

Ambivalent emotions:

A cross-cultural conceptual review of their relevance to wellbeing

Qualitative Research in Psychology

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Abstract

Although wellbeing tends to be associated with positive affect, theorists have suggested it might also involve more ambivalent emotions. Scholars have further argued that although such emotions are somewhat overlooked in Western societies, other cultures are more attuned to them. In the interest of exploring the value of ambivalent emotions, an enquiry was conducted into relevant concepts found across the world's cultures, focusing specifically on so-called untranslatable words. Through a quasi-systematic search of academic and grey literature, together with conceptual snowballing, 30 relevant terms were located. A process of grounded theory analysis identified five main themes: hope; longing; pathos; appreciation of imperfection; and sensitivity to mystery. The analysis highlights the need for a more expansive conception of wellbeing, going beyond an exclusive identification with positively-valenced emotions to incorporate more complex and ambivalent processes.

Keywords: ambivalent emotion; wellbeing; cross-cultural; language.

Introduction

Conceptualising Emotions

Wellbeing tends to be operationalised in multidimensional terms, incorporating numerous ways in which a person might hope to do or be well (de Chavez et al., 2005). These ways include: physical health (Larson, 1999); social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986); cognitive performance (Tang et al., 2007); and positive affect (Diener, 2000). For instance, Pollard and Davidson (2001, p.10) define wellbeing as ‘a state of successful performance across the life course integrating physical, cognitive and social-emotional function.’ Thus, a central component of wellbeing is an affective dimension, i.e., emotions and feelings¹.

In the literature, psychologists tend to focus more on emotions than feelings. Broadly speaking, there are two main perspectives on emotions: naturalistic and constructionist (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). Naturalistic models conceptualise emotions in an essentialist way as natural kinds, i.e., relatively universal affective responses. Within this broad perspective are two key models. Russell’s (1980) circumplex model posits that affective states are generated through the interaction of two independent neurophysiological systems: valence, i.e., pleasant-unpleasant; and arousal, i.e., active-passive. Conversely, Ekman’s (1999)

¹ Damasio (2001, p.781) defines an emotion as ‘a patterned collection of chemical and neural responses that is produced by the brain when it detects the presence of an emotionally competent stimulus,’ and feelings as ‘the mental representation of the physiological changes that characterize emotions.’ Damasio further suggests that **whereas** emotions are ‘scientifically public,’ i.e., visible physiologically, feelings are private, inner subjective experiences. Both phenomena are of interest here. However, in addition to these prescriptive definitions – i.e., how terms are deployed in scientific theory – this paper is also concerned with descriptive definitions, **i.e.**, how such terms are used in everyday life (Widen & Russell, 2010). **As such**, the paper also focuses on qualia more broadly – what wellbeing *feels* like – as reflected in Jackson’s (1982, p.127) allusion to the ‘experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise or seeing the sky.’

paradigm of basic emotions proposes five such emotions: anger; disgust; fear; sadness; and enjoyment. These five differ in terms of such factors as antecedent events, appraisal, and probable behavioural responses, and moreover are regarded as being subserved by a ‘discrete and independent neural system’ (Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005, p. 715). This theory has been supported by extensive cross-cultural research which suggests that these five may, to some extent, be universally experienced and recognised (Ekman, 2016). That said, it has also been widely critiqued and challenged, both theoretically (e.g., Ortony & Turner, 1990) and empirically (e.g., Gendron, Roberson, van der Vyver, & Barrett, 2014).

Standing in contrast to these naturalistic models are constructionist² theories. Rather than emotions being inner states that are universally available, they are conceived as a product of the complex dynamics of social interaction, and of the broader cultural context in which this interaction occurs (Kövecses, 2003). A pioneer here is Harré (1986, p.5), who saw emotions as subsisting mainly ‘in the reciprocal exchanges of a social encounter.’ Since such encounters are primarily discursive, he regarded emotions as primarily a linguistic construction. From this perspective, given linguistic differences across cultures – a point that shall be explored below – there is great cross-cultural variation in how emotions are

