

The dimensions of prosociality: A cross-cultural lexical analysis

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Abstract

The West is usually portrayed relatively individualistic. It is further argued that this tendency has influenced academia, leading to an underappreciation of the importance of prosociality. In the interest of exploring this topic, an enquiry was conducted into conceptualisations of prosociality across the world's cultures. The enquiry focused on so-called untranslatable words, i.e., which lack an exact translation into another language (in this case, English). Through a quasi-systematic search of academic and grey literature, together with additional data collection, over 200 relevant terms were located. An adapted form of grounded theory identified five dimensions: socialising/congregating; morals/ethics; compassion/kindness; interaction/communication; and communality. The analysis sheds light on the dynamics of prosociality, as understood by cultures across the globe. Moreover, the roster of terms featured have the potential to enrich the nomological network in psychology, allowing for a richer conceptualisation of the social dimensions of human functioning.

Keywords: prosociality; social psychology; cross-cultural; language.

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Introduction

Neglecting Prosociality

It is often suggested that the “West” – to the extent that such a construct is valid (which is debatable, as discussed below) – is relatively individualistic (Becker & Marecek, 2008).

Individualism captures a view of the self that is thought to have emerged over the last few centuries in the West, namely, that it exists as a “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe” (Geertz, 1983, p.59). This perspective derives from the influence of thinkers like Descartes (1641), whose conclusion *cogito ergo sum* was pivotal in establishing the “reification of the disengaged first-person-singular self” (Taylor, 1995, p.59), to the extent that this individualised sense of self is frequently referred to as the “Cartesian I.” Such perspectives do generally acknowledge that other people exist – excepting philosophies such as solipsism – but only either as external objects or interior mental representations.

Thus, in more individualistic societies, people are liable to be seen (and to see *themselves*) primarily as isolated units, beholden unto themselves, and perhaps a few close friends and relatives. As a result, theorists argue that people in such societies tend to overlook the important of connecting and belonging. Moreover, it is argued that many Western societies have become *more* individualistic recently, especially places like the UK and USA, with Putnam (1995) for instance noting the “strange disappearance of social capital” in the latter. (Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986, p.248) as “the sum total of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual (or a group) by virtue of being enmeshed in a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”) This individualistic sense of selfhood has influenced the view of the person in contemporary psychology, which is perhaps not surprising since such fields are inherently culturally situated (as discussed further below), even if this is not often acknowledged by

scholars within these (Becker & Marecek, 2008). This tendency is reflected in the myriad constructs prefixed by “self,” from self-esteem to self-determination. It is not simply that the main object of concern in psychology is the individual. Rather, it is that people are seen as fundamentally unique, autonomous, and self-contained. The social, to the extent that it is recognised at all, tends to then be constructed as an aggregation of individuals (Harrington, 2002).

Individualism is often defined in opposition to the notion of collectivist cultures, of which Eastern countries tend to be used as exemplars. The distinction was originally developed to address differences at a societal level (Hofstede, 1980). However, Markus and Kitayama’s (1991, p.224) work on self-construals explored the impact of such societal configurations on individual self-identity. Their theorising suggested that people in the West tend to view themselves primarily as autonomous atomistic units. In contrast, Eastern cultures are seen as emphasising the importance of “attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence.” As Triandis (2001, p.907) puts it, people in collectivist cultures are more likely to “define themselves as aspects of groups’ and to ‘give priority to in-group goals.’” That said, it could be argued that this individualist-collectivist distinction is simply the latest incarnation of the “East-West” orientalist discourse identified by Said (1995). Just as with the East-West distinction itself, it arguably homogenises and obscures myriad differences at a local level, neglecting the fact that “the East” possesses its own strains of individualism while “the West” has its own collectivist traditions (and also places that place relatively more of an emphasis on communality, like Scandinavia) (Hyypä & Mäki, 2003). Indeed, an influential evaluation and meta-analysis by Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002), reviewing 50 studies, has called into question the validity of the individualist-collectivist distinction (or at least the possibility of unproblematically categorising countries as such). For instance, while European Americans were reported to be more individualistic (e.g., valuing personal

independence) and less collectivistic (e.g., feeling duty to in-groups) than some other cultures, they were not more individualistic than African Americans or Latinos, nor less collectivistic than Japanese or Koreans. As such, although the individualist-collectivist distinction has to an extent corroborated in numerous studies (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010), one must be wary of designating entire societies – or even larger aggregations (e.g., West vs. East) – as either individualistic or collectivistic.

With that caveat in mind though, one might wonder why it *matters* if some societies – such as the USA – nevertheless appear to tend more towards individualism than others. One answer is that individualism is widely seen as being detrimental to health and wellbeing (or to put that in positive terms, health and wellbeing are strongly influenced by factors such as social capital). By way of example, Hyypä and Mäki (2003) conducted a striking analysis in Finland, comparing a Finnish-speaking majority population with a Swedish-speaking minority. Although the two communities are similar in most respects (e.g., genetic profile, socioeconomic status, education, use of health services, environmental stimuli, etc.), there are remarkable disparities in morbidity, disability and mortality, with the average age at death for Swedish-speaking men being 77.9, against 69.2 for Finnish-speaking men. The authors suggest these dramatic inequalities cannot be explained by conventional health-related risk factors, but derive from much greater levels of social capital among the Swedish-speaking minority. Such examples could be multiplied at length. Moreover, this study also highlights the issues with categorising societies as individualistic or collectivistic, as it demonstrates that there can be considerable within-country heterogeneity (i.e., at the level of communities) with respect to individualism or collectivism.

Nevertheless, one could make the case that it would be beneficial for societies that are relatively individualistic to become less so. Relatedly, academic psychology would also do well to develop a greater appreciation and understanding of the value of prosociality – which

Taylor and Wood (2014, p.1427) define broadly as “a positive orientation towards one’s social context.” Here we return to the point above that an individualistic sense of selfhood has influenced the view of the person in contemporary psychology. That is, psychology generally has inevitably been influenced by the cultural contexts in which it has been practiced. In that sense, one can identify multiple “ethnopsychologies” across the globe, from the transnational (e.g., “Western ethnopsychology”; Wierzbicka, 1989) to the subnational (e.g., “Ifaluk ethnopsychology”; Lutz, 1985). However, since the Second World War, due to the hegemony of the USA, American ethnopsychology has come to dominate the field as a whole – i.e., academic psychology as an international endeavour – to the extent that it is often regarded uncritically as psychology *in toto* (Danziger, 1985, 2006). This has meant that concepts, ideologies, priorities, and methods associated with American psychology have come to dominate the international scene. One aspect of this dominance is that (American) English has become the default language for the field (e.g., constituting most of its literature and discourse). Consequently, most of its ideas and theories are structured around the contours of the English language, and biased by the ideological and economic traditions associated with the USA (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Thus, to the extent that the USA is individualistic, such individualism can be seen as permeating the field of psychology as a whole.

