

Eastern Conceptualizations of Happiness: Fundamental Differences with Western Views

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Abstract The purpose of this review is to compare and contrast western and eastern conceptualizations of happiness and optimal functioning. Towards this end, accounts of happiness and optimal functioning provided in western philosophy and scientific psychology are compared with those in some eastern schools of thought (namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Sufism). Six fundamental differences in western and eastern conceptualizations of the good life are identified and discussed in the context of broader psychological theory. It is hoped that this theoretical analysis will stimulate more culturally informed research among happiness researchers.

Keywords Happiness · The good life · Optimal functioning · Culture · Eastern traditions

1 Introduction

The current literature on happiness and well-being has been criticised by many (e.g., Christopher 1999; Joshanloo 2013; Lu and Gilmour 2006; Uchida and Kitayama 2009) on the grounds that it takes a culture-free stance. It has been argued that contemporary western notions of happiness and optimal functioning have their roots in western old and new streams of thought. Among many, Coan (1977) and Hwang (2009) argue that modern psychiatry and psychology are features of contemporary western civilization, reflecting western traditions and ways of living. The western understanding of the self and happiness rest on taken-for-granted and deeply held presuppositions dominant in the contemporary West. For example, Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) contend that mainstream western psychology is largely based on the tenets of liberal individualism, which encompasses a notion of fixed self with clear boundaries with the non-self. To date, most of the research on happiness has been guided by these western conceptualizations and have relied on

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western instruments. Unfortunately, western theories and instruments are applied across cultures, at the expense of ignoring indigenous frameworks.

The present review is an attempt to partially tackle these drawbacks, and provide a reference for future empirical research. The purpose is to examine fundamental differences between the eastern and western conceptualizations of happiness at a conceptual level. To this end, western notions of happiness will be briefly reviewed first. Secondly, views of eastern traditions will be investigated. Finally, six fundamental differences between eastern and western notions of happiness will be highlighted with the aim of providing an integrated understanding of cultural differences in the conceptions of happiness.

1.1 Western Conceptualization of Mental Well-Being

With regard to the western notions of happiness, it is necessary to touch on the distinction between two widely accepted traditions of analysis in the study of well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic. The primary difference between the eudaimonic and hedonic conceptualization of well-being is that the former is premised on virtues, skills, and positive functioning, whereas the latter is premised on pleasure and positive feelings (Keyes and Annas 2009). Eudaimonia was the main word for happiness and positive functioning in Ancient Greek philosophy. Hedonism as a way of achieving happiness received very little attention in premodern eras. Only recently, hedonism has gained popularity and credit mainly in western cultures (Christopher 1999; Tatarkiewicz 1976).

In philosophy, hedonism is defined as “an ethical position which claims that pleasure or happiness is the highest or most intrinsic good in life, and that people should pursue as much pleasure and as little pain as possible” (Bunnin and Yu 2004, pp. 298–299). This position has been advocated, for example, by Aristippus and the utilitarians. In line with this philosophical position, psychological hedonism holds that “human actions are determined by the desire to secure pleasure and to avoid pain” (Bunnin and Yu 2004, p. 299). Among hedonic-oriented psychologists, well-being is conceived as identical to subjective well-being (Diener 2012) which is dependent on the pleasure and pain experiences of an individual over a certain period of time (Ryan and Deci 2001). Subjective well-being is operationalized and assessed as a predominance of positive over negative affect (i.e., affect balance) as well as a global satisfaction with life based on an individual’s self-chosen standards (Diener 1984). It has been argued that the dominant view of happiness in the contemporary West is basically hedonistic (e.g., Belliotti 2004; Christopher and Hickinbottom 2008; Haybron 2008; Joshanloo 2013; McMahon 2008; Schwartz 2009; Tatarkiewicz 1976; Triandis 1995; Triandis et al. 1990).

The eudaimonistic tradition, on the other hand, posits that a human being can live a good life only when they actualize their potential rather than by pursuing pleasure produced by good feelings or satisfaction of bodily needs (Devettere 2002). The most influential advocate of this notion in the West is Aristotle, who decisively rejected hedonism as a way of achieving happiness: “The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals” (Aristotle 1985, p. 7). Eudaimonia is a life of activity in accordance with virtue (Annas 2000). Eudaimonism is concerned with actualizing one’s potential and capacities as a human being (Ryan and Deci 2001). Such traits as self-esteem, meaning in life, optimism, enjoyment of activities as personally expressive, and autonomy have been emphasized in eudaimonic theories in the West (Ryan and Deci 2001; Ryff 1989; Waterman et al. 2010). Some of these values are consistent with the dominant western ethos of individualism.

In short, contemporary western culture and western psychological theory define the concept of well-being and a good life mainly based on positive affectivity and hedonic balance (as further discussed later on). Contemporary western theories of happiness and optimal functioning also focus partly on individualistic virtues such as self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, mastery, and control (Christopher 1999; Christopher and Hickinbottom 2008). In the following sections, a number of eastern notions of happiness are examined to set the stage for a comprehensive comparison of eastern and western concepts of happiness.

1.2 Eastern Conceptualizations of Mental Well-Being

The notions of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism about happiness will be reviewed in the following sections. These belief systems are chosen for the purposes of the current analysis because they are dominant worldviews in Asia, and exert a far-reaching influence on the way people in this continent think and behave (Hwang 2009). Confucianism is believed to be at the root of the traditional system of thought shared by many East Asian cultures, although people in these regions are to various degrees influenced by other traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism. Hinduism is the predominant religion of India which has influenced many other religions such as Buddhism and Sufism. Sufism is influential in India, Pakistan, and the Persian world (e.g., Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and other Persian-speaking regions). Sufism has become fully integrated into these people's religious lives affecting their ways of thinking and behaving (for a review see Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012). I present a review of the notions of happiness proposed by each of these Asian traditions below.

