

## **Chapter 10**

### **How to live the good life**

#### **Asian and Western paths to happiness**

#### **Happiness is not the *summum bonum***

Although people every where in the world strive to be happy and live the good life, happiness is not the *summum bonum* or chief good in life for certain groups of people.

For example, East Asians like the Chinese or Japanese place a lower value on happiness compared to Westerners like Americans or Australians. In Western societies, pleasant emotions are highly desirable and unpleasant emotions are highly undesirable, whereas in East Asian societies these two types of emotions are almost equally desirable.

Substantiating this idea that happiness is not the *summum bonum* is research indicating that subjective well-being is experienced by members of different cultural communities in contrasting ways.

For example, Asian American students were satisfied with days when they did what their parents would like, whereas European Americans were satisfied with days when they had fun and pleasant emotions.

Asian Americans also worked hard at a task they were not good at in order to master it, even though it may cause them to experience a negative mood. By contrast, European Americans prefer to move to a task where they might perform better in order to change their mood from a negative to a positive one.

Why are Americans so enamoured of happiness to the extent of writing it into their Constitution: "Every American has the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"? Why do the Chinese adopt a cautious attitude towards happiness so that they start to worry when they become *too* happy?

In this chapter, I will look at the issue of how and why people living in different cultures value happiness in different ways and to

different degrees. The core ideas in this chapter can be traced to a paper entitled *In Search of the Good Life: A Cultural Odyssey in the East and West*. In it, I present my cultural perspective on happiness which was developed with the help of esteemed colleagues.

### **Cultural specificity of the good life**

Ng and colleagues began their thesis on the good life with a critical examination of the research on well-being conducted in the West. Specifically, the theories and measures used by these researchers – hedonic and eudaimonic – have been substantively shaped by Western individualistic moral visions of the good or ideal person.

*Individualism* regards the person as having priority over society, which is regarded simply as a collection of individuals. Individuals in society possess their own objectives, needs, desires, interests and rights. They act on these inner attributes in an autonomous manner, pursuing a rational course of action to achieve their self-chosen goals. As Geertz famously observes:

The Western conception of the person is a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background.

In accordance with this notion of the person, the hedonic researchers assess well-being in an individualistic manner (e.g., subjective well-being) and the eudaimonic researchers emphasize the role of autonomy in well-being (e.g., self-determination theory).

As these researchers may simply be drawing on their common sense understanding of well-being provided by their own culture, their findings may not be generalizable to other cultures, since common sense is itself a cultural system. Supporting this line of reasoning is research indicating that an individualistic view of self is not necessarily applicable to other cultures.

For instance, among Japanese, one is less than fully human when one is stripped away from one's social connections. This notion is encapsulated in *jibun*, the Japanese word for self. *Jibun* literally means "self-part", or a part of the larger whole that consists of social groups and relationships.

It implies that the self is not an essentiality apart from the social realm. The Japanese individual is a "fraction", and only becomes complete when fitting into or occupying his or her proper place in a social unit.

This cultural difference in conception of self explains why the meaning of conformity differs in the East and West. Specifically, conformity is regarded as a sign of moral weakness in the individualistic West. By contrast, it is a sign of maturity and strength in the collectivistic East.

Azuma observes that a Japanese person can be diverted from a belief or principle, but such diversion is accepted favourably by others because it shows that he or she has warm empathy. Speaking for his fellow Americans, Gergen remarks that "if our values were otherwise, social conformity would be viewed as pro-solidarity behaviour".

In providing this cultural critique of the existing theory and research on well-being, Ng and colleagues are not suggesting that the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches are wrong or lack merit. Instead, they stress the cultural specificity of the good life. That is, any understanding of well-being necessarily relies upon moral visions that are culturally embedded and frequently culture-specific.

Failure to acknowledge this point may not only run the risk of casting non-Western people as inherently less psychologically healthy. It may also prevent an appreciation of the indigenous virtues that other people cultivate and promote, and from which something valuable and useful might be learnt e.g., conformity is a moral strength or a pro-solidarity behaviour.

### **The cultural complex of well-being**

To reiterate, the very nature of what it means to be well or to

experience well-being takes culture-specific forms. Just as people cannot live in a general way, but must of necessity live in some set of culture-specific ways, a person cannot just “be well” in a general way.

Instead, well-being is very much a collaborative project which requires the person to participate in a cultural complex of meanings and practices. It defines the most natural and ordinary ways of acting in a variety of mundane everyday situations, such as saying hello and goodbye, having conversations, exchanging gossip, eating lunch and dinner, and playing sports.

By attuning one’s self to this cultural complex of meanings and practices, one experiences an enhanced sense of well-being as one is able to affirm one’s self as a meaningful and respectable entity in the cultural community to which one belongs.

Take the case of well-being in the West. To be happy in this cultural world, you must be extroverted, optimistic and feel good about yourself. These traits – optimism, extroversion and self-esteem – may be highly individualistic in nature, yet they require a cultural complex of meanings and practices that is organized in the form of the North American social world.

This cultural complex is often not evident because in the North American social world, social relations are patterned in such a way that the reality of the bounded, “non-social” self is brought to the fore of individual conscious experience, whereas the reality of the social relations that give rise to this self is obscured. To put it succinctly, in the North American social world, the individualistic self is socially constructed to believe that it is *not* socially constructed.

The researcher who accepts the cultural specificity of the good life faces a formidable task. He must make explicit and visible what is frequently implicit, hidden and taken-for-granted. He must also use this knowledge to inform his analysis of the good life.

Doing so will throw into sharp relief the culture-specific grounding of the natural and ordinary, and demonstrate that what counts as “well-being” depends on the definition and practice of concepts of “well” and “being” in different cultural communities.

As Kitayama and Markus observe, it is not just that different things make people happy in different cultural contexts – this is obviously the case. More significantly, it is the ways of being well and the experience of well-being that are different.