As such, the field would benefit from enriching its conceptual understanding – and relatedly its lexicon – of prosocial processes and phenomena. One way of doing so is through studying non-English languages, particularly (but not exclusively) those of cultures regarded as less individualistic. Many cultures – including some non-English-speaking Western ones, like the Nordic nations – are thought to have developed a greater appreciation of prosociality, and its importance for health and wellbeing. Thus, this paper endeavours to investigate cross-cultural perspectives on prosociality, doing so by exploring so-called untranslatable words.

Untranslatable Words

This paper draws on recent work by Lomas (2016), who is developing a lexicography of untranslatable words. While untranslatability is a contested phenomenon, it essentially refers to a word that does not appear to have an equivalent word/phrase in a given other language. The interest in such words is manifold. To begin with, they can assist in understanding other cultures, offering insights into their values, conceptualisations, traditions, and ways of being (Wierzbicka, 1997). The theoretical context here is the linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH) – also popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, following the influential work of Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1940) – which holds that language influences how people experience and understand the world. The stronger version of this hypothesis is linguistic determinism, whereby language is seen as inextricably constituting thought. In contrast, the milder version simply asserts that language shapes thought and experience. In relation to untranslatable words, the stronger deterministic view suggests that only people enmeshed in the culture that produced a given word can truly understand or experience the phenomenon that the word signifies (Taylor, 1985). However, the milder relativistic perspective holds that such words are to an extent accessible to people outside the culture, holding some potential universal relevance. This latter point highlights a second vital element of interest regarding untranslatable words: beyond just being informative vis-à-vis the culture that created a given word, such words enrich *other* lexicons. Indeed, cultures “borrowing” words from one another is central to language development. For instance, of the more than 600,000 lexemes in the OED, the percentage of borrowed words is estimated to be as high as 41% (Tadmor, 2009). Such borrowings are known as “loanwords,” although more specific terminology has also been developed to reflect varying levels of assimilation into the host language (Durkin, 2014).

Of particular interest here is *why* words are borrowed. Haspelmath (2009) identifies two main reasons: “core” versus “cultural” borrowings. The former is when a loanword replicates a word that already exists (i.e., with a similar meaning) in the recipient language. This tends to happen for sociolinguistic reasons, e.g., cultural capital associated with using foreign words. This type of borrowing, while interesting, is not of concern here. However, the second category of cultural borrowing is central. This occurs when the recipient language lacks its own word for a referent (e.g., if a new invention, practice, or idea is introduced to a culture). Thus, the loanword is used for pragmatic reasons: it is cognitive and socially useful, allowing speakers to articulate concepts they had previously struggled to (Blank, 1999). In Lehrer’s (1974, p.105) terminology, such words fill “semantic gaps,” i.e., “the lack of a convenient word to express what [one] wants to speak about.” It is such semantic gaps that makes a given word untranslatable, indicating phenomena that have been overlooked or undervalued by one’s own culture, but which another culture has identified and labelled.

Thus, a central premise of Lomas’ lexicography is that such words can enrich the English lexicon, and moreover augment the nomological network of concepts in psychology. There are numerous reasons why such augmentation is desirable, foremost among which is that, as argued above, from a critical perspective academic psychology tends to be relatively Western-centric (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Thus, the current paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of prosociality through the study of relevant untranslatable words.

Methods

Initial Review

In the original paper establishing the basis of the lexicography, Lomas (2016) identified 216 untranslatable words pertaining to wellbeing, located through a “quasi-systematic” review of academic and grey literature (*quasi* in that there was insufficient material in academic

journals to permit a true systematic review, utilising conventional academic databases).

Readers interested in the details of the process are encouraged to consult this original paper; suffice it to say here that the search protocols had several different elements (e.g., including examining the first 20 websites returned when entering “untranslatable words” into Google). Once the 216 words had been identified, appropriately robust definitions were sought through several sources, including on-line dictionaries, peer-reviewed academic sources (across all fields of academia), and bilingual colleagues. The words and their definitions were then analysed using a variation of grounded theory (GT), a qualitative methodology which allows theory to emerge inductively from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It was a GT variant in that it followed its three main coding stages (open, axial, and selective). In a process of open coding, the data – words and their definitions – were examined for emergent themes. This phase was assisted by other GT processes such as memoing and initial theorising. Axial coding then involved comparing themes in a process of constant comparison, and grouping them into categories based on conceptual similarity. Six main categories were produced, which in turn were paired into three meta-categories: feelings (positive and ambivalent), relationships (love and pro-sociality), and development (character and spirituality). Finally, selective coding saw the identification of a single “core” category, which in that case was wellbeing. Although applying GT to a lexical data-set in this way might perhaps be regarded as somewhat unconventional, there is considerable heterogeneity in the studies purporting to use GT (Cutcliffe, 2005), and arguably it is sufficiently aligned with GT principles to be considered one such example.

Subsequent Data Collection and Analysis

Following Lomas’s (2016) initial paper, the lexicography has since expanded to nearly 1,000 words. This has partly occurred through crowd-sourced contributions to a website created to host the project (www.drtilomas.com/lexicography), and partly through follow-up enquiries

by the current author via “conceptual snowballing.” Of the nearly 800 words collected since the initial paper, approximately 500 have been provided by website visitors, and 300 through conceptual snowballing. The term snowballing derives from recruitment, where participants facilitate the participation of additional people. This metaphor has been borrowed to reflect the way enquiries into an untranslatable word might lead the researcher to encounter related concepts. For instance, although nearly 100 languages are represented in the lexicography currently, many words are taken from a select group that are especially well-studied in psychologically-oriented literature, comprising Chinese, French, German, Greek, Japanese, Pāli, and Sanskrit. Thus, an enquiry into a word from these languages would often lead the researcher to a text in which related words are discussed (which would then be added to the lexicography).