1.3 Hinduism

Hinduism has a long history and myriad of traditions and approaches that are impossible to be fully covered here. I only try to offer a rough sketch of Hinduism's basic ideas and the aspects that are more characteristic of Hindu religious thought, although it is possible to find alternative views on any of the points discussed here.

The pursuit of salvation in Hinduism starts with discovering the true self. Hinduism posits that the self consists of material and non-material aspects. The innermost non-material self of each individual is called *atman* (Kim 1973; Klostermaier 2008). The ultimate reality that embraces all beings and is at the heart of the universe is called *brahman*. *Brahman* is the one supreme, universal spirit that is the ultimate ground of everything. It is without form, indescribable, indefinable, and purely absolute (Kim 1973; Klostermaier 2008). Hinduism posits that at the most basic level, *atman* and *brahman* are identical. But the material transient world veils this union. The ultimate goal of Hindus is to realize this unity, or, stated otherwise, to become one with *brahman*. In other words, they aim at attaining a high consciousness that can understand that *atman* is indeed *brahman*¹. Thus, obviously, unlike many western schools, Hinduism does not make a sharp distinction between humankind and the Divine (Younger 1972).

On this basis, the whole life is seen as a preparation for salvation in Hinduism. Salvation involves transcending the ever-recurring cycle of life, death, and rebirth (called as

¹ It should be noted that some perspectives in Hinduism speak of an ultimate distinction between humankind and the Divine, and instead of unity they believe in an absolute devotion to and reliance on the Divine (Narayanan 2004).

samsara). Salvation can be achieved by emancipating one's self from all bodily bonds. Only such a bodiless self is regarded as the true self. This self enjoys the highest state of consciousness that is nonrestricted (Klostermaier 2008). Every person's degree of bliss and joy is believed to depend on how successful he or she is on the path towards such spiritual knowledge of the self and *brahman*.

Spiritual and intuitive knowledge is highly emphasized in this doctrine. This sort of knowledge is transformational, and is equated with becoming: "One who knows *brahman* becomes *brahman*" (Klostermaier 2008, p. 110, italics in the original). True knowledge should not be imparted by others. It should not be rational or intellectual. Instead, it should come from one's own experience, which as mentioned earlier, requires the development of a high bodiless consciousness. This necessarily comes through moral development, freeing the mind from selfish desires, and self-control (Kim 1973; Klostermaier 2008). Emphasizing mystical knowledge, oneness of existence, and the identification of the Divine and humankind makes Hinduism a mystical religion. It does not come as any surprise that Hinduism advocates a spiritual version of happiness.

In such a doctrine, true joy comes from contentment and peace of mind brought about by constantly acknowledging that in everything dwells the Supreme Being (*brahman*). The factors that contribute greatly to peace of mind are giving up all illegitimate desires, avoiding greed, and attachment to transient and material objects (e.g., wealth and fame), egotism, and anger, which are considered to be cardinal vices in Hinduism (Bhawuk 2010). By avoiding these vices, one can be liberated from the material self, and ultimately become one with *brahman*.

Hinduism emphasizes virtues and righteousness rather than hedonism in conceptualizing happiness (Shamasundar 2008). The concept of *dharma* is very important in defining virtues in Hinduism. *Dharma* is the principle that governs the universe, society, and individual lives—the supreme and all-encompassing regulatory principle. The whole world and human affairs are controlled and operated by *Dharma* (Kim 1973; Narayanan 2004). Humankind's role in the Hindu worldview is to support this universal cosmic order (Younger 1972). In general, virtue (personal or social, material or spiritual) in Hinduism amounts to acting in accord with *dharma* (Salagame 2003). That is to uphold order in this world and curb actions which may disrupt the soul's harmony with cosmic and societal order. For example, human behaviour should never lead to the disruption of the vegetable, animal, or heavenly realms. Cardinal virtues of Hinduism include gratitude, non-violence, limitless compassion, and generosity. Other virtues include controlling the mind so that it can firmly rest on the object of interest, and enduring hardships without lamenting and becoming upset (Paranjpe 1988). Acting in accordance with these virtues is believed to lead to a state of harmony inside and with the outer world (Shamasundar 2008).

In sum, Hinduism emphasizes the practice of virtues and a contented state of mind as key ingredients of a good life. Virtue should take place in the context of an individual's yearning for transcendence from the material world. The end state of salvation is an egoless state with a limitless compassion for the rest of creation. Throughout the journey to salvation, experiential knowledge and intuition are privileged over rationality and intellect.

1.4 Buddhism

Buddhism posits that any notion of owning a permanent self with well-defined boundaries not only is an illusion, but also is the main source of unhappiness. Self-interest and selfishness are reliable indicators of an immature mind, a mind who has failed to realize that others are its own extensions. In contrast, self-renunciation is thought to lead to

limitless love and compassion, and eradication of destructive states of mind such as anger and hatred (Mitchell and Wiseman 2003). According to Buddhism, happiness should not be found outside—in material gains, bodily pleasures, and even in interpersonal relationships. Rather, it should be found in the heart (Webb 2012) through spiritual training. In Dalai Lama's words, "the highest happiness is when one reaches liberation, at which point there is no more suffering. That's genuine, lasting happiness. True happiness relates to the mind and heart" (Webb 2012, p. 34). Happiness is the state of mind that ensues if we realize true states of affairs—if we are awakened.