² Such theories are also sometimes referred to as constructivist. However, although constructionism and constructivism are often used synonymously, they are subtly different traditions. Constructionism is more socially-focused, being primarily concerned with how knowledge is produced by ‘social practices and institutions, or... the interactions and negotiations between relevant social groups’ (Gasper, 1999, p.855). By contrast, constructivism is more psychologically- and individually-focused, being primarily concerned with the way that individuals mentally construct ‘the world of experience through cognitive processes’ (Young & Collin, 2004, p.375). To an extent, the current paper straddles both traditions, since in addition to its concern with how different cultures have conceptualised subjective experience, there is also an interest in the way that these conceptualisations might impact upon people’s cognitive processes. However, to avoid confusion, the label constructionism will be used throughout.

experienced, interpreted and understood. This form of strong cultural determinism has been advocated by anthropologists such as Lutz (2011).

Finally, between the naturalistic and constructionist perspectives is a middle ground, featuring theories that incorporate elements of both positions. Such theories allow for the possibility of universals in human experiences, but also recognise that these universals may be shaped by socio-cultural contexts in various ways. Indeed, this is the stance taken in the present paper. For instance, Feldman Barrett's (2006) conceptual-act model proposes that discrete emotions emerge from a conceptual analysis of a 'momentary state of core affect' (p.49). The concept of core affect arguably aligns with the naturalistic theories above, being a state of affective arousal – as per the circumplex model – or a basic emotion, as per Ekman. However, the 'ebb and flow of core affect' is then filtered through a person's linguistic-conceptual schemas and thus interpreted as a specific emotion. As such, her theory accommodates the kind of cultural mediation of experiences argued for in constructionist models. Similarly, Matsumoto and Hwang (2012, p.212) advocate the idea of 'culturally driven emotion regulation.' As per naturalistic theories, they argue for 'a set of biologically innate emotions that are produced by a core emotion system' (p.92). However, these emotions are then filtered through culturally-acquired schemas that calibrate how these emotions are felt, interpreted, and reacted to.

Valence and Ambivalence

A key component of all emotion theories is valence. Whether such theories take a naturalistic or a constructionist stance, or a synthesis of both, emotions are commonly appraised in terms of valence, i.e., classified as positive or negative. Valence can be regarded as an 'evaluative response' to one's current situation, namely, the 'operations by which organisms discriminate threatening from nurturant environments' (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994, p.401). A common way of conceptualising this response is in terms of approach vs. withdrawal. Positively-

valenced emotions are associated with neurophysiological and behavioural attraction towards a stimulus, with concomitant feelings of pleasure and reward. Conversely, negatively-valenced emotions are associated with a reaction against a stimulus, with associated dysphoric feelings. This conceptualisation of valence has implications for outcomes such as wellbeing. Theories of wellbeing tend to depict positively-valenced emotions as reflective of wellbeing, and negatively-valenced ones as antithetical to it. For example, subjective wellbeing has been theorised as comprising two main dimensions (Diener, 2000): cognitive, i.e., judgements of life satisfaction; and affective, i.e., the ratio of positive to negative affect. Thus, with the affective component, positively-valenced emotions are treated as cumulatively contributing to wellbeing, whereas negatively-valenced ones detract from it.

However, over recent years, scholars have begun to pay attention to the intriguing phenomenon of ambivalent emotions – also known as mixed emotions – i.e., emotional experiences that are a compound of positive *and* negative valence. A classic example is longing, which has been defined as a ‘blend of the primary emotions of happiness and sadness’ (Holm, Greker, & Strömberg, 2002, p.608). Such experiences can be appraised in various ways. In their Analogical Emotional Scale, Carrera and Ocejja (2007) differentiate between sequential and simultaneous ambivalent emotions. The former occurs when an emotion of one valence is swiftly followed by one of an oppositional valence. Perhaps even more intriguingly, the latter describes the case when emotions of opposing valence are simultaneously activated. To an extent, this possibility runs counter to traditional conceptualisations of emotions, which tend to evoke the idea of a ‘single bipolar affective mechanism,’ i.e., one continuum, with positive and negative valence at either end, and with any given experience occupying one point along this spectrum (Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003, p.211). However, Cacioppo and Berntson’s (1994) Evaluative Space Model suggests that rather than a bipolar continuum, the affect system involves a bivariate

space, in which positive and negative valence are functionally independent. As Larsen et al. put it, ‘activation of positivity (appetition) may be partially distinct and separate from activation of negativity (aversion) at the earliest stages of evaluative processes’ (p.213). Larsen et al. do recognise that behavioural expression tends to be constrained towards a bipolar organisation; i.e., overall, the person is compelled to either approach or withdraw from a stimulus. However, at the level of underlying mechanisms, no such limiting conditions are present: one may well experience a co-activation of positive and negative valence.