One way to tackle this challenge is to draw a comparison between two divergent, broadly defined cultural groups. Such a fruitful comparison can be made between the European-American and East Asian cultural groups, for two reasons.

First, there is an expanding literature on psychological differences between European-American and East Asian populations that can be taken advantage of when making this comparison. Second, the indigenous psychology of selfhood that guides the individual on how to live as a person in society differs widely in these two cultural groups.

### **Independent conception of selfhood in the West**

In the European-American cultural context, the person is believed to consist of a set of “internal” or “personal” attributes such as abilities, talents, personality traits, preferences, subjective feeling states, beliefs and attitudes. These attributes are thought to be internal and personal in the sense that they come from within and characterize the person regardless of the situation.

This independent conception of the person is unevenly distributed within society. Thus, cultural scripts of independence may be most available among middle-class, well-educated and well-paid white males in Europe and America. But they are regularly embodied in the major prevailing practices, institutions and public symbols of this cultural community.

For example, the socialization style is almost synonymous with individualizing and decontextualizing the self, and the socialization process is one of progressively “personalizing” the child as a unique agent. In European-American middle class families, infants are given their own beds, sometimes their own rooms, in order to encourage and foster autonomy.

Another important feature of an individualistic approach to personhood is the stress on the right and necessity to make one's own choices in life. Individualistic members perceive themselves as making these choices on a purposive, utilitarian basis according to personal preferences. These choices serve to articulate and to reify the self as a distinct individual.

Indeed, the central themes in many American commercials and advertisements revolve around the availability of a wide variety of sizes, styles, flavours and colours that permit and require people to pick their favourite. Large, medium or small? Cash, debit card or charge? Paper or plastic bag?

Likewise, American hosts commonly tell their guests to "help yourself". With this suggestion, the host invites the guest to affirm the self by expressing some of the preferences that are thought to constitute the "real self".

Growing up and living within these European-American meanings, practices, institutions, symbols and ideas, most people tend to become independent and autonomous selves with clearly articulated attributes, preferences and choices, unaware of the cultural framings of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

### **Interdependent conception of selfhood in the East**

A very different conception of the person prevails in the East Asian cultural context. This model promotes a view of the individual as inherently and fundamentally connected to others. It stresses empathy, reciprocity, belongingness, kinship, hierarchy, loyalty, respect, politeness and social obligations.

The focus of life is the self-in-relation-to-others, so that people experience themselves as mutually interdependent. One is expected to adjust one's self to meet the expectations of significant others and to work for the good of the dyad, the group, the organization or the nation. Human fulfillment comes from harmonious participation in honourable social relations.

From this alternative perspective, an independent,

autonomous, assertive and self-centred person is immature and uncultivated. The emphasis is on sensitive perception of the other's perspective and on flexible adaptation to the social requirement of each particular situation.

Relationships and social obligations take precedence because they are regarded as more natural and valuable than the rights, needs and wishes of individuals. The "demands" of others are often experienced as a welcome engagement that invites participation rather than as an unwanted invasion of privacy.

This interdependent conception of the person is unevenly distributed within society, and the cultural scripts of interdependence may be most available among older generations of East Asians who do not watch MTV or listen to BBC or CNN. Still, they are richly represented in many aspects of this cultural community.

For instance, child-rearing philosophy and practices aim to transform an asocial baby into a social being who is attuned to the psychological presence of others. Japanese mothers who tell stories to children focus on what the protagonists were feeling, asking the child "what does the boy feel" or "what is he saying"?

Although people are psychologically attuned to significant others, this intersubjectivity is not necessarily based on a direct or explicit articulation of what is inside the mind. Instead, indirect communication is *de rigueur* e.g., Asian hosts typically anticipate the needs of their guests in advance, instead of asking them to "help yourself".

Therefore, when an Asian visits the West, he may experience culture shock. A Japanese author shared this strange feeling of being in a new culture. He was attending his first cocktail party, and found it odd that his American host kept asking him to make a myriad of choices about his food and drink, instead of empathically discerning his needs, as hosts in Japan would do.

To summarize, in the European-American cultural context, a *transmitter* orientation is fostered, and people are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings confidently and assertively. By

contrast, in the East Asian cultural context, a *receiver* orientation is cultivated, in which listening and interpreting skills are called into play, and not-saying and silence is valued.

### **Self-enhancement and self-criticism in the East and West**

Given the different conceptions of selfhood in the East and West, one would expect to find many differences between members of these two cultural communities – in the way they think, feel and act as a person in society. One area involves the tendency of the person to enhance the self (see Chapter 6 on positive illusions of self).

A large number of studies reveal a pervasive and robust tendency to engage in self-enhancement in the West. For example, European-Americans typically explain their success in terms of internal and stable attributes such as ability or talent, while discounting their failure by attributing it to some external causes (e.g., blaming others) or internal but unstable factors (e.g., lack of effort).

European-Americans also tend to display the *optimism bias*, whereby the individual overestimates the likelihood that desirable and fortunate events will occur to him, while at the same time underestimating the likelihood of occurrence of comparable undesirable events.

In one study university respondents in Canada estimated the chance of positive events occurring to themselves to be significantly greater than the chance of these events occurring to the average undergraduate. Conversely, these respondents estimated the chance of negative events occurring to themselves to be significantly lower than the chance of these events occurring to the average undergraduate.

By contrast, East Asians engage in little self-enhancement and may even be quite critical of themselves. One group of researchers found that Chinese students explained their success in terms of effort and their failure in terms of lack of effort i.e., they blamed themselves for not studying hard enough.

In the above-mentioned study on the occurrence of desirable versus undesirable events, the optimism bias that was evident among the Canadian respondents was significantly attenuated in a comparative sample of Japanese respondents; in some cases it even reversed to show a significant pessimistic bias.

The findings from these Japanese respondents cannot be attributed to impression management, because even when responses are recorded in a manner that maintains the anonymity of these respondents, self-enhancement is still absent or reversed.