The main barrier in the path to genuine happiness is the suffering resulting from the *craving-and-aversion* mechanism (Chen 2006a), which follows when "the temporariness and inherent lack of satisfaction of hedonism are not understood" (Kwee 2012, p. 253). Craving for illegitimate desires brings with it its antithesis, namely, aversion. When we crave for something pleasant, we tend to reject its opposite. Buddhism holds that one can attain true freedom and peace if one outgrows the mind's habit of reacting with either craving or aversion to perceptions of external stimuli. Buddhism advocates a state of happiness which is not dependent on any external or internal pleasurable stimuli (Wallace and Shapiro 2006). In this doctrine, there is no direct relationship between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is temporary, and generally is centred on the self, which can make us selfish and sometimes is in conflict with the well-being of others (Ricard 2011).

The Buddhist version of well-being is based on mental balance and contentment (Wallace and Shapiro 2006), which can be cultivated by "reflecting on the transitory, unsatisfying nature of hedonic pleasures and by identifying and developing the inner causes of genuine well-being" (Wallace and Shapiro, p. 694). The final step in the path towards happiness is to understand that we are one with others, and this not only leads to obtaining happiness, but also brings peace and harmony into the lives of others (see Mitchell and Wiseman 2003, p. 6). As the fourteenth Dalai Lama puts it: "The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of happiness becomes" (see Mitchell and Wiseman 2003, p. 17). In Tibetan Buddhism, a meditational practice is prescribed for coping with suffering. It is done by reflecting that there are many other sentient beings undergoing similar suffering. By taking on other people's suffering, it is reported that we might be able to destroy the cause of our own suffering (see Mitchell and Wiseman 2003, p. 17). All this shows that the ultimate goal in Buddhism is not individual happiness but liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

Happiness understood in the Buddhist way is not necessarily incompatible with suffering, sadness, and tragedy (Ricard 2011), considering that the Buddhist version of happiness is not premised on hedonic balance. A Buddhist should try to grasp the true essence of happiness and sadness (Ricard 2011) not to favour one and avoid the other. Indeed, this doctrine maintains that suffering can be beneficial. According to the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the Buddhist point of view is that "by enduring suffering, you can purify your past negative actions and generate determination to achieve liberation" (see Mitchell and Wiseman 2003, p. 15–16). If one can transform adverse situations into factors of the spiritual path, hindrances will become favourable conditions for spiritual practice (see Mitchell and Wiseman 2003). In sum, from a Buddhist standpoint, perceiving the self as separate from the non-self leads to unnecessary personal desires, and these desired are blamed for causing suffering. In order to stop the suffering, one needs to achieve a state of inner peace by realizing that the separation of the self and the non-self is but an illusion. This awakening will be manifested in limitless love and compassion for all sentient beings.

1.5 Taoism

Tao is the eternal truth, the principle regulating nature, heaven, and the lives of human beings (Young et al. 2005). In Taoism, virtue generally consists of acting in accord with Tao. The Taoist ideal is to return to a genuine and simple way of life (Chen 2006b). Taoism advocates the principle of *non-action*. This principle invites us to act effortlessly and spontaneously—allowing things to take their course without inappropriate interference (Chan 1963, 2006b; Peng et al. 2006).

According to the *two poles* principle, the world is believed to operate through the interaction of two opposite poles: *yin* and *yang*. That is to say, all things exist in polarity, with the two poles complementing and supporting each other (Chen 2006b). For instance, goodness cannot exist without evil. It follows that we should accept both poles of anything, happiness together with unhappiness, success together with failure. Failing to do so will lead to a sense of suffering. Understanding how happiness and unhappiness complement one another, and are mutually dependent is believed to be the key to happiness. Tranquillity results when pain and pleasure are both seen to be essential (Peng et al. 2006). We are advised by Taoism to accept with equanimity the cosmic pattern of change.

Contentment and peace of mind are highly valued in Taoism (Lee et al. 2013). This state of mind is thought to be a result of an experiential knowledge of basic Taoist principles. This can be achieved if one follows Tao, by not favouring one pole (e.g., happiness) over the other one (e.g., suffering), and by accepting the pattern of change, which leads to the idea that the positive is hidden in the negative and vice versa. These principles together with that of non-action are thought to lead to a sense of inner peace and contentment. It is reported that, by following these principles, an individual can embrace non-judgmentally their negative feelings and negative sides of their personality and life (Chen 2006b).

Happiness and contentment can be achieved where no vice (e.g., greed, hatred, fear) exists, and thus they are value-based concepts in Taoism. One should not directly pursue these ideal states. They occur as the by-product of living in accordance with Tao. Some practical techniques to achieve contentment are taking a transcendent perspective, forgoing one's desire for success and achievement, and using softness against hardness (Young et al. 2005). Chen (2006b) contends that with such a formulation of happiness, it is possible to stay content under adverse circumstances.

1.6 Confucianism

In Confucianism, a happy life is not differentiated from a good life (Zhang and Veenhoven 2008). The question of a good life is usually understood in terms of what it means to be humane (i.e., to be virtuous, Sundararajan 2005). This school of thought strongly emphasizes social and interpersonal virtues contributing to internal and social harmony. In the *doctrine of the mean* we read “Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout Heaven and Earth, and all things will be nourished and will flourish” (Ching 2003, p. 85). In Confucianism, a high value is attached to social relationships particularly family relationships. Harmony is an important goal of personal and social life (Ip 2009). In a harmonious way of living, actions result from the individual's perceptions of their relationships with other people and not necessarily from private volition, emotions, or needs (Ho 1995). Instead of reinforcing and enhancing the individual self, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation, self-conquest, and self-discipline, and this has sometimes led to valuing self-abnegation and asceticism (Ching 2003). However, Confucianism stresses that self-cultivation should

be undertaken to obtain social virtues, and should not lead to one's isolation from society. "The self-cultivation process involves the perforation of the boundary of the individuated self to include others, starting from those who are closest, such as family members" (Yang 2006, p. 342). Obviously, self-cultivation is at the service of obtaining harmony with others.