Part of the academic interest in ambivalent emotions lies in the recognition that such experiences can be valuable or beneficial in various ways. For instance, Rees, Rothman, Lehavy, and Sanchez-Burks (2013) observed that emotional ambivalence appears to increase judgment accuracy. They suggest that this outcome is partly because people with a tendency towards ambivalence are more accustomed to ‘thinking about a problem dialectically’³, i.e., approaching and understanding an issue from different and even conflicting perspectives (p.360). Relatedly, Fong (2006) found that experiences of ambivalence mean that people are more likely to identify unusual relationships between concepts, a process which is central to creativity. Indeed, elaborating on this theme, Moss and Wilson (2014, p.75) describe ambivalent emotions as ‘the underlying source of all creativity.’ They link ambivalence to such vital creative processes as: the capacity to contemplate and even reconcile contradictory

³ The term ‘dialectic’ encompasses multiple meanings and usages. According to Merriam-Webster, these usages include: (1) discussion and reasoning by dialogue as a means of intellectual investigation; (2) any systematic reasoning, exposition, or argument that juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas, and usually seeks to resolve their conflict; (3) a philosophical process associated with Georg Hegel, in which a thesis is challenged by its antithesis, with a resulting synthesis that preserves the best of both; (4) an appraisal of the unfolding of human history associated with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, influenced by Hegel, known as dialectical materialism; and (5) the dialectical tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements. In the present paper, it is this more generic fifth definition that is being evoked whenever dialectics is brought into the discussion.

perspectives; sensitivity to overarching patterns; and willingness to challenge preconceived ideas and expectations.

Furthermore, Larsen et al. (2003) have linked ambivalence directly to wellbeing, specifically highlighting the role that co-activation can play in resilience, i.e., helping people cope with distressing events. Specifically, modes of co-activation may enable negative emotions and memories to be assimilated with meaningful narratives, thereby ameliorating the impact of such feelings and memories. In support of this co-activation model of health, a longitudinal study by Hershfield, Scheibe, Sims, and Carstensen (2012) found that mixed emotions appear to diminish the physiological impact of stress. Similarly, in an occupational context, Moss and Couchman (2012) suggest that familiarity with ambivalent emotions can help prevent burnout, and as such that employees should be assisted in cultivating and understanding such emotions.

Thus, scholars are beginning to recognise that wellbeing might not simply be served by positively-valenced emotions, but also by more ambivalent ones. This recognition has been highlighted by what is referred to as ‘second wave’ positive psychology (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016, p.1753). Positive psychology was founded upon a polarising dichotomy, in which ostensibly negative phenomena were conceptualised as undesirable, and thus to be avoided, whereas apparently positive qualities were treated as necessarily beneficial, and thus to be sought. However, scholars are increasingly appreciative of the idea that wellbeing involves an ‘inevitable dialectics between positive and negative aspects of living’ (Ryff & Singer, 2003, p.272).

Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) have identified several principles at the heart of this dialectical conception of wellbeing. First, the principle of appraisal recognises that it can be hard to categorise phenomena as either positive or negative, as such appraisals are fundamentally contextually-dependent. For instance, excessive optimism can lead to

miscalculations of risk, whereas appropriate pessimism may promote prudence (Norem, 2001). Second, the principle of covalence reflects the idea that many valuable emotions and experiences are ambivalent, comprising positive *and* negative feelings (Lazarus, 2003), as highlighted in the two paragraphs above. This observation is even so for the most cherished human experiences, such as love. Although various forms of love exist, most are subject to a complex dialectical dynamic, as reflected C.S. Lewis' (1971, p.121) lament that 'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.' However, recognition of covalence leads inexorably to the third principle: complementarity. One could argue that the potential dysphoria inherent in love is not an aberration, but its very condition: its light and dark aspects are inseparable, complementary and co-creating sides of the same coin. As Bauman (2013, p.6) puts it, 'to love means opening up to that most sublime of all human conditions, one in which fear blends with joy into an alloy that no longer allows its ingredients to separate.'

