



## The Impact of Ethnicity and Gender on Psychological Well-Being in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

This research explored psychological well-being in Afghanistan, focusing on ethnic and gender influences. Using a descriptive causal-comparative approach, 960 participants, comprising 597 males and 363 females were recruited from four ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, Pashtun, and Hazara) residing in various provinces of Afghanistan. Data were collected using the Psychological Well-Being short form Scale and analyzed with SPSS (Version 27), applying independent samples t-tests and multivariate analysis of variance. The findings revealed that a significant gender difference emerged in the autonomy dimension ( $p = .014$ ), with men demonstrating higher levels of autonomy. Results indicated significant effects of ethnicity on personal growth, positive relations, self-acceptance and purpose in life. Overall psychological well-being was also significantly influenced by ethnicity. However, no significant ethnic differences were found for environmental mastery or autonomy. Tukey post-hoc analysis revealed higher self-acceptance among Hazaras than Uzbeks ( $p = .040$ ). Evidence from the study suggests that ethnicity constitutes an influential factor shaping different dimensions of psychological well-being, while gender-related differences appear to be more limited in scope. The results highlight the importance of considering sociocultural factors when addressing mental health and well-being within diverse populations.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Ethnicity, Gender, Psychological Well-Being.

### Introduction

Despite Afghanistan's significant ethnic and gender diversity, a systematic empirical investigation into the simultaneous effects of both gender and ethnicity on psychological well-being utilizing the established framework of Ryff's model remains absent from the literature. In fact, neglecting cultural influences creates a critical gap in well-being research (Moradhaseli et al., 2024). Hence, understanding psychological well-being within the cultural context through the lens of Afghan society is especially vital. Cross-cultural research has consistently shown that psychological well-being, from its meaning and conceptualization to its lived experience, is influenced by cultural differences

(Moradhaseli et al., 2024). In this regard, the fourth wave of psychology, which emphasizes multicultural perspectives in counseling, highlights the necessity of contextualizing and localizing research in accordance with prevailing cultural values and norms (Kolaei et al., 2018). Psychological well-being is shaped and reinforced by multiple factors, one of which is individuals' multicultural experiences that may contribute to its enhancement. From a cultural relativist perspective, human beings are not inherently superior or inferior to one another; rather, they are different, and these differences are worthy of scholarly attention (Mirzaiefar et al., 2019).

Given these considerations, focusing on psychological well-being is essential (Sinha & Verma, 1992), and identifying the factors that influence it is equally important, as it is influenced by factors such as cultural background, socioeconomic conditions and other interrelated factors (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009, as cited in Sharma, Bharti, Sharma et al., 2021).

The emergence of Positive Psychology in recent decades has brought remarkable transformations to the behavioral sciences. Unlike earlier dominant approaches, positive psychology emphasizes adaptation, happiness, and psychological well-being as central to human flourishing. Psychological well-being is considered one of the most critical factors in individuals' growth and development (Masoomparast et al., 2021; as cited in Khoremaei, Zolfaghari, & Poorseyed, 2024). According to Ryff, psychological well-being represents a broad developmental process that may fluctuate over the life course (Ryff, 2014). It is noteworthy that the components of psychological well-being are interconnected and work in harmony to enhance individuals' overall life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being (Archana & Sinha, 2024).

Taken together, these arguments underscore the importance of examining and identifying the status of psychological well-being in the Afghan population. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate psychological well-being among Afghan individuals across different genders and ethnic groups. By doing so, it aims to address an existing gap in the literature, as this topic has received limited attention in previous research, particularly in Afghanistan. To this end, the study adopts Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model as its theoretical framework and seeks to answer the question: *What is the status of psychological well-being among Afghan individuals?*

## Material and Method

An applied, descriptive causal-comparative design was employed. In the descriptive phase, descriptive statistical techniques were applied to calculate indicators and present the data in tables and figures. In the causal-comparative phase, the collected data were compared across ethnic groups to identify potential differences. Specifically, the study focused on four major Afghan ethnic groups: Uzbek, Pashtun, Tajik, and Hazara. Since the study was conducted in Afghanistan, the target population included Afghan families from different major ethnic groups residing in various cities such as Jowzjan, Kandahar, Balkh, and Bamyan.