Cardinal virtues in Confucianism are social in essence. The three dominant virtues of benevolence (also translated as humanity or human-heartedness), righteousness (or justice), and propriety should regulate interpersonal relationships (Hwang 2001, 2006). Other important virtues are wisdom, trustworthiness, filial piety (Woods and Lamond 2011), moderation, and dutifulness (Yan 2005). Benevolence (i.e., a feeling of compassion, love, and concern for the well-being of others) is believed to be the essence of being human (Zhang and Veenhoven 2008), the chief virtue that makes a life good.

In sum, Confucianism portrays a good life mainly as a life of internal and external harmony. It is equally important to have a fully functioning family with compassionate bonds among the members, cultivating internal satisfaction, and facing hardship and adversity with equanimity. Such a good life can be achieved by sticking to virtues, disciplined self-governance, and maintaining a harmonious attachment with others and the world. Pleasure and positive emotions are not especially emphasized in this notion of happiness (Lee et al. 2013). Instead they should be controlled or sometimes sacrificed. In fact, one's life should be sacrificed for the sake of virtue. For example, Confucius says "... humane men do not seek to preserve their lives at the expense of humanity; rather, they give their lives to attain humanity" (*The analects*, 15.9, Huang 1997, p. 153).

1.7 Sufism

Sufism is a philosophy trying to explain world, mankind, and God relying on intuitive knowledge and direct experience rather than reasoning and logic (Joshi and Rastegar 2012). According to Frager (1999), a basic concept in Sufi psychology is the heart, i.e., where gnosis and spiritual knowledge reside. The heart is thought to contain our deeper intelligence and wisdom. Sufism aspires towards developing a "soft, feeling, compassionate heart" (p. 2). Understanding through the "heart's intelligence" is superior to understanding through the intelligence of the head. Indeed, the intelligence of the heart is the only instrument that can be used to discover the ultimate truth (Joshi and Rastegar 2012). To Sufis, reason is limited in many ways and cannot outgrow its inherent limitations. In particular, when reason denies intuitive knowledge and "blinds the eye of the heart", it becomes the target of strong criticism from Sufism. This stands in stark contrast to the Aristotelian and contemporary western emphasis on logical reasoning as the highest human faculty, which should rule the whole personality (Frager 1999).

Another important concept in Sufism is the ego (the self or *the nafs*). The ego is a part of our psyche that consistently leads us off the spiritual path, a part of the self which commands us to do evil. As stated metaphorically by a Sufi: "the ego's ultimate aim is to overthrow God's dominion of the heart and for the ego to proclaim itself as lord" (Kabbani 2006, p. 197). According to Kabbani (2006), the ego can impede the actualization of the spiritual potential of the heart if not controlled by the divine aspects of the personality. Accordingly, the ego should be actively fought against throughout life (Frager 1999). Pursuing the Sufi path might lead to some mystical experiences of annihilation of the self or unity of being (e.g. Fakhry 2004). The annihilation of the individual self refers to the destruction of the individual self to become one with the Divine Being who is omnipresent.

In this state, Sufis say, the soul is so completely absorbed by the presence of God that it no longer has any individuality (Elkaisy-Friemuth 2006; Joshanloo 2013).

Like other eastern philosophies, gaining internal and external harmony is emphasized in Sufism. Sufis think that “The secret of the existence of the individual as well as of the whole cosmos lies in one thing, and that is balance” (Khan and Witteveen 1999, p. 25). The disharmony of thought, body, and external world is believed by Sufis to lead to illness. To gain balance and harmony, one needs to whole-heartedly love God and accept whatever he ordains, including miseries, losses, and hardship. Sufis embrace hardship and suffering as necessary elements of the path towards God. A Persian Sufi poet says: “The self will not go in gladness and with caresses, it must be chased with sorrow, drowned in tears” (Vaughan-Lee 1994, p. 90). Sufis believe that God is with those hearts which are broken for him. They use the analogy that gold ore becomes gold after it is put through a process of fire. Likewise, a Sufi should be transformed to a true lover of God through suffering (Vaughan-Lee 1994). Interpreted this way, hardship and suffering are seen as blessings and gifts from God to help the individual abandon their attachment to this world and transform them to a true lover. In short, what most representatively characterizes a Sufi conceptualization of happiness is a combination of inner harmony, intuition, contentment, self-transcendence, and union with the Divine.

2 Discussion

The previous sections provided sketches of the notions of happiness in five different eastern schools of thought, providing the essential context within which to summarise major differences between western and eastern views of happiness. In this section, insights from all these eastern schools are integrated to facilitate the discussion of major domains of difference between western and eastern views. Six major domains of difference emerge, which are listed below. These are definitely not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but they appear to capture the most outstanding domains of difference.

2.1 Self-Transcendence Versus Self-Enhancement

The way cultures define the self is of great importance in conceptualizing happiness. Whereas the western concept of the self is primarily based on the ideals of individualism, eastern traditions tend to regard the self as a small part of the collective and the cosmos. Consistent with the western understanding of the self, enhancing autonomy, independence, self-esteem, and a strong ego is considered to be a vital ingredient of a good life in these cultures (Chang and Dong-Shick 2005; Chen 2006a; Markus and Hamedani 2007). In contrast, in Asian traditions, the individual self is de-emphasised in one way or another (Hwang 2009). In Buddhism, the existence of an individual self is considered an illusion. Confucianism emphasizes the relational aspects of the self, defining its maturity in transcending one’s personal desires for the sake of family and group. In Sufism and Hinduism, a mature self is one that loses its individuality and gets absorbed in the Transcendent. In these cultures, self-choice and autonomy are not portrayed as moral ideals (e.g., Sundararajan 2005).