In adding a word – whether through website suggestions or snowballing – the same checking procedures were followed as in the initial paper. Definitions were sought through means including on-line dictionaries, academic sources, and bilingual colleagues. Moreover, once the words and their definitions had been added to the lexicography, they were accessible on the website for public inspection. In some instances, people with knowledge of the word and language in question provided feedback, suggesting a refined or augmented definition of the word. (Of the nearly 2,000 emails to the website so far, around 300 have related and led to the amending of a definition.) This peer and public feedback provides a further credibility check (which is valued in GT).

It should be noted that this subsequent phase of data collection cannot be regarded as systematic (not even in the “quasi-systematic” sense of the original paper). The lexicography is an evolving work-in-progress. After all, some 7,000 languages exist worldwide, and it is unlikely that one research project could study them all and retrieve their relevant words. However, that does not mean one cannot usefully analyse the lexicography’s existing words

and emergent themes/categories, even if such analyses are incomplete and subject to revision. Indeed, the addition of 800 or so new words has not altered the overall thematic structure created in the original paper, with the words being accommodated within its framework of meta-categories and categories. As such, subsequent work on the expanded lexicography has resulted in publications focusing on five of the six categories identified in the original paper (with the current paper constituting the sixth), namely: positive emotions (Lomas, 2017b), ambivalent emotions (Lomas, 2018e), love (Lomas, 2018c), character (Lomas, 2018d), and spirituality (Lomas, 2018b). It has also generated a theoretical paper which outlines the significance of untranslatable words, particularly their value to psychology (e.g., in terms of expanding its nomological network) (Lomas, 2018a).

Following on from these publications, the current paper focuses on the category of prosociality, which comprises over 200 words at present. This is one of two categories included in the meta-category of relationships, alongside love. Whereas love encompasses close bonds with select others, prosociality concerns relationships with people “in general” (e.g., one’s local community). As with love though, it has a positive inflection (rather than simply describing any form of relationship), as reflected in Taylor and Wood (2014, p.1427) definition as “a positive orientation towards one’s social context.” Thus is, the words do not merely relate to the social domain per se, but in some way can be interpreted as reflective or encouraging of prosocial behaviours or attitudes. These words were once again analysed using the GT variation developed in Lomas’ (2016) original paper. The data again comprised the set of words and their definitions, which had been refined and checked in the ways outlined above (e.g., consulting dictionaries, peer-reviewed sources, and bilingual speakers, together with website feedback). In the first stage of open coding, words and their definitions were examined for thematic content. Next, words were grouped together through constant comparison into 18 thematic codes (referred to below as “sub-themes”), which were

themselves in turn aggregated into five themes. This process could be described as somewhat intuitive since, unlike in factor analysis (with its recourse to statistical techniques), choosing which thematic structure provides the “best fit” for the data mainly relies on the researcher’s informed judgement (with the author being the sole researcher). Thus, it is acknowledged that this analytic process is somewhat idiosyncratic, shaped by the author’s personal inclinations and perspectives; other researchers may have configured and labelled the themes differently, based on their own situatedness and reading of the data. Finally, a single “core” category was generated, namely prosociality (although this category had been in mind from the start of the analysis, so it cannot be deemed a truly inductively-derived core category).

Results and Discussion

The words analysed fell into five broad themes: socialising/congregating; morals/ethics; compassion/kindness; interaction/communication; and communality. These are illustrated in figure 1 below, which includes their subthemes, together with an illustrative word for each subtheme. Themes and subthemes are discussed in turn below, featuring a selection of relevant words.

