminant analysis are: (a) to determine whether statistically significant differences exist between the average score profiles of two or more a priori defined groups, (b) to establish procedures for classifying statistical units into groups on the basis of their scores on several variables, and (c) to determine which of the independent variables account most for the differences in the average score profiles of the two or more groups [44].

The analysis produced evidence of significant differentiation between clusters for the first discriminant function derived,  $\lambda = .866, \chi^2 (df=4, N = 92) = 12.691, p = .013$ . Group centroids along the significant discriminant function indicated that the ‘balanced well-being’ cluster was located at the positive extreme (+.318) and the ‘high autonomy, low well-being’ cluster was located at the negative extreme (-.521), with the ‘low autonomy, high well-being’ cluster at an intermediate position (-.090), but closer to the balanced well-being cluster.

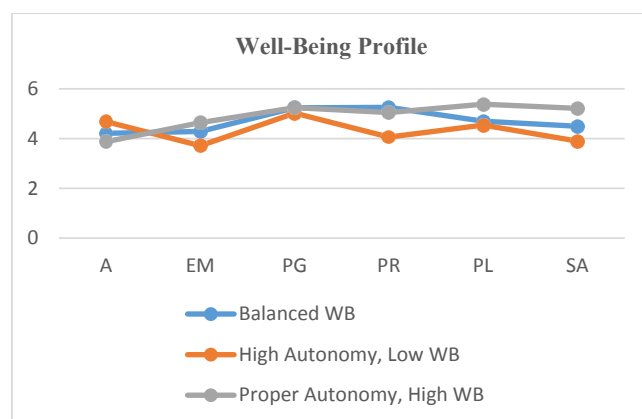
Follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, and significant differences were found between clusters on the Interpersonal Harmony virtue factor,  $F(2,90) = 6.358, p = .003$ . Tukey’s HSD tests indicated that only the following differences were significant: the ‘balanced well-being’ cluster ( $M = 5.98$ ) differed from only the ‘high autonomy, low well-being’ ( $M=5.28$ ) on interpersonal strengths. No other significant statistical differences were found between the other clusters.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how character strengths and virtues relate to well-being in gay and lesbian individuals. This is an important area of inquiry in positive psychology that is still in the initial stages of exploration.

**Discussion of Research Question 1**

The first question addressed in this study was: “Is it possible to group participants into two or more clusters that reflect their levels of psychological well-being in terms of subscale scores on the SPWB?” Cluster analysis for the psychological well-being measure revealed three separate groups, with mean scores



**Note:** A: Autonomy, EM: Environmental Mastery, PG: Personal Growth, PR: Positive Relations, PL: Purpose of Life, SA: Self-Acceptance.

**Figure 1:** Mean Profile of SPWB Subscales.

plotted in Figure 1. Individuals in the balanced well-being cluster scored in the mid-range on the subscales compared to the other two groups, except on the positive relations subscale on which they scored the highest. The group labeled high autonomy, low well-being scored highest on the autonomy subscale but lowest on all of the other subscales. Conversely, the group labeled low autonomy, high well-being scored lowest on autonomy and highest on the other subscales, except on positive relations on which they scored second highest.

When interpreting these clusters, autonomy seems to be an important factor. The cluster with the highest autonomy scored lowest in all of the other well-being categories. The cluster with the lowest autonomy scored highest on all of the other categories, except for second highest on positive relations. And the cluster with the middle score in autonomy also scored in the middle on all other subscales except for positive relations. Therefore, having the right amount of autonomy seems to be a key factor in well-being for this population, and is related somehow to personal relationships.

In the well-being scale used in this study, the construct of autonomy was defined as “self-determination, independence, and the regulation of behavior from within...having an internal locus of evaluation, whereby one does not look to others for approval, but evaluates oneself by personal standards... a deliverance from convention, in which the person no longer clings to the collective fears, beliefs, and laws of the masses...freedom from the norms

governing everyday life” [37]. Questions from this subscale were aimed at uncovering how much a person worries about what other people think of them, how much the individual’s decisions are influenced by others, and how comfortable the respondent is with voicing their own opinions.

In this study’s findings, there seems to be a complex interaction at work with autonomy and personal relationships. The amount of autonomy a person feels they have seems to play a role in the quality of their personal relationships. This can perhaps be partially explained with another study by Vincke J, et al. [45] which explored the relationship between the well-being subscales on the SPWB and the Big Five Personality factors. This study found a slight negative correlation (-.15) between autonomy and the personality factor of Agreeableness- the personality trait which can be described as an individual’s tendency to place a high value on maintaining peaceful interpersonal relationships. Those who score high in Agreeableness tend to be cooperative and sensitive to the needs and perspectives of others [46]. In personality literature, the factor of Agreeableness is highly related to positive personal relationships.