Why are European-Americans inclined towards self-enhancement while East Asians are inclined towards self-criticism? Some researchers have traced this cultural difference to the conception of self in the East and West.

Specifically, the cultural imperative in an individualistic society is to be a unique person who is different from the rest of the crowd, as captured in this American saying: *the squeaky wheel gets the grease*.

Consequently, European-American parents strive to identify positively-valued internal attributes in their offspring that contribute to this unique self. In turn, the child may develop a habitual attention bias toward positive self-relevant information i.e., they engage in self-enhancement.

By contrast, the cultural imperative in a collectivistic society is to fit in and adjust oneself to the social group, as captured in this Japanese saying: *the nail that stands out gets hammered in*.

Consequently, East Asian parents strive to identify negatively-valued internal attributes in their offspring that have to be corrected to meet the expectations or norms in society. In turn, the child may develop a habitual attention bias toward negative self-relevant information i.e., they engage in self-criticism.

The above reasoning may explain why the nature of self-esteem – feeling good about one’s self – varies in the East and West. Specifically, the Western form of self-esteem is based primarily on

the affirmation that *positive* features are *present* in one's self. By contrast, the Eastern form of self-esteem is based primarily on the affirmation that *negative* features are *absent* from one's self.

Hence, whereas American ideals are often centred around distinguishing oneself and standing out from the rest of the crowd, Japanese ideals are often framed in terms of *hitonami* (average as a person). From the Japanese perspective, it is much more important not to fall behind the average than to go beyond the average.

### **Different ways of experiencing emotions in the East and West**

Besides differing in the tendency to enhance or criticize the self, individualistic members in the West and collectivistic members in the East also differ in the way they experience emotions. A group of researchers have provided empirical evidence to substantiate this view.

These researchers asked both American and Japanese college students to report the frequency with which they experience five types of emotions. First is a set of positive emotions that typically result from an affirmation of the self as independent, efficacious and competent, like pride and feelings of superiority.

Second are those that typically result from an affirmation of the self as interdependent, connected to others and relational, like close feelings, friendly feelings and feelings of respect.

Third are those that typically result from a threat to the self's independence and competence, such as anger and disgust, which motivates the person to resist the threat.

Fourth are those that typically result from a threat on the self's interdependence and relationality, such as shame and guilt, which motivates the person to restore it.

The final set of emotions is also positive but relatively general, such as elation, calmness and happiness. These emotions are not contingent on any specific type of antecedent and they provide the best proxy for subjective well-being.

The researchers theorized that collectivistic members who successfully practiced the cultural task of interdependence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally-engaged positive emotions (e.g., friendly feeling), would be most likely to experience the general positive emotions (e.g., elated, calm).

But collectivistic members who successfully practiced the alternative task of independence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally-disengaged positive emotions (e.g., pride), would not necessarily experience them.

By contrast, individualistic members who successfully practiced the cultural task of independence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally-disengaged positive emotions (e.g., pride), would be most likely to experience the general positive emotions (e.g., elated, calm).

But individualistic members who successfully practiced the alternative task of interdependence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally-engaged positive emotions (e.g., friendly feeling), would not necessarily experience them.

The results were consistent with this reasoning. For the Japanese respondents, there was a higher degree of association between the interpersonally-engaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions than between the interpersonally-disengaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions.

By contrast, for the American respondents, there was a higher degree of association between the interpersonally-disengaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions than between the interpersonally-engaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions.

Another cross-cultural difference in emotional experience concerns the reported frequencies of experiencing different types of emotions. In the case of the American respondents, the reported frequency of emotional experience was much higher for positive emotions than for negative emotions. In the case of the Japanese respondents, the reported frequency was much higher for engaged

emotions than for disengaged emotions.

The researchers explained that with a cultural imperative of the self as independent, social motivations tend to be anchored around the culturally-sanctioned concern for discovering and confirming desirable internal attributes of the self. Both disengaging (e.g., pride) and engaging (e.g., friendly feeling) positive emotions enable the individual to affirm the independence of self.

By contrast, with a cultural imperative of the self as interdependent, social motivations tend to be anchored around the culturally-sanctioned concern for fitting in and adjusting oneself to the interpersonal context. Both positive (e.g., friendly feeling) and negative (e.g., guilt) engaging emotions enable the individual to affirm the interdependence of self.

Hence, the American respondents have a strong tendency to enhance and augment the experience of positive emotions, regardless of whether these emotions are interpersonally disengaged or engaged. On the other hand, the Japanese respondents have a strong tendency to enhance and augment the experience of engaging emotions, regardless of whether these emotions are positive or negative. Indeed, this is the case.

### **Are good feelings always good? Are bad feelings always bad?**

A final cross-cultural difference concerns the pattern of correlations between positive and negative emotions. In the case of the American respondents, the overall pattern is largely negative, whereas in the case of the Japanese respondents, it is largely positive.

Although correlational results are inherently difficult to interpret as they do not imply causation, the researchers argued that this finding is culturally meaningful.

Specifically, in the West an important conception of happiness is hedonism. Epicurus, an ancient Greek thinker, taught that pleasure is good and pain is bad. John Stuart Mill, a modern English philosopher, argued that one must always act so as to produce “the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people”.

Because of this prevailing view of happiness in the West – an unmitigated good which is to be desired without any reservation – individualistic members are motivated to maximize positive feelings and minimize negative ones.

By contrast, one of the profoundest insights in Eastern philosophy is the duality of nature. That is, all things in nature exist in duality: they complement and give rise to each other. Hence goodness cannot exist without evil just as pleasure cannot exist without pain.

A related point is the ubiquitous pattern of change: all things in nature are cyclical and they reverse to their opposite. For example, day fades into night and winter gives way to spring. To know these natural principles of duality and change is the key to adapting effectively to the vicissitudes of life.