### Participants and Sampling Procedure

To ensure an adequate sample size and account for potential attrition, the initial sample was increased to 1,545 participants. Of these, 960 individuals were retained via convenience sampling. The final sample consisted of 240 participants from each of the four provinces:

Mazar-e-Sharif, Bamyan, Kandahar, and Jowzjan. Data were collected using printed (paper-and-pencil) questionnaires. After obtaining the necessary ethical approvals and permissions (a sample form is provided in the appendices), the questionnaires were distributed to participants in various locations across the selected provinces. The choice of provinces was based on the ethnic groups targeted in this study. Data collection sites included schools, universities, villages, provincial centers, and participants' places of residence.

### Reliability and Validity

Ryff's 18-item PWB Scale was used, assessing six dimensions (Ryff, 1989), which is among the most widely used instruments. The total score across these six dimensions represents an individual's overall psychological well-being. Items 9, 12, and 18 assess autonomy; Items 1, 4, and 6 assess environmental mastery; Items 7, 15, and 17 assess personal growth; Items 3, 11, and 13 assess positive relations; Items 5, 14, and 16 assess purpose in life; and Items 2, 8, and 10 assess self-acceptance. The scale showed excellent reliability in Afghan samples ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ; Haqyar et al., 2022). Furthermore, Ahmadyar et al (2025) validated the Persian version of the scale in an Afghan population. Their findings demonstrated acceptable reliability across all subscales ( $\alpha=0.70$  to  $\alpha=0.87$ ). These results indicate that the instrument has strong internal consistency and is suitable for measuring the constructs of interest in the current study.

### Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS 27. Means and standard deviations were computed for all dimensions of psychological well-being. To examine Gender differences independent-samples t-test was employed. Afghan Ethnic group effects were evaluated via multivariate analysis of variance employing Pillai's Trace, followed by univariate ANOVAs and Tukey comparisons where appropriate.

## Findings

In order to address the research question regarding differences in psychological well-being and its components across various Afghan ethnic groups, descriptive statistics for the key variables were first calculated. The results indicate that men's ( $M = 62.64$ ) score has a small difference from women's ( $M = 61.76$ ) on overall psychological well-being. Similarly, men obtained marginally higher mean scores in most subscales, including self acceptance, environmental mastery, and autonomy. Women, however, showed a slightly higher mean score in purpose in life. This pattern indicates that

**Table 1.** Descriptive Indicators of the *Dimensions* of Psychological Well-Being based on Gender Differences

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Sd
Psychological well-being	Male	597	62.64	11.99
	Female	363	61.76	12.42
Environmental mastery	Male	597	7.80	2.94
	Female	363	7.44	3.12
Autonomy	Male	597	11.71	3.63
	Female	363	11.10	3.84

Personal growth	Male	597	8.01	2.94
	Female	363	8.02	2.97
Positive relations	Male	597	11.26	3.56
	Female	363	11.31	3.67
Self-acceptance	Male	597	12.98	3.54
	Female	363	12.67	3.78
Purpose in life	Male	597	10.89	4.41
	Female	363	11.23	3.50

The results of Table 2 show that the only significant gender difference was found in the autonomy subscale ( $t(958) = 2.455, p = .014$ ), with men reporting higher autonomy scores than women. The results of Box's M test ( $p < .001$ ) indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices was not met. However, owing to the documented robustness of MANOVA to such violations when sample sizes are sufficiently large and balanced, the analysis proceeded with Pillai's Trace = 0.083,  $F(9, 2868) = 9.045$ , and revealed a statistically significant multivariate effect. This finding suggests that the groups differ significantly in their overall multivariate profile of psychological well-being dimensions.

**Table 2.** Summary of Independent Samples t-Test Results for Gender Differences in Psychological Well-Being and Its Components

	F	(Levene)	t	df	p (Sig.)
Psychological well-being	0.894	.345	1.086	958	.278
Environmental mastery	5.637	.018	1.825	958	.068
Autonomy	2.016	.156	2.455	958	.014*
Personal growth	0.235	.628	-0.038	958	.969
Positive relations	0.148	.700	-0.199	958	.842
Self-acceptance	6.317	.012	12.50	724	.212
Purpose in life	0.463	.497	-1.181	958	.238
Box's M	3.389				<.001

Based on the table below, the assumption of equal variances was satisfied for Environmental Mastery, Self-Acceptance, and Psychological Well-being.