It follows then that individuals with a strong sense of autonomy, in light of autonomy’s connection with Agreeableness, might be less interested in compromising on their perspective in order to maintain harmony within a relationship. Individuals with a balanced sense of autonomy may have the ability to bend when necessary, and in other situations hold fast to what they know are their important needs and desires. In this way, autonomy and personal relationships are held in balance and are both able to thrive through the judicious use of individual autonomy. So we see that a person’s level of autonomy may play an important role in determining the nature of his or her personal relationships. High levels of autonomy may create issues due to an unwillingness to compromise or be influenced by the other person, while too little autonomy may create relationships in which the individual feels controlled and manipulated.

This is an especially important consideration for gay and lesbian individuals. As discussed earlier in the study, many researchers have found that social support plays a vital role in determining the well-being of LGBT individuals. It was previously demonstrated that gay and lesbian individuals face discrimination, harassment, violence, prejudice, and rejection from society at large. Ample social support has been linked to higher self-esteem, lower symptoms of depression and anxiety, and higher well-being over all.

## Discussion of Research Question 2

The third research question in this study was: “Is it possible to discriminate well-being clusters in terms of the virtue factors reflected in ones’ character strengths?” In order to explore whether or not the two virtue factors (i.e., Interpersonal Harmony and Practical Wisdom) could differentiate between group memberships, discriminant analysis was performed. For the psychological well-being measure, the first discriminant function was found to be statistically significant, indicating that the “Interpersonal Harmony” factor was found to discriminate between group memberships. Post hoc analysis using Tukey’s HSD revealed that those belonging to the ‘balanced well-being’

group scored highest in Interpersonal Harmony and that their scores in this factor were significantly different than those in the ‘high autonomy, low well-being’ group. No significant differences were found between ‘balanced’ and ‘proper autonomy and high well-being’ in regard to the two virtue factors.

Regarding the SPWB clusters, it is interesting that the Interpersonal Harmony (kindness, forgiveness, fairness, capacity to love and be loved, social intelligence, teamwork, humor, and spirituality) was significantly different from the ‘balanced well-being’ and the ‘high autonomy, low well-being’ clusters. This supports the idea that social support provided from personal relationships which are developed and nurtured by employing interpersonal strengths is especially vital to a gay or lesbian individual’s well-being, as evidenced by the fact that those individuals who reported the lowest overall well-being were also the ones who were weakest in the Interpersonal Harmony virtue factor. This supports the idea that autonomy, personality factors such as Agreeableness, and interpersonal character strengths are complex constructs that interact with each other with regards to well-being for gay and lesbian individuals, and warrant further attention in future research.

## Implications

Interventions and therapeutic treatment modalities for gay and lesbian individuals will benefit by addressing the relationship between virtues and well-being. Emphasizing the importance of social support and the ways to best nurture important relationships can help gay and lesbian clients who are struggling with a variety of issues. While autonomy is an important factor in well-being, especially for individuals who may feel like their decisions and behaviors are being judged by society, it could also be important to learn that a balance of autonomy and agreeableness may be important in facilitating healthy relationships. Interventions that explore a gay or lesbian client’s perceptions of autonomy and the best way to maintain a personal sense of agency while accepting the influence and perspectives of friends, family, and partners may be helpful when attempting to raise the client’s overall sense of well-being and psychosocial health.

In this same way, the character strengths involved in the Interpersonal Harmony virtue factor can be developed and practiced by clients who may be weak in these areas. While some individuals may thrive despite weaknesses in interpersonal strengths, gay and lesbian individuals may be especially in need of interventions which develop the character strengths to facilitate strong, supportive relationships due to societal pressures placed on sexual minorities. The feelings of acceptance and approval that society in general withholds from gay and lesbian individuals can be found on a more localized scale within the context of LGBT communities, personal friendships, family relationships (through either family of origin or choice), and romantic partnerships. Fostering and developing the character strengths within the Interpersonal Harmony virtue factor can build a strong network of social support and lead to greater client well-being.

Further research is warranted to explore the ways in which autonomy is linked to the health of relationships and social support for gay and lesbian individuals. Since social support is such a key factor for this population, any way in which this can be

strengthened and promoted should be explored through further research. Furthermore, research regarding the interaction of the character strengths within the Interpersonal Harmony virtue factor is warranted in order to discover the best interventions that will develop and strengthen character strengths associated with this virtue.

In order to generalize these results to a larger portion of the LGBT community, further research is warranted with different demographic populations. Individuals in various developmental stages, from adolescence to older adults, should be considered in future studies. A sample with a greater diversity of ethnicities and education ranges should be included in future studies in order to address the needs of the wider LGBT community. In addition, future research on this topic should be conducted with bisexual and transgender individuals in order to obtain result specific to those populations. Also, while this study included both men and women, it may be helpful in the future to explore the differences between these groups.

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