Hence Confucian scholars in pre-modern China exhort people to “choose the lighter happiness” as well as to exercise a “habit of hesitation” towards happiness. One ought to become “so happy that I am afraid”, since happiness and unhappiness stem from a common root and unhappiness arrives on the heel of happiness.

Being modern people, we are ignorant and unappreciative of these ancient principles of life. As a result, we face a lot of problems in living. In particular, our unhappiness stems from our one-sided view of goodness and badness e.g., we see good feelings as being always good and bad feelings as being always bad. If we can change our “one-track” mindset to a “dual-track” one, then our problems in life will disappear.

This requires us to avoid feeling too happy when times are good and to avoid feeling too sad when times are bad. As the Taoist philosopher Laozi remarked: “Fortune owes its existence to misfortune, and misfortune is hidden in fortune”.

In summary, the hedonic conception of happiness in the West suggests that to attain well-being, the individual should increase pleasure and decrease pain. By contrast, the ancient view of happiness in the East suggests that one should not seek to maximize the positive feelings and minimize the negative ones.

Instead, one should detach oneself from the seemingly natural desire for good feelings and an aversion against bad feelings by keeping a good balance between them. Doing so will enable one to be calm, undisturbed and emotionally healthy.

Going back to the findings of the researchers, to the extent that European-Americans seek to cultivate good feelings and disavow bad feelings, we would expect to obtain a *negative* pattern of correlations between the positive and negative emotions, like the one observed for the American respondents.

In a similar vein, to the extent that East Asians strive for balance rather than differentiation in their emotional lives, we would expect to obtain a *positive* pattern of correlations between the positive and negative emotions, like the one observed for the Japanese respondents.

### **“Having” and “sharing” emotions in the East and West**

The preceding analysis of emotional experience in the East and West support the *social constructionist* perspective on emotion.

Unlike biologically-based theories of emotion, this perspective suggests that the cultural complex of meanings and practices has an important role to play in shaping the emotional experience of the individual.

Specifically, in an individualistic culture, much of emotional life is focused on the individual, in keeping with the independent conception of the person. Because one sees oneself as a being with interiority and depth, one regards one’s emotions as one’s own property, a private experience which one undergoes.

Put more succinctly, in the West people *have* emotions which are located *in* the individual.

On the other hand, in a collectivistic culture, much of emotional life is focused on significant others like family members and close friends, in keeping with the interdependent conception of the person.

For example, personal happiness has not traditionally been considered as the highest good for the Chinese. Instead, one's worth as a human being is based on the extent to which one is a dutiful son or daughter and fulfills family obligations.

As Diener and Diener observe, how a collectivist feels about herself is less relevant to her life satisfaction than is her view of whether she behaves properly in the organized social order.

Consequently, in the East emotions are more communal and intersubjective in nature, and people are more likely to use external cues such as the social setting to interpret their emotional experience.

Instead of "having" emotions in private, people "share" them with significant others. Put more succinctly, in the East, people *share* emotions which are located *between* individuals.

In accordance with this line of thinking, researchers have found that Western emotion terms can be mapped along a two-dimensional scaling solution. The first dimension pits pleasant-good against unpleasant-bad, whereas the second dimension pits active-high energy against inactive-low energy.

By contrast, collectivist cultures like Japan exhibit a third dimension not found in individualistic cultures like America. This dimension pits self-centred or ego emotions against other-centred or social emotions.

Examples of these social emotions in Japan include *amae* or the hopeful anticipation of another's indulgence; as well as *ittaikan* or the feeling of oneness that arises when a person is in a closely-knit group.

The identification of social emotions in non-Western cultures does not necessarily mean that Europeans or Americans do not experience these emotions. However, it indicates that for individualistic members, such emotions are largely undifferentiated.

This lack of differentiation implies that they may not be

as important to European-Americans, since they have not been accorded enough value within this cultural community to be given a linguistic label.

The general neglect of these social emotions is consistent with the individualistic moral vision, in which the interpersonal dimensions of reality and of the self are downplayed in favour of the view of the self as an independent and autonomous entity.

### **Agency, communion and well-being**

So far, I have looked at how individualistic and collectivistic members differ in their conception of happiness. In the rest of this chapter, I am going to develop a cultural perspective on the good life that is equally applicable in the East and West. I begin with the observation that there are two fundamental modes of existence in this world, namely, agency and communion.

*Agency* is an autonomous mode of being whose focus is the self or individual; it is manifested in agentive behaviours like self-protection, self-assertion, self-expansion, self-control and self-direction. Agency is the dominant mode of being in the West as the person is encouraged to maintain autonomy from the social group

By contrast, *communion* is a relational mode of being whose focus is the other or society; it is manifested in communal behaviours like group participation, group cooperation, group attachment and group union. Communion is the dominant mode of being in the East as the person is encouraged to maintain connectedness with the social group.

To enjoy well-being, there should be a healthy balance between agency (self) and communion (others). By contrast, too much emphasis on one mode of existence vis-a-vis the other mode will result in psychological dysfunction. There are two ways in which this unhealthy imbalance between agency (self) and communion (others) can occur, namely, unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion.

*Unmitigated agency* reflects a focus on self to the exclusion of

others. It is a narrow aspect of agency which by definition excludes communion. The person who scores high on unmitigated agency is characterized by an excessive focus on self and by a negative view of others; such a person is arrogant, egoistic, cynical and hostile.

Unmitigated agency is distinct from agency and communion. That is, unmitigated agency cannot be reduced to some combination of the two. Conceptually, a person who scores high on agency and low on communion can be independent and self-confident but not helpful or emotional. This is not the same as someone who is cynical, hostile and greedy.

*Unmitigated communion* is a focus on others to the exclusion of self. It is a narrow aspect of communion which by definition excludes agency. The person who scores high on unmitigated communion is characterized by a preoccupation with others that leads to self-neglect. In other words, there are two aspects of unmitigated communion, namely, an over-involvement with others as well as a neglect of self.