This fundamental difference between western and eastern concepts of happiness has important consequences for determining the nature of positive psychological qualities. For example, western psychological models and measurement instruments emphasize self-

determination, resistance to enculturation, and deliverance from convention (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryff 1989; Ryff and Singer 2008). Plus, contemporary western formulations and measurement instruments have mainly left out the social aspect of well-being, focusing on its private aspects (Keyes 1998). These individualistic qualities are not good indicators for mental well-being in eastern cultures where self-transcendence captures the core of psychological maturity. The western concept of happiness has been criticized based on eastern perspectives as being too self-focused. In eastern schools of thought, it is argued that an individualistic pursuit of happiness may indeed lead to individual and collective unhappiness. Dambrun and Ricard (2011), for instance, argue that an individualistic notion of happiness can lead only to transitory positive states as well as numerous negative ones (e.g., hostility, jealousy, anger, and hatred), whereas a less selfish conceptualization of happiness can lead to a higher frequency of compassion, empathy, care, respect and so on which are signifiers of psychological maturity in the East.

Accordingly, psychological theories of mental well-being in the East may consider measuring self-transcendence as an important ingredient of well-being. The eastern emphasis on self-transcendence is also consistent with the conceptualization of wisdom by Levenson et al. (2002). Following some earlier lines of research, these researchers define wisdom as moving beyond self-centred consciousness and connecting empathically with the experiences of others. In short, the current review implies that important aspects of the experience of the self are ignored in the contemporary formulations and measures of mental well-being. In formulating and assessing mental well-being in eastern cultures, enough attention should be devoted to such positive qualities as self-transcendence, empathy, and wisdom. Moreover, as further discussed later on, in eastern mental well-being models, the relational and collective aspect of the self should be given due weight.

2.2 Eudaimonism Versus Hedonism

In contemporary western psychology, scientific analysis of individuals' mental well-being and quality of life is mainly undertaken in the field of subjective well-being, which has been formulated based on a hedonic understanding of well-being. Subjective well-being scales assess the presence of positive emotions and a sense of satisfaction, as well as the absence of negative feelings over a certain period of time. A hedonistic conceptualization of happiness is in accord with the core values and ethos of modern western culture, namely liberal modernity, hedonism, and romantic individualism (e.g., Belliotti 2004; Christopher and Hickenbottom 2008; Haybron 2008; Joshanloo 2013; McMahon 2008; Schwartz 2009; Tatariewicz 1976; Triandis 1995; Triandis et al. 1990). Ever since the Enlightenment, westerners have believed in the sovereignty of individuals over their personal happiness (Haybron 2008), and the importance of mood and affect balance as an ingredient of a good life (Christopher 1999; Tatariewicz 1976). Thus, in the contemporary West, happiness is defined dominantly based on the absence and presence of pleasure and certain emotions (e.g., Kahneman 1999). It is not surprising that almost all large-scale multinational studies on mental well-being launched by western researchers over the last decades have been based on hedonistic theory, using subjective well-being measures (e.g., Diener et al. 2010; Helliwell et al. 2012; Inglehart 2009).

However, the present review suggests that hedonism as a way of pursuing happiness is not equally favoured in eastern traditions (e.g., Lee et al. 2013). In these traditions, positive emotions and pleasures are considered too temporary and marginal to be the criterion against which happiness is measured. For example, Buddhism dismisses any kind of hedonism because hedonism carries the potential for cultivating self-centeredness (Ricard

2011). Asceticism has always been considered a key method for purification of the soul in Sufism (Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012), which obviously runs counter to the hedonistic perspective. Eastern schools are generally suspicious of bodily pleasures, and promote desire control techniques to keep individuals from perusing pleasures at the expense of ignoring main virtues. Plus, as will be argued later, suffering and negative emotions (which signify unhappiness in the hedonistic view) are not considered entirely bad in these cultures, and are thought to contribute to spiritual development. All this makes clear that hedonism cannot be the basis for defining happiness in eastern cultures. Instead, virtues form the cornerstone of a good life in these cultures. Therefore, the eastern conceptualization of happiness is more consistent with a eudaimonistic understanding of happiness.

Given that the eastern concept of happiness is basically eudaimonistic, it might seem attractive to apply the western eudaimonistic models and measures in eastern contexts. However, it is important to note that the positive qualities advocated by eastern eudaimonism are fundamentally different from those recognized in contemporary western psychology, with the former emphasizing selflessness, adjustment to the environment, and relational virtues, and the latter emphasizing virtues like autonomy and environmental mastery. In nonwestern cultures, even personal virtues are utilized to ultimately achieve self-transcendence, caring for other humans and other living beings, and contributing to the collective. Some of western virtues (e.g., possessing an autonomous self with clear boundaries with others), are not only looked down on in the East, but also considered the cause of unhappiness, sin, and destruction of the collective. In contrast, experiencing a sense of no-self or unity with the non-self, are sometimes considered pathological in western psychiatry and psychology. A good example of the differences in the nature of virtue is filial piety which is considered as an important sign of maturity within the eastern context (Hoshmand and Ho 1995). However, in western cultures, family obligations and social expectations are sometimes considered as constraints impeding the full expression of human potential and unique selfhood (Christopher and Hinkinbottom 2008).