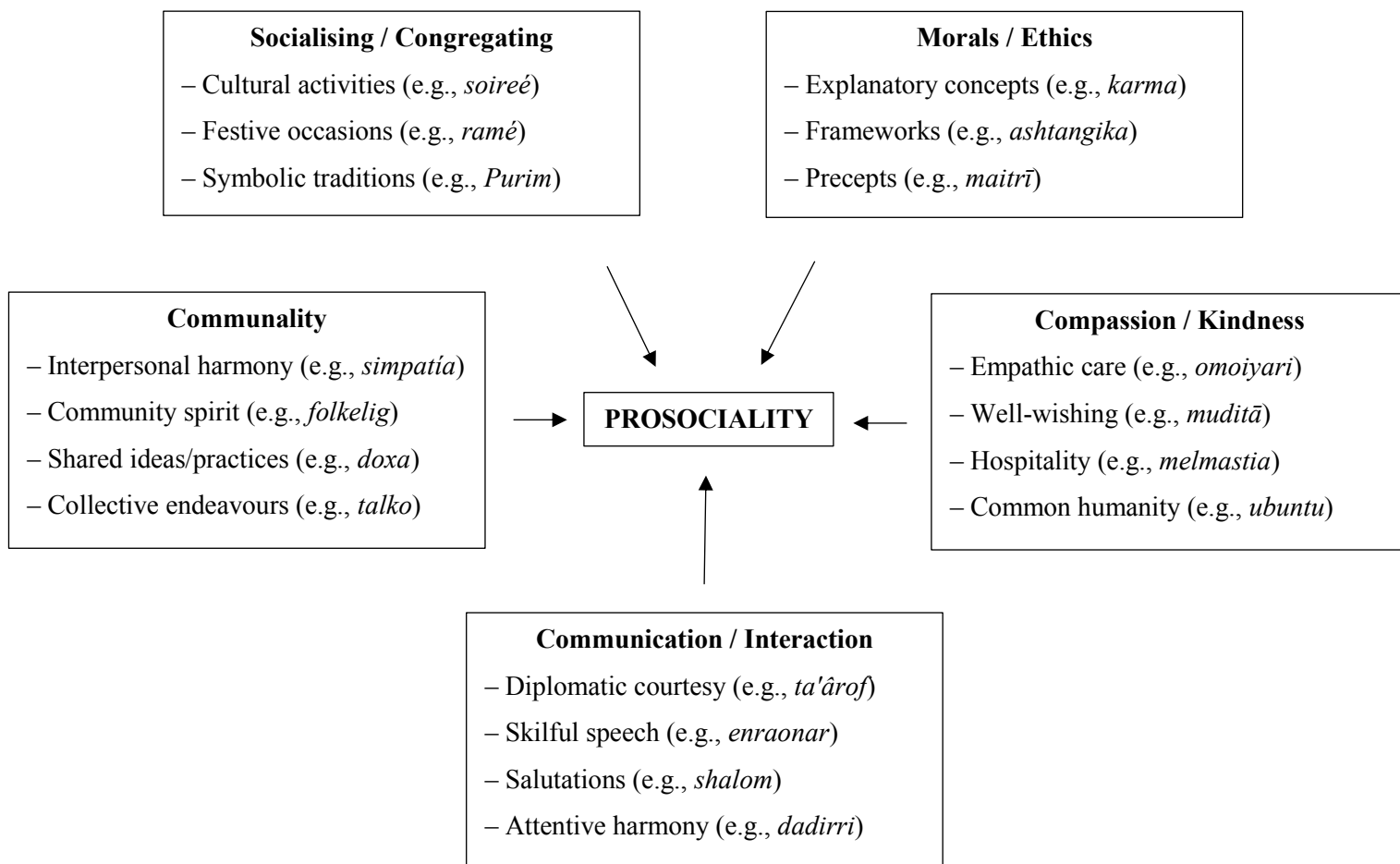


Figure 1. The main themes, with sub-themes and illustrative words

Socialising / Congregating

This first theme addresses the phenomena of socialising and congregating. One might argue that these are not necessarily prosocial in themselves. However, per the definition from Taylor and Wood (2014, p.1427) drawn on here – “a positive orientation towards one’s social context” – one might suggest that unless a person is *compelled* to congregate with others, there is at least some degree of prosocial attitude underlying their decision to socialise.

Some words here depict forms of social occasions and activities that have developed in particular cultures. Consider for instance French, which has provided two loanwords, *soirée* (a relatively cultured evening party, often centred around music or conversation), and *apéritif* (technically a drink taken before dinner, but also covers the occasion itself). Spanish

likewise has similar words. For instance, *tertulia* refers to a social gathering, or even just a conversation, with literary or artistic overtones, and thus has parallels with *soirée*. Relatively less refined is a *botellón* (literally “big bottle”), which describes people congregating in public to socialise while drinking alcohol. Besides labels for different types of gatherings, there are numerous words pertaining to forms and experiences of revelry. For example, the Balinese term *ramé* is used to describe parties that are particularly festive, tumultuous and lively (and boisterous social occasions more generally) (Geertz, 1973, p.446).

Such examples could be multiplied at length, but are sufficient to allude to the diversity of terms pertaining to socialising. Moreover, the European terms in particular illustrate the point that words relating to congregating/socializing – and prosociality more broadly – are not only found within countries typically regarded as collectivist. (Indeed, English itself is replete with such terms; yet it still lacks others which are found in other languages – which are thereby untranslatable – hence the value of this analysis.) After all, both France and Spain, as Western countries, are widely characterised as individualistic (Hofstede, 1980), even if the picture is somewhat complicated (since, (a) in relative terms, they are less so than places like the USA (Delgado, 2011), and (b) there are individualist *and* collectivist traditions within these countries (Green, 1978)). Including words from such languages thus reinforces the point that this analysis is not simply about selecting terms from cultures regarded as collectivist – especially since such labels are problematic (Oyserman et al., 2002). Rather, the point is to augment the nomological network in psychology – and the English lexicon more broadly – with untranslatable terms pertaining to prosociality across all languages (not only those from cultures usually characterised as collectivist).

In addition to these more light-hearted examples, there are many traditions/customs relating to congregating – bringing people together for some purpose – that hold deep cultural significance. Many are connected to particular religions; indeed, so influential are religions in

many cultures – influencing and shaping most aspects of life – that it is effectively impossible to disentangle religious and social practices. Thus, across the world’s languages, there are words relating to religious practices that bring people together. It would be far beyond the scope of this paper to cover all such practices. So, by way of example, this section will just highlight one religion that is particularly abundant in such customs, namely Judaism. The selection of this tradition also reinforces the point, made above, that this analysis is not limited to terms from collectivist cultures. After all, Jewish people – and relatedly, speakers of Hebrew – are integral members of countries typically regarded as individualist, like the USA. Societies are heterogenous, and even those characterised as individualistic will contain within them traditions and communities that place a strong emphasis on communality.

Even just limiting the focus here to this one faith, it would not be possible to discuss its entire rich tapestry of social traditions. As such, two shall be mentioned – both quite different, and which both embed various customs within them – to give a sense of this richness. First, on a more revelrous note, aligning with the festive words above, is the annual festival of *Purim*, commemorating the saving of the Jewish people from a figure named Haman, as recounted in the Book of Esther. (The name is possibly the plural of *pūr*, meaning lot, alluding to the drawing of lots by Haman, although this interpretation is contested; Prouser, 2013). It is generally a joyous occasion, marked customs including: *mishloach manot* (literally ‘sending of portions’), i.e., exchanging gifts of food and drink; *matanot l’evyonim* (‘gifts to the poor’), i.e., charitable donations; *seudat Purim* (*Purim* feast); *keriat hamegillah* (‘reading of the scroll,’ i.e., Book of Esther); and *al hanissim* (‘on the miracles’), i.e., post-meal prayers.

The joyousness of *Purim* is contrasted with the gravity of *Shiv'ah*, the Hebrew word for “seven,” which denotes the week-long period of mourning prescribed in Judaism, a ritual known as “sitting *Shiv'ah*.” Upon a burial, first degree relatives assume the status of *avel*, or

mourner. Friends, relatives, and the community then visit to pay a *Shiv'ah* call, providing comfort and solace, as well as supportive necessities. This practice, also known as *Nichum aveilim* – “comforting the mourner” – is regarded as a great *mitzvah*. *Mitzvah* in itself is an important term, meaning commandment or law, thereby implying a good deed (in accordance with Jewish ethics). Readers may recognise the term from the practices of *Bar* and *Bat mitzvah*, the ceremonies marking the “coming of age” of boys and girls. *Bar* and *bat* mean son and daughter respectively, so according to Judiac law, the ceremony marks the occasion when young people are regarded as accountable for their actions, becoming sons/daughters “of the law.” This point leads into the next section: as per *mitzvah*, there are a wealth of prosocial words pertaining to morals and ethics.