Unmitigated communion cannot be captured by high communion and low agency or some combination of the two. Conceptually, a high communion and low agency person would be kind and aware of others' feelings but passive and not competitive. This is not the same as someone who becomes overly involved with others to the exclusion of self.

### **Unmitigated agency, unmitigated communion and ill-being**

Helgeson and colleagues conducted a series of studies to substantiate the claim that agency and communion contributes to well-being, whereas unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion contributes to ill-being.

In the first of these studies, they examined the correlations among the four constructs across a series of diverse samples to determine the extent to which these measures are empirically distinct.

Their participants include college students, patients suffering from heart disease, as well as children of women who had been

diagnosed with breast cancer. Based on past research, Helgeson and colleagues made the following predictions.

First, agency and communion would be uncorrelated. Second, unmitigated agency and agency would reveal a small positive relation because they both reflect a focus on self. Third, unmitigated agency would be negatively correlated with communion because it reflects a focus on self to the exclusion of others.

Fourth, unmitigated communion and communion would be positively correlated because both reflect a focus on others. Fifth, unmitigated communion would be negatively correlated with agency because it reflects a focus on others to the exclusion of self. Finally, unmitigated communion and unmitigated agency would be either uncorrelated or negatively correlated.

Helgeson and colleagues found support for these predictions. Specifically, agency and communion were unrelated, unmitigated agency and agency were positively related, unmitigated agency and communion were negatively related, unmitigated communion and communion were positively related, and unmitigated communion and agency were negatively related.

There was also a trend for unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion to be negatively related. These relations held across the different types of respondents in the research.

In the second study, Helgeson and colleagues aimed to show that unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion are not reducible to some combination of agency and communion. To accomplish this, they evaluated a set of variables related to well-being for which they could make differential predictions with regards to agency, communion, unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion.

They included measures on self-esteem, social relations (perceived availability of support, support provision and negative social interactions), psychological distress (anxiety, depression and hostility), an index of well-being as well as an index of health behaviour.

Helgeson and colleagues found that agency is associated with high self-esteem and reduced psychological distress, whereas unmitigated agency is associated with negative interactions with other people, low self-esteem, hostility and poor health behavior. Thus, agency appears to represent a healthy focus on self, while unmitigated agency appears to represent an unhealthy focus on self.

Helgeson and colleagues also found that communion is related to providing support as well as perceiving support to be available, but is largely unrelated to self-esteem or indicators of psychological well-being.

By contrast, unmitigated communion is associated with providing support to others, but not with perceiving it to be available. It is also associated with negative interactions with others, as well as with indicators of psychological distress and poor health behaviour. Thus, communion appears to represent a healthy focus on others, while unmitigated communion appears to represent an unhealthy focus on others.

Helgeson and colleagues concluded that it is important to distinguish agency and communion from unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion. Whereas the first two constructs are associated with well-being and psychological health, the latter two constructs are associated with ill-being and psychological distress.

**Difficulties arising from an excessive focus on self or other**

Besides experiencing less subjective well-being, unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion individuals are also more likely to suffer from poor physical health, such as coronary heart disease, breast cancer, prostate cancer and diabetes.

Such individuals are more likely to succumb to these bodily diseases because they do not have a supportive network which they can turn to in times of stress. Even if there is a supportive network available, they may not utilize it.

The reasons for the lack of social support, as well as the reluctance to seek help from others even if it is available, differ

for the unmitigated agency individual and unmitigated communion individual.

In the case of the unmitigated agency individual, he is more likely to attend to his own needs than to the needs of others. Thus, when the unmitigated agency individual needs support, others may recall his lack of attention to relationships in the past and so be unwilling to help.

Even if others are available to support the unmitigated agency individual, he may be unwilling to accept this support, because his extreme self-reliance and overconfidence in himself leads him to believe that he doesn't need other people's help.

Confirming this line of thinking, Helgeson and colleagues found that unmitigated agency individuals are likely to perceive asking for help as an admission of weakness or a sign of incompetence. Unmitigated agency individuals' negative view of others is also likely to lead them to perceive others as incapable of helping.

The relation of unmitigated communion to lack of social support and the reluctance to seek help is more complicated. This is because the focus of the unmitigated communion individual is exclusively on others. Hence one might expect her to have good relationships with others.

Still, Helgeson and colleagues have offered several reasons to explain why the unmitigated communion individual faces difficulties in her relationship with others.

First, her excessive attention to others may be perceived by them as being overprotective and intrusive. To that extent, relationship difficulties and conflicts with others could result.

Second, the unmitigated communion individual's overzealous concern for others may extend to the point that she doesn't want to burden others with her own problems.

Alternatively, she may perceive any attempt by others to reciprocate her help as inadequate. Other people simply cannot meet the unmitigated communion individual's high expectations for

support.

Third, the unmitigated communion individual may not turn to others for support because she perceives that others are really not available to help her. This feeling of others' unavailability or lack of desire to help her could be a consequence of the low self-regard of the unmitigated communion individual.

Finally, the unmitigated communion individual may purposely seek a one-sided relationship with others. This will enable her to perceive herself as being important and even indispensable in the relationship. Seeking or accepting help would restore "balance" to the unmitigated communion individual's relationship with other people, making her feel less important to them.

To conclude, the above analyses have shown that agency and communion are pre-requisites for well-being. That is, when both are present in the individual, he or she will experience well-being.