**Table 3.** Levene's Test for Equality of Variances Across Afghan groups

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Significance Level
Environmental Mastery	1.019	3	956	0.383
Autonomy	13.618	3	956	<0.001
Personal Growth	22.277	3	956	<0.001
Positive Relations	6.059	3	956	<0.001
Self-Acceptance	1.102	3	956	0.347
Purpose in Life	9.415	3	956	<0.001
Psychological Well-being	1.615	3	956	0.184

As shown in Table 4, results indicate significant group differences among Afghan groups in Self-Acceptance  $F=2.911$  and Psychological Wellbeing  $F=2.75$ . These findings suggest that participants' levels of self-acceptance and overall psychological well-being vary meaningfully across the studied groups. Conversely, ethnic group differences did not reach statistical significance for environmental mastery or autonomy. Overall, these results suggest that while certain aspects of psychological functioning, particularly self-acceptance and general well-being, are sensitive to group differences, other aspects, such as environmental mastery and autonomy, appear to be more stable across groups. This pattern highlights the multidimensional nature of psychological well-being, suggesting that different components may be influenced by distinct contextual or individual factors.

**Table 4.** Results of One-Way ANOVA

	SS	df	MS	F value	Significance Level
Environmental Mastery	16.675	3	5.558	0.612	0.607
Self-Acceptance	114.521	3	38.174	2.911	0.034
Psychological Well-being	1212.978	3	404.326	2.752	0.042
Autonomy	55.386	3	18.462	1.336	0.261

As presented in Table 5, the results show significant group differences in Purpose in Life ( $F(3, 530.544)=6.842$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), Self-Acceptance ( $F(3, 530.894)=2.859$ ,  $p=0.036$ ), and Positive Relations ( $F(3, 529.925)=6.896$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). These findings indicate that the mean scores for these three variables differ significantly between the groups, even when adjusting for unequal variances. While the difference in *Self-Acceptance* is statistically significant but relatively smaller in magnitude. Overall, the results underscore that group membership is associated with meaningful variations in two key dimensions, such as Positive relations and Purpose in life.

**Table 5.** Results of Welch's ANOVA for the Study Variables

Variable	Statistic	df1	df2	Significance Level
Purpose in Life	6.842	3	530.544	<0.001
Self-Acceptance	2.859	3	530.894	0.036
Positive Relations	6.896	3	529.925	<0.001

As presented in Table 6, the results indicate significant differences among ethnic groups in several components of psychological well-being. Specifically, statistically significant group differences were found for Personal Growth ( $\eta^2=0.043$ ), Positive Relations ( $\eta^2=0.020$ ), Self-Acceptance ( $\eta^2=0.009$ ), Purpose in Life ( $\eta^2=0.020$ ), and overall Psychological Well-being ( $\eta^2=0.009$ ). In contrast, no significant differences were observed for Environmental Mastery ( $p=0.607$ ) and *Autonomy* ( $p=0.261$ ). The results underscore the critical role of incorporating cultural and ethnic dimensions when investigating psychological well-being.

**Table 6.** Summary of Between-Subjects Effects for Psychological Well-being Components by Ethnicity

	Type III SS	MS	df	F	Sig	Partial $\eta^2$
Environmental Mastery	16.675	5.558	3	0.612	0.607	0.002
Autonomy	55.386	18.462	3	1.336	0.261	0.004
Personal Growth	362.238	120.746	3	14.452	<0.001	0.043
Positive Relations	243.903	81.301	3	6.377	<0.001	0.020
Self-Acceptance	114.521	38.174	3	2.911	0.034	0.009
Purpose in Life	373.636	124.545	3	6.585	<0.001	0.020
Psychological Well-being	1212.978	404.326	3	2.752	0.042	0.009

As shown in Table 7, For Personal Growth, significant differences were observed between Tajiks and Pashtuns ( $p < 0.001$ ), Tajiks and Hazaras ( $p < 0.001$ ), Uzbeks and Pashtuns ( $p=0.047$ ), and Uzbeks and Hazaras ( $p=0.001$ ), with the Pashtun and Hazara groups reporting higher mean scores compared to the Tajik and Uzbek groups. For **Positive Relations**, Tajiks scored significantly lower than Pashtuns ( $p=0.02$ ) and Hazaras. Additionally, Uzbeks scored significantly lower than Hazaras ( $p=0.009$ ), while Pashtuns scored higher both Tajiks and Uzbeks. For Purpose in Life, Tajiks scored significantly lower than Pashtuns ( $p=0.003$ ) and Hazaras ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating notable ethnic group differences in this domain as well.