The eastern concept of eudaimonia fits well with the formulation of eudaimonia in Dambrun and Ricard's (2011) theory of self-based functioning. According to this theory, the structure of the self (i.e., self-centeredness or selflessness) can lead to different kinds of psychological functioning (involving motivation, affect, beliefs, and behaviours) which may have notable consequences for one's happiness. Dambrun and Ricard argue that a conceptualization of self as a real entity with sharp boundaries, which is more dominant in the West than in the East, is consistent with being motivated by the hedonistic principles of desire for pleasure and reluctance towards pain. In contrast, a conception that de-emphasizes the stability and boundaries of the self, is consistent with being motivated by "the principle of harmony". From an eastern perspective, they argue that authentic happiness ensues when selflessness, rather than self-centeredness is cultivated.

2.3 Harmony Versus Mastery

In the contemporary western worldview, humankind is considered to be a privileged creature, and by virtue of its intelligence is bound to control other aspects of creation (Sibley 1973). This perspective has its roots in western enlightenment mentality considering raw nature as a force to be controlled and subordinated. On this basis, humankind should naturally attempt to "analyze, label, categorize, manipulate, control, or consume the things of the world" (Gilgen and Cho 1979, p. 836). In contrast, in eastern worldviews, humanity is described as a small part of the cosmos and should recognize its oneness with

the nature. For example, in Taoism, humankind possesses an insignificant position in the cosmic hierarchy:

A man in the universe is like a pebble or a twig in the mountains. As such he can only obey nature. He may be useful in a small way, but it is beyond him to originate anything (Zhwangtze, Autumn Water). (Zhang and Veenhoven 2008, p. 429)

In a similar vein, in Hinduism, humankind is considered as a part of nature with no special superiority over other parts (Gardner and Stern 1996). In eastern schools, all creatures including human beings, animals, plants, and even non-sentient beings are considered to be parts of an underlying unity. Therefore, unlike many western schools, eastern schools do not make a sharp distinction between humankind and the rest of creation. Ideas like mastering or conquering nature are alien to these traditions.

This fundamental difference has significant repercussions for defining positive psychological qualities. Consistent with the western dominant way of thinking about humankind and its relationship with the environment, qualities such as environmental mastery and control are highly valued in western cultures (Kim and Markus 1999; Snibbe and Markus 2005; Tseng 2005). This emphasis is also reflected in contemporary western conceptualizations of a good life. For example, in a widely used model (Ryff 1989), a fully functioning person is thought to be one who “has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; [And is] able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values” (Ryff and Singer 2008, p. 25).

Kitayama et al. (2007) note that the overemphasis on maintaining and enhancing personal control over the environment helps members of individualistic cultures realize their supreme ideals of independence and autonomy, which ultimately leads to higher mental well-being. In contrast, in eastern cultures where interpersonal harmony and adjustment are emphasized, people reach a sense of well-being basically through promoting mutual sympathy and harmony with others and the whole cosmos (Kitayama et al. 2007). These perspectives value self-transcendence, interdependence, softness, flexibility, and adjustment to the environment rather than autonomy and independence (Chen 2006b; Young et al. 2005). One cardinal virtue in eastern cultures is to adjust one’s psyche to the rhythm of the cosmos and life. For example, in Taoism and Hinduism, virtue is to adjust to the universal laws of Tao and *dharma*, respectively. These schools emphasize the importance of adjustment to the situation, gentleness, and humility towards other people and conditions of life rather than trying to influence and control things. This ideal may not be welcome from a western point of view that focuses on environmental mastery and control.

In sum, one of the fundamental differences in western and eastern notions of happiness and a good life is that in the former, attempting to change, master, and control the world (including various aspects of one’s life, relationships, and nature) is praised, whereas in the latter, adjustment to the environment, achieving harmony with others and the cosmos is prioritized. Unfortunately, current western models and measures have been mainly developed based on a mastery model, ignoring the significance of harmony in non-western contexts.

2.4 Contentment Versus Satisfaction

Life satisfaction has been stressed over the past four decades in western psychological literature on mental health (Diener 2012; Diener et al. 1999). For example, in subjective well-being theory, satisfaction is regarded as one of the fundamental components of mental well-being. At first glance, the eastern concept of contentment may seem similar to the

western concept of life satisfaction. However, a closer look indicates that there are fundamental differences between these two concepts. Contentment, in the East, involves satisfaction as well as many other qualities and experiences. It is understood as a delicate balance between joy and sorrow that should be preserved in both happy and sad times (Kwee 2012; Shamasundar 2008). In Hinduism, for instance, contentment is considered to be different from a passive acceptance of situations. Instead, “it is an intensely dynamic acceptance of results of one’s efforts in [the] moment-to-moment struggle of life” (Shamasundar 2008, p. 141). It involves accepting any failure or misery one faces with “composure, dignity, and gracefulness”. This sense of contentment is believed to result from the realization of the transcendent self (Salagame 2003). Therefore, in the East, this concept is spiritually loaded. It involves a sense of being at peace with oneself, others, and the whole cosmos, which should be achieved through hard spiritual practice. In these traditions, goal achievement, social comparison, and even the amount of suffering that a person experiences should not affect one’s sense of contentment and balance. Chen (2006b) points out that

Contentment refers to a state of mind in which the potential psychic energy known as libido in Western psychology is “transformed” to serve a higher purpose rather than actualized as a desire that needs to be “gratified” or repressed. In this way, contentment is accompanied by a sense of fulfillment and abundance. (p. 93)

In this sense, contentment is a religious obligation for a believer. Moreover, in eastern traditions, just obtaining personal contentment is not enough, and one should also work for acquiring objective virtues (e.g., empathy and self-transcendence), whereas in the field of subjective well-being life satisfaction is essentially a goal in itself. Plus, unlike in the East, in the subjective well-being literature, satisfaction is considered a desirable state of mind irrespective of its causes. That is, what leads to life satisfaction in the person (e.g., desire gratification, goal achievement, social comparison, pleasure) is generally not important.