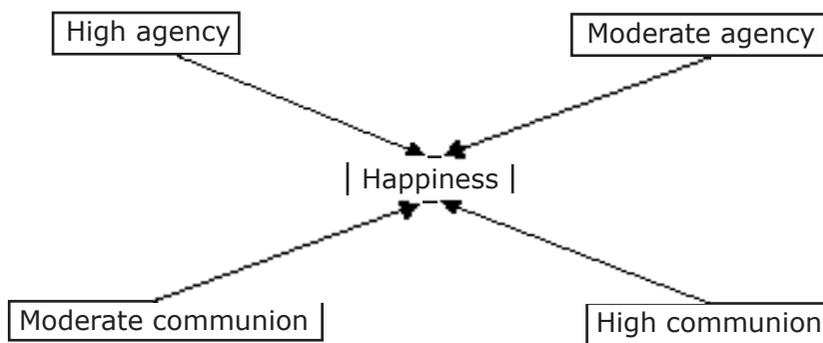
On the other hand, if there is an excessive focus on self at the expense of others (unmitigated agency) or on others at the expense of self (unmitigated communion), the individual will experience ill-being instead.

### **Asian and Western paths to well-being**

Figure 10.1 A cultural model of well-being

*Direct pursuit of happiness  
in the West*

*Indirect pursuit of happiness  
in the East*



Ng and colleagues developed a cultural model of well-being shown in Figure 10.1. It suggests that people in different cultures require different combinations of agency and communion to experience well-being. Specifically, in individualistic cultures where people possess an independent conception of selfhood and enhance themselves to realize the cultural mandate of being a unique person, the individual experiences well-being via a combination of high agency and moderate communion.

By contrast, in collectivistic cultures where people possess an interdependent conception of selfhood and criticize themselves to realize the cultural mandate of fitting into the social group, the individual experiences well-being via a combination of high communion and moderate agency.

Put in a succinct way, individualistic members in the West engage in a *direct* pursuit of happiness by focusing on themselves more than on others. By contrast, collectivistic members in the East engage in an *indirect* pursuit of happiness by focusing on others

more than on themselves. This theoretical model of well-being is supported by a number of cross-cultural studies.

One group of researchers examined the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction in 31 nations. They found a positive correlation between these two variables in all the countries that they studied, but the size of this correlation differed in a culturally meaningful way.

Specifically, self-esteem and life satisfaction correlated more highly in individualistic cultures (e.g., America) compared to collectivistic ones (e.g., China). In other words, the association between agency and well-being is stronger in individualistic cultures than collectivistic ones.

A second group of researchers investigated the relative importance of subjective emotions (agency) versus normative beliefs (communion) for life satisfaction judgments amongst individualist and collectivist nations.

At the country level of analysis, subjective emotions and life satisfaction correlated more highly in individualistic nations than in collectivistic ones.

At the individual level of analysis, subjective emotions were better than cultural norms in predicting life satisfaction in individualistic societies compared to collectivistic ones. In contrast, subjective emotions and cultural norms were equally good at predicting life satisfaction in collectivistic societies.

That is, in individualistic cultures, well-being is attained by doing what a person would like to do (agency). By contrast, in collectivistic cultures, it is also attained by doing what a person thinks he or she ought to do (communion).

Finally, a third group of researchers discovered that the association between communion and well-being is stronger in collectivistic cultures than individualistic ones.

Specifically, they found that relationship harmony was a more

significant predictor of life satisfaction for respondents in Hong Kong than for respondents in America.

### **Affirming agency at the expense of communion in the West**

Well-being can be achieved via a combination of high agency and moderate communion in an individualistic culture and moderate agency and high communion in a collectivistic culture. But many members in these two societies do not experience a sense of well-being. Unhappy and dissatisfied people exist in both the East and West.

Ng and colleagues suggest that in the European-American cultural context, the individual is unhappy because he has the tendency to *affirm agency at the expense of communion*. That is, the individualistic member encounters problems in living because of an extreme focus on self at the expense of other people. This imbalance is a result of the individualistic ethos in this culture.

Take the case of the average American who grows up with this individualistic vision of life: "I am free to do what I want"; "I can achieve my goals if I try hard enough"; "I should believe in myself instead of listening to other people".

These culturally-constructed beliefs are known colloquially as the American Dream, which inspires members of this society to work hard and realize their chosen goals in life.

However, there is a fatal flaw in the American Dream. Specifically, not every one will succeed in attaining his chosen goals in life, for reasons that have nothing to do with his own effort. For example, in the Olympics every runner desires to be the first to cross the finishing line. But only one runner can win the race.

When the average American experiences the pain of failure, the culture of individualism provides him with a socially acceptable style of explanation which focuses on the individual e.g., "I did not try hard enough. I must put in more effort".

Although this way of making sense of the unsuccessful outcome enables him to remain in control of the negative situation, continued

exposure to failure eventually results in learned helplessness and depression.

This disjunction between dream and reality has led Schwartz to argue that the Western aspiration to self-determination is a mistake, both as an actual description of how people live as well as a normative ideal in life.

In support of this argument, Schwartz observed that people in Western society equate happiness with freedom. That is, to be happy is to be free to do as one wish.

If this *cultural myth of happiness* is true, then Westerners should be one of the happiest people on earth. This is because they can live exactly the kind of life they want, unconstrained by material, economic and cultural limitations, in comparison with people in other societies.

However, the number of happy people has not noticeably increased with the general expansion of individual freedom in the West. Instead, as Schwartz noted with much irony: "What we find is an explosive *growth* in the number of people with depression. Some estimates are that depression is ten times more likely to afflict someone now than at the turn of the century".

Schwartz suggested several reasons for this paradoxical phenomenon which he termed the *tyranny of freedom*. First, increases in experienced control over the years have been accompanied by increases in expectations about control.

However, this expectation does not match reality. There are many things in life that are simply not within one's control, from the morning rush hour and the unpredictable weather to the fluctuating moods of family and friends. The individual who expects to be in control is likely to be frustrated when things do not work out the way he intends it to. Research on learned helplessness theory indicates that such individuals are prone to experience clinical depression.

Second, the extreme emphasis on the individual undermines a crucial vaccine against psychological depression, namely, deep commitment and belonging to social groups and institutions. That is, the more people focus on themselves, the more their connections

to others will be weakened. This gradual weakening in social ties increases the vulnerability of the individual to psychological depression.