**Table 7.** Results of Games-Howell post Hoc test for ethnic Group Mean Comparisons among Afghan ethnic groups

	ethnic	ethnic Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Personal Growth	Tajik	Uzbek	0.5458	0.2411	0.108
	Tajik	Pashtun	1.2458*	0.2512	0.000
	Tajik	Hazara	1.5833*	0.2587	0.000
	Uzbek	Pashtun	0.7000*	0.2689	0.047
	Uzbek	Hazara	1.0375*	0.2759	0.001
	Pashtun	Hazara	0.3375	0.2848	0.637
Positive Relations	Tajik	Uzbek	-0.7375	0.3481	0.149
	Tajik	Pashtun	-0.9125*	0.3218	0.025
	Tajik	Hazara	-1.2167*	0.3022	0.000
	Uzbek	Pashtun	-0.1750	0.3300	0.952
	Uzbek	Hazara	1.0417*	0.3300	0.009
	Pashtun	Hazara	1.2167*	0.3022	0.000
Purpose in Life	Tajik	Uzbek	-0.8833	0.3825	0.097
	Tajik	Pashtun	-1.3208*	0.3832	0.003
	Tajik	Hazara	-1.6667*	0.3988	0.000
	Uzbek	Pashtun	-0.4375	0.3952	0.685
	Uzbek	Hazara	-0.7833	0.4103	0.226
	Pashtun	Hazara	-0.3458	0.4110	0.835

As shown in Table 8, results revealed a statistically significant difference in *Self-Acceptance* among the Tajik and Hazara groups ( $p = 0.040$ ), with Hazara participants reporting higher mean scores. A similar significant difference was observed among the Uzbek and Hazara ethnic groups ( $p = 0.040$ ), again favoring Hazara participants. No significant difference was found between the Pashtun and Hazara groups in this domain. For the overall Psychological Well-being variable, no statistically significant differences were detected between any of the ethnic groups (all  $p > 0.05$ ). Although ethnic contrasts in Self-Acceptance emerged most notably with Hazaras outperforming Tajiks and Uzbeks, these pairwise differences fell short of statistical significance.

**Table 8.** Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test for Mean Differences Between Ethnic Groups

Dependent Variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Self-Acceptance	Tajik	Uzbek	0.37083	0.3306	0.676	-0.4799	1.2216
	Tajik	Pashtun	0.75833	0.3306	0.100	-0.0924	1.6091
	Tajik	Hazara	0.87917*	0.3306	0.040	0.0284	1.7299
	Uzbek	Pashtun	-0.75833	0.3306	0.100	-1.6091	0.0924
	Uzbek	Hazara	-0.87917*	0.3306	0.040	-1.7299	-0.0284
	Pashtun	Hazara	-0.12083	0.3306	0.983	-0.9716	0.7299
Psychological Well-being	Tajik	Uzbek	-0.33750	1.1065	0.990	-3.1851	2.5101
	Tajik	Pashtun	2.07083	1.1065	0.241	-0.7767	4.9184

**Table 8.** Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test for Mean Differences Between Ethnic Groups

Dependent Variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
	Tajik	Hazara	2.06250	1.1065	0.244	-0.7851	4.9101
	Uzbek	Pashtun	-2.07083	1.1065	0.241	-4.9184	0.7767
	Uzbek	Hazara	-2.06250	1.1065	0.244	-4.9101	0.7851
	Pashtun	Hazara	-0.00833	1.1065	1.000	-2.8392	2.8559

## Discussion

The present investigation indicates that ethnicity significantly modulates select facets of psychological well-being, namely Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Self-Acceptance, and Purpose in Life. Notably, Pashtun and Hazara respondents consistently exhibited more favorable profiles in developmental and existential domains relative to their Tajik and Uzbek counterparts, underscoring the role of sociocultural heritage in shaping adaptive psychological functioning. These results are consistent with cross-cultural research emphasizing the role of culture in shaping psychological well-being (Moradhaseli et al., 2024). As these scholars have argued, culture and ethnicity can significantly influence how individuals perceive and experience well-being.