2.5 Valuing Versus Avoiding Suffering

A potential consequence of a hedonistic conceptualization of happiness that stresses the maximization of subjective well-being (consisting in part of the absence of negative emotions) is that such a conceptualization, which seems to be dominant in the West, makes it difficult to accept hardship, negative affect, and unhappiness as possible integral parts of a good life (e.g., Held 2002; Robbins 2008; Shamasundar 2008). In hedonic psychology, the absence of subjective well-being is seen as negative and researchers in this field have generally failed to look at and document potentially positive factors when a person reports themselves as unhappy.

The field of subjective well-being can be criticized using the eastern conceptualization of eudaimonia mainly because in this field happiness is partly conceptualized and measured as the absence of negative emotions and suffering. Given that hardship, suffering, and pain are unavoidable aspects of life, this idea seems unrealistic to many eastern perspectives. For example, Ho and Ho (2007) observe that

The preoccupation with subjective well-being appears to be a symptom of attempting to expunge unhappiness from humanity’s collective consciousness. But true happiness includes the wisdom to embrace unhappiness as part of life. It comes naturally when one is no longer obsessed with pursuing it. (p. 64).

Having this in mind, eastern eudaimonistic theories of well-being accept the existence of negative feelings and anhedonia in a truly happy life. From an eastern point of view, one should be able to embrace both positive and negative sides of life. For example, in Taoism, failing to accept unhappiness together with happiness is believed to lead to a subjective sense of suffering. Similarly, Buddhist psychology posits that “happiness is a relative quality that codependently originates with unhappiness and that therefore it cannot possibly exist in an absolute sense or in isolation” (Kwee 2012, p. 250). In fact, an emphasis on self-cultivation and self-discipline (vs. self-enhancement) renders eastern formulations of happiness more tolerant towards negative experiences and feelings. Acting in accordance with such virtues as sympathy, love, self-control, generosity, desire optimization, and tolerance occasionally requires hard self-discipline and sacrifice. Despair and failure are to be expected in the process of self-actualization and self-development.

Indeed, some dosage of suffering is prescribed in eastern schools as a necessary ingredient of a happy life. For example, Sufism holds that, through suffering, a person can be transformed to a true lover of God (Vaughan-Lee 1994). In Hinduism, a state of well-being without having been challenged by hardship and illnesses is considered incomplete (Shamasundar 2008). Similarly, Confucius explicitly emphasizes sticking to virtues even when they have hedonic costs. No matter what the hedonic or affective costs of virtuous activity are, one should practice it as it is the ultimate signifier of one’s level of happiness and flourishing. This is emphasized in the sayings of Confucius that “Eating coarse food, drinking plain water, and bending one arm for pillow—happiness also lies therein...” (*The analects*, 7.15) and “a *shi* [e.g., a minor scholar and official] who aspires after the Way [of Confucianism] but is ashamed of poor cloths and poor food is not worth discoursing with” (*The analects*, 4.9, Huang 1997, p. 68, italics in the original). In a similar vein, in Buddhism, it is posited that by enduring suffering, an individual can purge the consequences of their past misdeeds. In sum, nonwestern traditions generally see positive aspects in negative emotions (e.g., sadness) and suffering, and believe that hardship and suffering can contribute to happiness. This can have significant consequences for the field of mental well-being. For example, an easterner who has been experiencing negative emotions over the past month may score low on contemporary subjective well-being scales, but he or she may have many reasons to find real happiness in his or her life over the last month (based on spiritual reasons).

The contemporary subjective well-being measures are not able to reflect these important subtleties of eastern emotional and spiritual experiences, because for them, the presence of negative feelings necessarily signifies unhappiness. The western psychological eudaimonism is on the other hand more tolerant of the existence of unhappiness and suffering (Wong 2011, 2012). This theoretical potential however has not led to the full integration of these insights into dominant eudaimonic models (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryff 1989). That is, even though some of these lines of research have studied people facing hardship (e.g., Ryff and Singer 2003), the measures designed in these lines of research do not explicitly tap into subtleties of people’s experiences of negative affect and suffering. It is also noteworthy that the western eudaimonic theories do emphasize the importance of positive affect balance, and postulate that a person will be better off if psychological virtues are supplemented by positive affect balance (e.g., Keyes and Annas 2009; Keyes et al. 2002), or psychological virtues lead to positive affect balance. Again, this emphasis on positive affect balance makes the integration of negative affect and suffering into eudaimonic models difficult. Therefore, much theoretical and empirical work remains to be done for a successful integration of eastern views of suffering and negative affect into western hedonic and eudaimonic models.

2.6 Relevance Versus Relative Irrelevance of Spirituality and Religion

As Webb (2012) points out, in examining the concept of happiness across cultures, it is crucially important to take into account the extent to which spirituality or transcendence is important for a culture. In dominant western lines of research where materialistic values and moral pluralism are valued, religion and spirituality are studied mainly as predictors of mental well-being, and they are not involved in formulating it. In contrast, in non-western cultures, spirituality and religion are interwoven in individuals' understanding and experiencing of life in general and happiness in particular. Happiness for many non-westerners is formulated based on religious and metaphysical worldviews. Transcendence, spirituality, mystical experience, following religious duties, and practicing religious rituals are essential for these people's sense of happiness.