Third, having more choices is *not* necessarily better for the individual compared to having fewer choices. In fact the reverse may be true. A group of researchers found that college students were more likely to write an extra-credit essay and wrote better essays when they had 6 rather than 30 options to choose from.

The researchers also found that participants who were presented with a wide range of chocolates (30 options) proved more dissatisfied and were more regretful of the choices they had made in comparison with those who were presented with a narrow range of chocolates (6 options).

Based on these findings, Schwartz concludes that the freedom to choose is not an unmixed blessing but comes at a cost to the individual. Rather than expanding one's freedom by increasing the range of choices, he argued that people in individualistic cultures must learn to de-emphasize individual freedom. At the same time, they should determine which cultural constraints are necessary in order to live meaningful and satisfying lives in society.

Schwartz used a linguistic analogy to illustrate this point. Specifically, the capacity to use language is the single most liberating characteristic of *homo sapiens*. It frees humans in significant ways from the temporal and material limitations that afflict other organisms.

For example, people can say anything about anything at any time and in any place. But they can do this only because language is heavily constrained by grammatical rules.

Just as linguistic freedom is made possible through the existence of linguistic constraints in the form of grammatical rules, Schwartz argues that individual well-being is only possible via a form of self-determination that occurs with significant constraints in society. The challenge is to identify which constraints on personal freedom are the crucial ones within society.

## **Affirming communion at the expense of agency in the East**

Whereas affirming agency at the expense of communion lies at the root of impeding the good life in the West, *affirming communion at the expense of agency* lies at the root of impeding the good life in the East. Manifestation of this imbalance takes a variety of forms. One of them is the obsession with face in Chinese society.

The Chinese term for face is *mianzi*, which refers to the recognition accorded to one's self by society. *Mianzi* occupies a central role in the life of the typical Chinese because he lives in a collectivistic and hierarchical society.

In such a society, people use considerations of rank and hierarchy to make socially evaluative judgments about the individual. Consequently, the typical Chinese is concerned with how he appears to other people and strives to increase his own face in society.

The Chinese who behaves in this way is said to be *ai mianzi* ("in love with my own face"). This obsessive concern with face has a negative impact on well-being for a variety of reasons.

First, one is likely to claim more face from others than what they are willing to extend. This discrepancy between the *mianzi* that one claims from others and the *mianzi* that one receives from others constitutes a source of strain in one's interpersonal relations.

Second, when other people do not acknowledge one's claim to *mianzi*, one's face is threatened or even lost, leaving one with many unpleasant emotions like anger, shame, guilt, embarrassment and the like.

Third, an extreme focus on *mianzi* may create interpersonal difficulties. For example, when a dispute takes place between two or more individuals, each may insist that he is right, in an attempt to protect his own face in the matter. As a result, good friends may become bitter enemies.

A Chinese expert on face describes this excessive concern with *mianzi* as "taking things too seriously". Referring to the Chinese folk

saying “they won’t cry without seeing the coffin”, she elaborated:

I think Chinese sometimes take things too seriously. Not until they have destroyed the whole situation and the event becomes very serious will they realize they have done something wrong and regret what they have done. They have made the event too big and cannot find a way to remedy it.

Especially problematic is the situation in which one party assumes a higher status vis-à-vis the other party. For example, the elderly are a revered group in Chinese society. Younger people are expected to give *mianzi* to their seniors instead of claiming it from them. Conversely, elderly people expect to get *mianzi* from the younger generation instead of giving it to them.

Particularly in the relationship between father and son, the father can claim his *mianzi* as father from his son. However, this linkage between *mianzi* and status in Chinese society can lead to a situation that is “not reasonable”. Another expert on the Chinese conception of face elaborated on this point:

Among Chinese, the father is the older generation. If today he has some conflict with his child, and there is a third party involved in the situation, even if the son is correct, the father would not apologize to his son. He will think, “I am the father, how could I apologize to you?” This is a common occurrence. He loves his *mianzi* to death and thinks, “My status is higher than yours, how can I apologize?” It is his fault but he wants the other to “remedy the situation”. This is not reasonable.

Besides these negative fallouts, an obsession with face can lead the individual to adopt extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals in life. For example, many Singaporeans try to “inflate” their own face in society by chasing after materialistic goods.

These Singaporeans mistakenly believe that the successful pursuit of these “5 Cs of life” – cash, car, condominium, credit-card and country-club membership – will enable them to lead the good life. Some of them got more than what they had bargained for, as seen in the following anecdote.

A manager in Singapore bought a brand new Mercedes Benz. At night, he parked it at the common lot next to his residence. The next morning, he found that a vandal had scratched his car. Indignant and frustrated, he decided to track down the culprit, and spent about S\$15,000, on video-recording equipment.

The Singaporean manager and his wife took turns to stay up into the wee hours of the morning, hoping to catch the vandal red-handed on film. Their efforts paid off but they got a nasty shock. The culprit turned out to be none other than their next-door neighbour, who was seething with rage and jealousy at the sight of their new Mercedes Benz!

Besides this negative obsession with face, affirming communion at the expense of agency leads to the suppression of individual creativity in the East. In *Why Asians are Less Creative Than Westerners*, I argue that this lack of creativity is not due to any genetic or biological limitations of Asians.

Instead, it is the result of living in a collectivistic, tightly-organized and consensus-minded society, in which individual conformity to social norms is encouraged and expected, while differences between individuals are minimized to avoid conflict. This emphasis on group living and social harmony has created a stable and conservative society of Asians who are not very creative or imaginative.

Like Schwartz, I call for a fundamental change in Asian society that enables the Asian to be different without feeling out of place, and to pursue cherished dreams instead of imitating what other people do and say.

Rather than being obsessed with saving his own face, the Asian should express his personal views in a constructive way without any fear of recrimination from the social group.