Morals / Ethics

Across the world’s cultures, many different systems of morals/ethics have been developed, giving rise to numerous untranslatable words. Morals/ethics are relevant to prosociality for two main reasons: (a) they are *created* via prosocial processes, and (b) they *concern*, in part, prosocial behaviour.

With regard to (a), morals (from the Latin *mōres*, connoting norms, custom, tradition), are beliefs and practices about right and wrong that are dominant in a community. Ethics (from the Greek *ethikos*, meaning custom or usage) are then the codification of such morals by a group “on the basis of mutual and usually reciprocal recognition” (Hazard Jr, 1994, p.453). With regard to (b), morals/ethics cover many areas of life, not only those relating to prosociality per se, such as dietary and culinary prescriptions. However, many moral/ethical guidelines do pertain to prosociality, elucidating the ways in which we should ideally interact and treat each other. Before considering some examples of these prescriptions, it would be useful to consider *why* morality is important. Underlying their specific precepts, many religions/cultures have developed foundational theories about morality itself, i.e., why it

matters. By way of example, as with Judaism above, this section will focus on one tradition that has a particularly rich lexicon in this regard: Buddhism. Besides its richness, Buddhism has been selected for attention here due to its prominence in the lexicography, to which it has contributed numerous terms through conceptual snowballing (as a result of the personal interests of the author, a practising Buddhist). It should nevertheless be remembered that most religions/spiritual traditions have their own moral/ethical frameworks, even if these have mostly not yet been incorporated into the lexicography, and which would likely introduce further nuance and complexity to this theme (since traditions are not identical).

At the heart of Buddhism is a doctrine known in Sanskrit as *pratītyasamutpāda*. This translates as the law of conditionality or “dependent origination,” articulating the Buddha’s insight into the causal nature of the universe (Shulman, 2008). In Buddhist philosophy, this is arguably the meta law that underpins all other laws. For instance, it is the basis for another central Buddhist teaching, *catvāri āryasatyāni*, or the four “noble truths.” The first truth is *duḥkha* (suffering or dissatisfaction), which refers in this context to the idea that life is inherently pervaded by this quality. Second is *samudaya* (origin or cause), which refers here to the cause of suffering, namely craving and attachment. Third is *nirodha* (cessation), which refers to the ending of *duḥkha* by ceasing to crave and attach to phenomena. Fourth is *marga* (path), which refers to the way one can cease craving/attachment, which in Buddhism is the *ashtāngika* (i.e., “Eightfold” path, elucidated further below).

Understanding *pratītyasamutpāda* is seen as the key to wellbeing, and ultimately to *nirvāṇa* (awakening and consequent freedom from suffering). As Sangharakshita and Subhuti (2013, p.49) put it, “once we have understood and are fully convinced about the nature of reality as [*pratītyasamutpāda*], we align ourselves with those regularities or laws that lead us to liberation.” This law has been expounded upon in various ways in Buddhist literature. One influential analysis – by Buddhaghosa in the 5th Century C.E. – identifies five levels of

conditionality, known as the fivefold *niyāma* (“laws, conditions or constraints that govern processes or phenomena”; Keown, 2003). These delineate five domains of life that are subject to causal law-like principles, each of which is delineated by a different prefix.

The first prefix is *utu*, which means seasons; thus *utu-niyāma* refers to the “law of the seasons,” i.e., the regularity of environmental phenomena. Regarded anachronistically (in the context of contemporary understanding), this refers to non-organic physical laws (e.g., the law of gravity). Second, *bīja* refers to the “law of seeds,” i.e., patterns in the realm of organic phenomena (e.g., genetic inheritance of phenotypes). Third, *citta* is the “law of the mind,” describing causal patterns among mental events. Fourth, *karma* concerns causality with respect to ethics/morality (as discussed further shortly). Finally, *dharma* is the “law of nature,” which in this context refers to the spiritual potential inherent in the universe (e.g., its capacity to produce sentient beings who can make spiritual progress).

This framework has subsequently been deployed in Buddhism as a basis and rationale for morals/ethics. Of particular relevance are the last two *niyāma*. Firstly, there is notion of *karma*. This differs subtly from some other religious notions of ethical justice, such as the Christian notions of sin, in that it requires no supernatural agency/being to administer it (reinforcing the point that traditions are not identical in terms of their conceptualisations and frameworks.) It rather holds that we are rewarded or punished, in a causal sense, *by* our actions, in that ethical actions are likely to lead to positive future outcomes and states of mind, and unethical ones to negative outcomes and states. Thus, it offers a potent rationale for acting morally: not only do moral acts benefit the recipient, and the community at large – both of which are conventionally given as reasons for morality – but the actor *too* (Kang, 2009). This motivation then blends into the final level of causality, the *dharma niyāma*. Buddhism holds that if one cultivates ethical actions – denoted by the adjective *kusala*, meaning skilful – the potential result is not “merely” happiness. Ultimately, *dharma niyāma*

is a statement of the more radical possibility that the Eightfold path can ultimately lead one to *bodhi* – awakening or enlightenment – and subsequent *nirvāṇa*. With that goal in mind, Buddhism then specifies what constitutes skilful/ethical behaviour through various precepts, most of which pertain to treatment of other people (hence their relevance here).

To begin with, three aspects of the Eightfold path are specifically concerned with *sīla* (morality). All eight aspects are prefixed by *samyag*, meaning right, correct, or most evocatively, best. Thus, pertaining to morality specifically, this prefix is appended to *vāc* (speech), *karmānta* (action), and *ājīva* (livelihood). (Of the remaining five, two pertain to *prajñā* (wisdom): *drṣṭi* (view) and *saṃkalpa* (resolve). Finally, three pertain to meditation: *vyāyāma* (effort), *smṛti* (mindfulness), and *samādhi* (concentration).) Then, elaborating on the strands of morality are numerous lists of precepts, specifying in detail what right speech, action and livelihood consist of. The most widely known and followed are the *pañcaśīlāni* (“five precepts”), whereby practitioners vow to refrain from various harmful behaviours. The first is *pāṇātipātā*, i.e., harming/killing living beings (or, couched in more positive terms, one might commit to *maitrī*, usually translated as loving-kindness or care). Second, *adinnādānā*, i.e., “taking the not given” (or phrased positively, committing to *dana*, i.e., generosity). Third is *kāmesu micchācāra*, i.e., sexual or sensual misconduct (or positively, committing to the cultivation of *santosa*, i.e., contentment). Fourth is *musāvādā*, i.e., false speech (or put positively, committing to *satya*, or truthfulness). The final precept is *surāmerayamajja pamādaṭṭhānā*, i.e., unmindful states related to alcohol or drugs (or positively, the cultivation of *smṛti*, i.e., mindfulness)

Thus, most of these precepts relate, directly or indirectly, to people’s relationships with others. Having set out an example of a general theory of morals/ethics – using Buddhism as a case study – subsequent themes feature specific examples of prosocial behaviours that

are encouraged by various cultures. Many pertain to compassion and kindness, as the next section explores.