One explanation for these findings may lie in cultural values, social structures, and lived experiences among Afghanistan's ethnic groups. For instance, Pashtuns, due to their collectivist culture and elevated social status, may place greater emphasis on personal growth and life purpose. In the Hazara community, a strong cultural emphasis on education and historical experiences of marginalization, combined with motivation to progress, appears to foster greater personal growth and a sense of purpose compared to Tajiks and Uzbeks. This pattern aligns with the principles of positive psychology, which suggest that internal motivation and external challenges can drive personal development (Ryff, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Interestingly, the absence of significant ethnic differences in *environmental mastery* and *autonomy* suggests that these dimensions may be less affected by ethnicity and more influenced by other factors, such as socioeconomic status or individual experiences, including gender roles. Afghanistan's collectivist cultural context, characterized by strong family values and mutual support, may also explain the generally low emphasis on independence across groups. Individual decision-making is often shaped by collective expectations, which may limit the development of autonomy. Gender differences were also observed: men scored significantly higher than women in *autonomy*. The outcome is in agreement with earlier studies, including Sun et al (2016) and Mayordomo et al. (2016), which similarly found higher autonomy among male adolescents. Such differences likely reflect traditional gender roles in Afghan society, where men because of social and familial structures, men enjoy greater opportunities for independent decision-making (Karim,2025). The observed differences can also be interpreted through personality and cultural theory. For example, Ryff (2014) emphasized the link between personality traits such as openness to experience and dimensions like personal growth and positive relations. Among Pashtuns, cultural codes such as *Pashtunwali* emphasize values like honor, loyalty, and collective responsibility, which may encourage personal development

to maintain social status. Traditional structures like *Jirga* also provide opportunities for individuals to develop interpersonal and leadership skills (Pamir et al., 2023). In the Hazara community, historical adversity, educational aspirations, and egalitarian tendencies may enhance resilience, promoting growth and purpose in life. *Positive relations*, reflecting warm, trusting, and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Ryff, 1989), also appeared stronger in Pashtun and Hazara groups, possibly due to strong family and social ties. In Pashtun tribes, values of loyalty and mutual support create a foundation for positive relationships even if structured within hierarchical frameworks (Karim, 2025). Thus, cultural values such as tribal commitment among Pashtuns and familial resilience among Hazaras, along with religious beliefs, may play a key role in enhancing personal growth and positive relations.

These factors are recognized as influential determinants of psychological well-being. Although they were not directly assessed in the current study, future research should take them into account as potential moderating variables. Socioeconomic disparities may partly underlie the observed ethnic differences, a point highlighted by Abbas et al. (2024), who underscored the significant association between socioeconomic status and psychological well-being.

As a concluding remark, it should be noted that the results indicate that ethnicity and gender play a role in influencing particular aspects of psychological well-being. However, it is essential to also consider other contextual factors such as economic resources, educational attainment, and family dynamics. These results enhance the existing literature in positive and cross-cultural psychology by providing meaningful insights into how cultural and demographic variables shape psychological well-being within Afghan society.

## Conclusion

This research underscores the vital influence of ethnicity and gender on psychological well-being among Afghan individuals. Specifically, members of the Pashtun and Hazara ethnic groups reported higher scores in areas related to personal growth and purpose in life, which may reflect the combined effects of their cultural heritage, societal organization, and historical context. While Pashtuns' stronger performance in personal growth and purpose in life may stem from a more collectivist cultural framework and historically established social status, the Hazara community's outcomes appear to be driven by a distinct culture of perseverance and educational attainment. This is likely further motivated by a historical context of marginalization and a consequent collective drive for socio-economic improvement, resulting in their comparatively higher scores relative to Tajik and Uzbek participants.

In contrast, ethnic disparities were not significant in the domains of environmental mastery and autonomy, suggesting these aspects are potentially more dependent on socioeconomic status or shared cultural frameworks such as collectivism. Gender differences were apparent in autonomy, with men exhibiting greater levels than women, aligning with traditional gender expectations and differences in authority and decision-making roles. These findings emphasize the importance of incorporating both cultural and demographic factors when studying psychological well-being in collectivist cultures. Future investigations would benefit from considering additional variables like age and socioeconomic background to further clarify these associations. Overall, this study

contributes valuable insights to the literature on cross-cultural and positive psychology, demonstrating how cultural contexts shape psychological well-being in diverse populations.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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