Although this call for openness, tolerance and diversity may increase the potential for social friction between different individuals, I believe that its overall impact would be good for Asian society.

An open environment where a diversity of views can flourish

eventually leads to a more creative and intellectually vibrant society which can make better decisions that have a positive impact on the well-being of people living in Asian society.

### **Striking a balance between agency and communion**

The failure to strike a balance between agency and communion is not due to the mutual incompatibility of these two fundamental modes of existence. Instead, it is due to the individual's tendency to subscribe to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in his or her society without critical reflection.

This tendency is a by-product of the socialization process, in which the developing child is gradually attuned to the cultural complex of meanings and practices which define the most natural and ordinary ways of behaving as a person in society.

By attuning one's self to this cultural complex, one functions as a meaningful and respectable cultural entity. However, what is "right", "proper", "desirable" and "correct" for the individual as a cultural entity may not be so for the individual as a psychological entity. This point is succinctly stated by Heelas and Lock:

Our indigenous psychology works to maintain and fulfill what our social world defines as that which we should be. But perhaps this count against what our basic psychological nature demands of us: in other words, that sociocultural views of the self do not necessarily fulfill the needs of the self as a natural psychological entity.

To strike a good balance between the two fundamental modes of existence, one can engage in a *dialectical synthesis of agency and communion*. From this perspective, agency and communion do not merely coexist. Instead, each relies on the other to thrive.

Agency without communion is solitary individualism. The life it offers is like that of the polar bear, free to roam alone in the desolate cold. Communion without agency has no individual character. It offers a plain life of security and anchorage in the social group, like a swarm of bees in a hive.

But in unison, both agency and communion offer a new vision of the good life, in which freedom and security are included.

Agency may be achieved through communion, when the individual chooses to surrender a portion of personal freedom for the collective good and becomes more selfless in relating and maintaining solidarity with others.

Communion may be realized via agency, in an open and tolerant society that encourages plurality and diversity, rather than in a face-conscious society that imposes conformity and uniformity.

### **Doing the right thing vs doing the self-interested thing**

Sampson has illustrated how this dialectical synthesis of agency and communion can result in a good society in which people can live the good life. He considers the motivation to engage in socially responsible behaviour in two conceptions of individualism.

One is *self-contained individualism*, where the boundary between self and other is clearly differentiated. The other is *enssembled individualism*, where a dialectical synthesis of self and other has been achieved.

In self-contained individualism, one engages in socially responsible behaviour only if one experiences personal efficacy as a causal agent. In other words, if one believes that one's actions are under one's own control, then one feels motivated to behave in a socially responsible way.

On the other hand, if one believes that one's actions are not under one's control, then one does not feel motivated to behave in a socially responsible way.

By contrast, in ensembled individualism, where the dialectical synthesis of self and other has been achieved, one's identity is defined in and through one's relations with others. One is completed through these relations and does not exist apart from them. Therefore one's work on behalf of others is simultaneously work on behalf of oneself.

To put it succinctly, there is no conflict between doing the right thing and doing the self-interested thing in the case of ensembled individualism.

By contrast, in the case of self-contained individualism, the individual is frequently torn between doing the right thing and doing the self-interested thing.

According to Sampson, when socially responsible behaviour appears as part of an indigenous psychology of ensembled individualism, people provide and receive assistance without defining this situation as an infringement on their personal freedoms.

But when socially responsible behaviour appears as part of an indigenous psychology of self-contained individualism, increasingly strong external rule will be required in order to contain the excesses that self-interested behaviour produces.

### **In search of the good life: Insights from the East and West**

In summary, this cultural analysis has produced the following conclusions on the good life. First, there are different ways of conceptualizing happiness.

In the West people believe that happiness is an unmitigated good that the individual is entitled to. In the East people adopt a more hesitating attitude towards happiness.

Second, there are different ways of experiencing happiness. In the West people experience happiness as a private feeling that is located in the individual. They also experience self-esteem by affirming that positive features are present in themselves.

By contrast, in the East people experience happiness as a communal feeling that is located between individuals. They also experience self-esteem by affirming that negative features are absent from themselves.

Third, there are different ways of pursuing happiness. In the West people engage in the direct pursuit of happiness by focusing on themselves rather than other people. They also engage in self-

enhancement to stand out from the social group.

In the East people engage in the indirect pursuit of happiness by focusing on their loved ones instead of themselves. They also engage in self-criticism to fit in to the social group.

Fourth, to be happy and live the good life, we should maintain a good balance between agency (self) and communion (other). Incidentally, this pointer on how to live the good life is compatible with the received wisdom of venerated thinkers in the East and West.

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ exhorted his audience to "do to others what you want them to do to you". Confucius said the same thing to his disciples, but in a different way: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you".

Buddha preached the middle path to enlightenment which involves not causing hurt to oneself or others, broadly defined to include all living things, not just human beings. Laozi highlighted the importance of harmonizing one's action with the universe, instead of taking extreme action in either direction.

Fifth, this cultural perspective on well-being sheds light on why many people in the East and West fail to live the good life. Specifically, individualistic members tend to affirm agency at the expense of communion, resulting in the tyranny of freedom.

On the other hand, collectivistic members tend to affirm communion at the expense of agency, resulting in a negative obsession with face and a suppression of individual creativity.

This failure to experience well-being cannot be attributed to the mutual incompatibility of agency and communion. Instead, it is due to the individual's tendency to subscribe to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in his or her society without critical reflection.

Finally, it is possible for the individual to live the good life via a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion. Individualistic members can make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the

collective, resulting in a communal form of agency.

Collectivistic members can express personal convictions in a constructive way without any fear of recrimination, resulting in an agentive form of communion.

When a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion is achieved, a good society in which people can live the good life ensues.

In such a society, there is no conflict between doing the right thing and doing the self-interested thing, as the individualism is ensembled (integration of self and other) rather than self-contained (differentiation of self from other).