Compassion / Kindness

The section above introduced ethics/morality by exploring theoretical principles that explain *why* these are considered important. Since it would be beyond the scope of this paper to consider such principles from all the world's cultures, Buddhism was used as a case study, since it is particularly rich in this regard (and is of personal interest to the author). There we encountered examples of specific forms of action regarded as constitutive of ethics/morality, such as the "five precepts." Arguably, at least two of these directly relate to this current theme: *maitrī* (loving-kindness), and *dāna* (generosity). Similar terms can be found across the world's languages. *Maitrī* has parallels with *agape*, which in classical Greece denoted benevolence, charity and goodwill. The term features extensively in Greek versions of the Bible (rendered in English translations as charity), where it is portrayed as the unconditional love that God holds towards humanity, and which followers are themselves exhorted to emulate ("love thy neighbour"). Indeed, it is elevated as pre-eminent among the virtues: in the words of St. Paul, "So faith, hope, love [*agape*] abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Notions comparable to *agape* and *maitrī* are found in many cultures/traditions, such as the Jewish notion of *gemilut hasadim*, often rendered as the bestowal or acts of loving-kindness (or alternatively as grace or mercy).

Such terms are augmented by those denoting forms of compassion. This is itself a loanword, derived from the Latin *com* (with) and *pati* (to suffer), thus implying a shared suffering. In this sense, it has parallels with its kinship loanwords empathy and sympathy, both of which have their origins in Greek. (However, they had different routes into English: sympathy arrived via Latin in the 16th Century, while empathy did not appear until the 20th century, travelling via Latin and then the German term *Einführung*, which translates as "into

feeling.”) In its original Greek context, *pathos* could mean suffering, but also more broadly emotion or even experience. The prefix *em-* then denotes “in,” while *sym* (*sun* in the original Greek) denotes “with.” Empathy and sympathy thus respectively describe sharing in or with another person’s feelings, processes which are reflected in a range of untranslatable words.

There are terms describing empathic awareness, like the Japanese *omoiyari*, which Hara (2006, p.24) defines as “altruistic sensitivity.” As per empathy and sympathy, it depicts an intuitive understanding of others’ plight; however, it also implies consequent altruistic action (which does not necessarily follow with empathy/sympathy). Some terms refer to empathically sharing sorrows/pains in particular, such as the Hebrew noun *koev halev*, which means “the heart aches.” Others refer to vicarious embarrassment – akin to cringing – including *Fremdschämen* in German, *myötähäpeä* in Finnish, and *pena ajena* in Spanish. Conveying a more general concern for others is the Māori verb and noun *aroha*; although sometimes rendered as mutuality, this translation lacks the warmth implied in the original (which can also be translated simply as love).

Conversely, some terms describe sharing others’ *positive* emotions, a usage which tends not to happen with compassion, empathy and sympathy (which are usually deployed in relation to dysphoria). For instance, the Sanskrit term *muditā* translates as sympathetic or vicarious happiness, and is valorised in Theravada Buddhism as one of the four *brahma-vihārās*. (The latter translates as “abodes of brahma,” with *Brahma* being the Vedic term for the creator or creative power of the universe. The phrase denotes four qualities – qualified by the adjective *apramāṇa*, meaning immeasurable or boundless – that practitioners are encouraged to cultivate, the others being *maitrī*, introduced above, *karuṇā* (compassion) and *upeksha* (equanimity).) Somewhat similarly, the Hebrew noun *nachat*, or *naches* in Yiddish, describes pride and joy in relation to another’s accomplishment (usually family members), as does the Yiddish verb *kvell* – derived from an old Germanic verb meaning to “well up” –

which specifically captures the process of overtly *expressing* these feelings. Relatedly, the Dutch verb *gunnen* articulates the feeling that a person deserves something positive (and deriving satisfaction from them attaining it).

Words relating to compassion blend with those concerning kindness. Kindness itself has a revealing etymology: it derives from the Old English *cynde*, which relates to the notion of kin. Thus, the term kindness originally described the type of affection that ideally exist between people who are kin, or are of the same “kind” (e.g., clan). However, its usage began to take on a more expansive quality, such that one might aim to bestow this kindness on people in general (as perhaps a more modest and achievable version of *agape*). Valorisation of kindness is found in *ubuntu*, from Zulu (and other Bantu languages), which recognises that all people are kin by virtue of their common humanity; as Desmond Tutu puts it, “It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours” (cited in Bowen, 2014, p.83). These sentiments are echoed in other words which likewise elevate such qualities into an ideal or norm that is central to the culture. For instance, for the Pashtun of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a central tenet of their ethical code – known as *Pashtunwali* – is *melmastia*, the moral obligation and honour in offering sanctuary and hospitality to all, without expectation of recompense (Ambreen & Mohyuddin, 2013). Similar ideas are expressed by the Greek *xenia*, which denotes “guest-friendship,” and the Hebrew *hachnasat orchim*, which translates as ‘welcoming the stranger’ (Blumberg, 2006, p.724). Although in one sense these terms can be rendered simply as “hospitality,” this rather emotionless word fails to capture the significance of these ideals in their respective cultures.

For instance, *hachnasat orchim* is another Judaic *mitzvah*, and intersects with a related *mitzvah* known as *tzedaka*. While this can be rendered as charity, it incorporates a moral obligation that is not usually present in this English term (e.g., *tzedaka* is derived from the root *Tzadei-Dalet-Qof*, meaning righteousness, justice or fairness). As such, rather than a case

of magnanimity, there is the implication that charitable giving is one's duty, arising out of concern with essential justice (Feingold, 1987). The importance of treating others well is similarly captured by the Chinese noun *guān xī*. However, this has a slightly different rationale compared to *tzedaka*; in contrast to the vaguely legalistic connotations of the latter terms, *guān xī* taps into ideas of *karma*, whereby one does good deeds and thus might reasonably expect favours or goodwill in return. Relatedly, if one is in *receipt* of good deeds, *ēn* describes a moral indebtedness, and a subsequent sense of duty. These terms relating to the give-and-take of social relationships overlap with the next theme, which describes a more general process of skilful interaction and communication.