In contemporary western models, it is taken for granted that happiness and satisfaction are to be experienced in this worldly life. However, an emphasis on mystical experience and transcending everyday life is remarkable in eastern cultures. In particular, experiencing states of no-self or unity with God are considered ideal ways of being in these traditions. Favouring mystical and transcendental experiences is not in accord with the dominant western values of materialism, positivism, and rationalism. Western belief systems occasionally dismiss mystical and spiritual phenomena as being superstitious (Johnson 1985). Consequently, these mystical states have been sometimes interpreted as being pathological by western clinicians (Ward 1989). The eastern mystical and transcendental perspectives, on the other hand, may have serious reservations about the effectiveness of western mental health services. For instance, Sufis express their concerns about secular psychotherapeutic methods which are based on developing self-esteem and rationality. Rasool (2002) believes that these methods cannot transform the client's "deep-seated cultural and psychological conditioning" (p. 24), and therefore should be seen merely as means for strengthening the ego, which is a western ideal. He thinks that these methods can never reach beyond their inherent limitations due to their ignorance of human beings' spiritual potential. So, their effects are at best short-lived. As a substitute, he asserts that, by reattaching the individual to God, awakening the heart, and cultivating their spiritual potential, Sufism can have a life-changing transformational effect on an individual.

It is also worth mentioning that eastern views on happiness and a good life are morally loaded. Happiness is defined based on moral values, and should be achieved through morally justifiable means. For example, morality is considered in Confucianism as the main ingredient of a well-lived life. According to Confucius, "... Wealth and rank acquired through unrighteous means are to me like drifting clouds" (*The analects*, 7.15, Huang 1997, p. 90). Indeed, contemporary western conceptions of happiness can be criticized by the eastern-minded for picturing a life devoid of a moral map (Sundararajan 2005). An emphasis on certain moral values is not consistent with the dominant western emphasis on moral relativism (Christopher and Hickinbottom 2008; Richardson and Guignon 2008; Slife and Richardson 2008).

In short, it does not seem enough to examine religion or spirituality as predictors of happiness in the East. Instead, the concept of happiness should be conceptualized and assessed in religiously-informed ways. A formulation of happiness for easterners should also take moral values into consideration. Not all positive emotions or achievements may be regarded as a components of happiness in eastern cultures. In order to be considered positive, an emotion or achievement should also be morally justified. An eastern notion of happiness generally has such religious concepts as awakening, transcendence, and union with the Divine as major components, which have been deliberately excluded from the

western dominant models of mental well-being. Some western scientific models, which are mainly driven by the standards of rationality, testability, and objectivity (Kwee 2012), reject these mystical and spiritual concepts for being non-scientific, superstitious, primitive, or even pathological, which makes dominant well-being models less applicable to nonwestern cultures.

3 Closing Remarks

Although, in this article, I focused on major differences between the western and eastern conceptions of happiness, it is important to note that both poles of the six domains mentioned above (e.g., harmony vs. mastery) can be found in any single culture. In fact, these opposite poles are two general approaches to the world available to individuals in all cultures. It is far from impossible to find westerners who endorse such eastern values as harmony and collectivism. For example, Delle Fave et al.'s (2011) qualitative study showed that some western participants emphasized inner harmony in defining happiness. Mogilner et al. (2011) found that, as Americans get older, they become more likely to associate happiness with peacefulness, which is consistent with an eastern understanding of happiness. However, previous research indicates that western and eastern cultures provide varying number of opportunities for the occurrence of these qualities, and that there are real differences between western and eastern cultures (e.g., Kitayama et al. 2007; Morling et al. 2002), which are not entirely abolished by globalization (Minkov 2011).

It is also noteworthy that certain qualities are universally accepted as main ingredients of happiness. For example, the majority of previous qualitative studies have found that the success of interpersonal relationships is an important factor in people's lay understanding of happiness across western and eastern cultures (e.g., Delle Fave et al. 2011; Pflug 2009). A positive personal relationship has also been recognized as an important ingredient of happiness in major western theories of mental well-being (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryff 1989). Recently, limited attention has been also devoted to the social aspect of well-being in the western psychological literature (Keyes 1998). Despite these fundamental similarities among cultures, the same psychological quality may take various shapes in western and nonwestern cultures. Two previous studies among many others illustrate this possibility very well. Pflug (2009) found that whereas South African participants emphasized the importance of the relationship with their family members in defining happiness, German participants emphasized selecting friends based on one's own personal character, reflecting the more flexible nature of interpersonal relationships in more individualistic Germany. Uchida and Kitayama (2009) found that interpersonal harmony was more closely associated with the hedonic experience of happiness by the Japanese participants than the American participants, although for both groups interpersonal harmony was important. In sum, there are differences in the way abstract qualities (which seem to be universally important to the good life) play out across cultures. More sensitive models and measures are needed to take into account cultural similarities and differences of this sort.

Although I focused on eastern schools of thought in this article, many of the concepts and virtues discussed here are also important ingredients of a good life in many other non-western cultures outside Asia (e.g., African, Latin American). For example, consider the Navajo of the South Western United States. For them, happiness mainly consists of "endeavouring to live in harmony and balance with oneself, one's loved ones, one's community, the natural world, and the universe throughout one's life span" (Willeto 2012, p. 379). As another example, consider the Matsigenka of the Peruvian Amazon. Izquierdo's

(2005) interviews with the Matsigenka showed that their main ways of obtaining well-being and happiness were harmonious relationships with the family and the community, maintaining balance with the physical and spiritual environments, sharing, and controlling anger and jealousy. In these non-eastern accounts of happiness, contributing to the collective and harmonious relationship with others and the whole cosmos form the main ingredients of a good life, which makes them very similar to eastern perspectives I have reviewed here.

The outcomes of the present review indicate that an investigation of indigenous cultures is necessary before applying western models and measures of mental well-being. Such knowledge is crucial in developing informed hypotheses and a more culture-sensitive measurement of related concepts. This article was a preliminary step in integrating the literature on eastern understandings of happiness. It is hoped that the outcomes of such conceptual analyses will stimulate more informed empirical investigations.

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