Interaction / Communication

This next theme speaks to harmony within social relationships, and specifically to interacting and communicating in skilful ways. An exemplar is the Farsi *ta'ârof*. Although sometimes translated simply as politeness, this is a culturally important and nuanced form of "ritual courtesy," particularly in relation to receiving and offering hospitality and gifts; Raifee (2013, p.154) likens it to a "verbal wrestling match" of politeness, involving repeated instance by the host that the guest have more food/drink, and equally insistent refusal by the guest to take it, until eventually the guest relents. This is thus used both by the host to make the guest feel welcome, and equally by the guest to "minimise imposition upon, or inconvenience to" the host. A similarly mutually-beneficial interaction is denoted by the Arabic *taarradhin*. This describes a positive agreement/solution to a disagreement, one that does not involve begrudging compromise, but rather a "win-win" for both parties.

Words relating to courtesy and diplomacy are joined by those reflecting the art of communication, like the Catalan verb *enraonar*, which means to engage in discussions in a civilised, reasoned manner. As Trillas and Navarro (2015) explain, although both *enraonar* and *parlar* are often simply translated as "to speak," the former implies communicating with

others in “the best possible manner.” They further suggest it means “not speaking incorrectly, doing so with a certain order, precision, calm and with the help of minimal but sufficient reasons to explain oneself,” and at the same time, attempting “to understand and be understood as clearly as possible.” The role of communication in social harmony is emphasised in a different way by the Fijian Hindi verb *talanoa*, which translates as “to tell stories,” but which has been analysed as a “gossip genre” in which so-called “idle chatter” serves an important function as a social adhesive (Brenneis, 1984, p.487). Capturing a different mode of discourse, the Arabic verb *samar* signifies the culturally significant and popular activity of sitting together in conversation at sunset (or generally in the evening).

In addition to these forms of positive discourse, there are a wealth of interjections and salutations that serve an adaptive social function. Hebrew for instance is graced by many examples, including: *shalom*, a polysemous noun connoting peace, harmony, wholeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquillity, and which is used as a greeting/parting salutation (as is its Arabic equivalent *salām*); *mazal tov*, which means “good fortune,” and serves as a blessing of health and happiness; and *tithadesh*, which translates as “get new,” and is offered to someone who has acquired a new possession or fortuitous change in circumstances. On a different note, there are interjections expressing gratitude, for instance in relation to another person’s effort, such as *xīn kǔ* in Chinese, and the Japanese term *otsukaresama*, which is derived from the verb *tsukarea*, meaning “to be or get tired” (Spiridon, 2014). Then there are interjections conveying compassion, such as the Swahili term *pole*, which articulates a sense of “I’m sorry for your misfortune,” and the Armenian expression *tsave danem* (literally “let me take away your pain”), which is used to position the speaker as caring about the other.

Finally, there are terms that transcend communication, being representative of a broader way of being. For instance, the Hawaiian term *aloha* – which can be interpreted as “the breath of presence” – is not only used as an expressive, caring salutation for both hello

and goodbye, but is depicted as epitomising the spirit of the island culture itself (Kaomea, 2000). Or take *dadirri*, used in numerous Australian Aboriginal languages, which describes a spiritual act of reflective and respectful listening. As Ungunmerr-Baumann (2002, p.1), of the Ngangikurungkurr Tribe, explains, it is “is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.” This is depicted as a powerful contemplative practice; as she continues, “When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness.” Thought of in this way, it is about more than simply listening well; in a deeper sense, West et al. (2012) describe it as an entire a contemplative way of life, being receptive and attuned to the world around with an attitude of respect and even reverence.

These latter meanings associated with *dadirri* indicate that skilful interaction does not only have to be between people. Many cultures have developed words to reflect the notion that human beings can – moreover should – be in communion with the broader natural world. For instance, Norwegian has the noun *friluftsliv*, which translates as “free air life” or “outdoor life,” articulating a philosophy of open-air living, and moreover of living in tune with nature, that is valorised in Norwegian culture (Gurholt, 2008). Or consider *hózhó*, which is portrayed as constituting the “essence” of the Diné (Navajo) people, reflecting their ideal of living in balance, peace, and harmony with the world around. This again is a whole way of being: as Kahn-John and Koithan (2015, p.24) explain, it constitutes a “complex wellness philosophy and belief system” of the Diné, “comprised of principles that guide one's thoughts, actions, behaviors, and speech.” Conversely, representing an absence of harmonious connection, the Hopi term *koyaanisqatsi* has been rendered as “nature out of balance” or “time out of joint,” denoting a dysfunctional way of life/living that calls for urgent change or renewal (Clements, 2004). These ideas around harmony and cohesion are reflected in the final theme, which articulates a broader sense of communality.

Communality

This final theme transcends the specifics of particular relationships and interactions, and speaks to the togetherness of the group as a whole. This category is perhaps exemplified by the Spanish ideal/norm of *simpatía*, which Triandis et al. (1984, p.1363) describe as a Hispanic “cultural script” that encourages people to “strive for harmony in interpersonal relations.” This idealised notion of social accord and synchrony is likewise reflected in the Javanese term *tjotjog*. According to Geertz (1976, p.31), it means “to fit, as a key does in a lock,” and is a “metaphysical concept” at the heart of Javanese culture, one which can be used in relation to just about all aspects of life, applying to contexts as diverse as a group being in agreement, a meeting of minds, a husband and wife being well-matched, clothes fitting well, food being agreeable, and the occurrence of a desired outcome. As such, the concept epitomises – though is not limited to – the notion of a close, connected, and coherent social group.

These ideas of communality are reflected in numerous words which tease apart its nuances. Some denote a sense of “community spirit,” like the Arabic term *asabiyyah*, which has been variously translated as solidarity, group feeling, and group consciousness; although sometimes equated with tribal loyalty, it is also often used to depict more intangible but no less powerful kinship bonds, such as people united by religious beliefs (Cleveland, 2015). Solidarity is likewise captured in the Swahili term *tuko pamoja*, which translates as “we are together” or “we are one” (Carotenuto & Luongo, 2016, p.157). Then, signifying a national spirit of inclusiveness is the Danish adjective *folkelig*, which can be rendered as “folkish,” and its related noun *folkelighed*, which translates as “what belongs to the people,” and has been defined as “enlightened democratic inclusivity” (Levisen, 2013, p.30). On an even grander scale is the Russian noun *mir*, which translates both as “peace” and “world” or “community,” thus articulating a broader sense of global togetherness (Shevtsova, 2015).

Words for community spirit overlap with terms articulating shared ideals and values. These are exemplified by the Greek *polis*, one of the earliest and most influential examples of such words, which roughly translates as city-state. This is the foundation for a range of similarly influential derivations, including *politicos*, “of, for, or relating to citizens” (the basis of the English loanword politics), and *politeia*, which denotes the order of social and political relationships in a polis. Greek is particularly rich in such terms, which is to be expected given the pioneering role the culture played in forging ideas around how people could and should live *together*. While it’s beyond the scope here to adumbrate all its contributions in this respect, a few more can be mentioned to illustrate its scope and influence. For instance, *doxa* connotes common belief and popular opinion, as well as a sense of shared behaviours and practices, and is the basis for terms like orthodox. Somewhat similarly, *democracy* – also a loanword of course – combines *dêmos* (people or neighbourhood) with *krátos* (force/power).

Notions of shared ideals/values abound in other languages, with various nuances embedded within them. Some terms incorporate a religious/spiritual dimension, like the Sanskrit *saṃgha*, which means assembly, but is used (e.g., in Buddhism) to describe a religious/spiritual community based around shared values and practices; although sometimes used to refer specifically to a monastic order, it can also describe the broader community of Buddhists. Other terms are more secular, for instance describing people working together for the common good. There are numerous such words from Scandinavian languages in particular, which is apposite given these countries’ reputations for egalitarianism and communitarianism (Hyypä & Mäki, 2003). For instance, a task collectively undertaken is called a *talko* (Swedish), *talkoot* (Finnish), or *dugnad* (Norwegian); as Huvila (2012, p.58) elucidates, these are often used for “a short, intensive, collective effort with a tangible goal,” such as when people pitch in to help a person renovate their home. Finally, there is the neologism *Janteloven*, coined by Danish author Aksel Sandemose (1936) to describe the laws

of Jante – a fictional community in his novel – that proscribe individualism and encourage collectivism. In one sense, these laws could be regarded as exemplifying the kind of community spirit that Scandinavian societies are often celebrated for; at the same time though, the term can be used pejoratively to denote a pressure towards conformity that can stifle individual development and expression (Levisen, 2013). Thus, the term perhaps points to the limits of the value of prosociality, in that even while social integration is important, there are points beyond which cultures can deem it coercive and even repressive.

Conclusion

The analysis explored five broad themes pertaining to prosociality: socialising/congregating, morals/ethics, compassion/kindness, interaction/communication, and communality. These themes, subthemes, and key words are illustrated in figure 1 above. The main significance of this analysis is that these dimensions of existence are arguably somewhat overlooked in societies that are relatively more individualistic, particularly the Anglophone Western countries (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Relatedly, from a critical perspective, this individualism has influenced academia itself, e.g., leading to models of wellbeing that downplay the importance of social bonds, and neglect the notion that wellbeing is to an extent a social phenomenon. For instance, there has been considerable prominence given in positive psychology to Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade's (2005) model of subjective wellbeing which holds that approximately only 10% of its variance is shaped by social circumstances. This has led the field to prioritise interventions that target individual psychological functioning, rather than endeavouring to effect more large-scale social change that may improve wellbeing (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Unfortunately, it is an ecological fallacy to suggest that this 10% figure (even if it is correct) applies to all people: for some, particularly people in more disadvantageous social positions, the percentage of the variance is likely to be far higher (Lund et al., 2010).

Thus, the advantage of studying non-English speaking cultures is that, compared to some Western societies (e.g., the USA or the UK), these may have a greater appreciation of the importance of social bonds. The word “some” in the previous sentence is important, since among the cultures that are considered appreciative of commonality are the Nordic nations, a factor that is usually cited when explaining their relatively high levels of wellbeing (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2016). As such, the words here offer a useful corrective to tendencies in psychology to overlook the social dimensions of wellbeing. The five themes elucidated above are testament to the rich variety of ways in which people can connect and cohere. These range from the solidarity found in congregating, to the value of being able to interact skilfully. Hopefully the ongoing study of these terms can help further our understanding of the value of prosociality, e.g., in terms of its impact of wellbeing, whose importance has already been recognised by the emergence of paradigms like “positive social psychology” (Lomas, 2015).

Moreover, further study is particularly necessary given the limitations of the analysis here. First, the treatment of the included words has been inevitably restricted, limited by attempting to convey an overarching comparative analysis (i.e., rather than focusing on a small number of terms) within the constraints of a short article. Moreover, given that translation is such a problematic and contested exercise, it will not have been possible to arrive at a canonical description of the words that would satisfy all speakers of the donor language. As with any form of translation, one aims “to catch the spirit” of the original word (McClaren, 1998, p.128). However, given the fluidity and complexity of language use, there will always be many possible ways of defining and interpreting a given word. Thus, the descriptions of the words here are merely one possible way of elucidating these terms, and ultimately are based on the author’s reading and interpretation of the source material. That said, dictionaries and scholarly sources were consulted in the aim of arriving at viable and

valid descriptions of all the words, and moreover in most cases the descriptions/definitions were checked with a native speaker of the donor language. In addition to issues around translation and hermeneutics, the analysis, and the lexicography itself, are by no means exhaustive. For instance, the lexicography only currently features around 100 languages, out of potentially more than 7,000 currently in existence. There are likely to be many relevant terms that are included neither in the analysis above, nor the lexicography as it currently stands (which is a work-in-progress). Moreover, some cultures and traditions have been considered in more depth than others (e.g., Buddhism), reflecting the interests of the author, which drove the process of conceptual snowballing in particular directions. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the analysis may still offer a useful cross-cultural appraisal of prosociality, limited and partial as it may be. Future research may hopefully build on this, developing an even more comprehensive and nuanced cross-cultural understanding of this important topic.

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