Thus, ambivalent emotions are increasingly recognised as being relevant to wellbeing. However, cross-cultural scholars have suggested that Western cultures are relatively poor at discerning and appreciating dialectical phenomena, particularly compared to Eastern cultures (Nisbett et al., 2001). As such, this paper investigates the concept of ambivalent emotions, and its relevance to wellbeing, through the study of so-called untranslatable words.

Untranslatable Words

This paper draws on recent work by Lomas (2016), who is developing a lexicography of untranslatable words pertaining to wellbeing. Although untranslatability is a contested phenomenon – since linguists argue that it is hard to find exact translations for most words (Hatim & Munday, 2004) – the concept essentially refers to a word that does not have an equivalent word or phrase in a given other language. The interest in such words is manifold. First, they can assist in understanding other cultures, offering insights into their values,

conceptualisations, traditions, and ways of being. As Wierzbicka (1997, p.5) puts it, ‘words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society, but also ways of thinking.’ The theoretical context here is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – developed by Sapir (1929) and his student Whorf (1940) – which holds that language influences how people experience, understand, and perceive the world. Of course, much work has occurred on this topic since Sapir and Whorf’s original endeavours, particularly in terms of incorporating the insights of constructionism (Wetherell, 2013). Indeed, contemporary scholarship exploring the intersection of language and experience is more likely to draw upon theorists such as Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault, Gergen, and so on. Nevertheless, some theorising in this area still invokes their hypothesis as a reference point, such as Perlovsky’s (2009, p.518) ‘Emotional Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.’ The stronger version of their hypothesis is linguistic determinism, whereby language is regarded as inextricably constituting thought. By contrast, the milder version simply asserts that language shapes thought and experience. In relation to untranslatable words, the stronger deterministic view posits that only people enmeshed within 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 term, such words can enrich other lexica. This phenomenon of cultures borrowing words from each other is central to language development. Indeed, of the some 600,000 lexemes in the Oxford English Dictionary, the percentage of borrowed words – those which cannot be taken back ‘to the earliest known stages of a language’ (Lehmann, 1962, p.212), which in the case of English are those not part of the original Anglo-Saxon lexicon – may be as high as 41%

(Tadmor, 2009). Such borrowings are known generically as loanwords, although more specific terminology has 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 process tends to happen for sociolinguistic reasons, e.g., due to the cultural capital associated with using foreign words (Blank, 1999). This type of borrowing is not of concern here. However, the second category of cultural borrowing is central. Haspelmath labels these cases ‘loanwords by necessity’ (p.46), where the recipient language lacks its own word for a specific referent, such as when a new practice or idea is introduced to a culture. Thus, the loanword is used for pragmatic reasons, as it allows speakers to articulate concepts they had previously been unable to (Blank, 1999). In Lehrer’s (1974, p.105) terminology, such words fill or bridge ‘semantic gaps,’ i.e., ‘the lack of a convenient word to express what one wants to speak about. This notion of a semantic gap is what makes a given word untranslatable, indicating phenomena that have been overlooked or undervalued by a particular culture, but which another culture has noticed and identified.

Thus, a central premise of Lomas’ lexicography is that such words can enrich the English lexicon, and thereby enhance our understanding of the world. In saying ‘our,’ this refers to English speakers in general, and more specifically to academia. In addition to any benefits the lexicography may hold for English-speaking cultures more broadly, it may augment the nomological network of concepts in fields like psychology (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Of the numerous reasons why this would be desirable, foremost is the notion that, from a critical perspective, mainstream psychology tends to be Western-centric, with much of its empirical work conducted with participants described by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan

(2010) as WEIRD, i.e., belonging to societies that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. Moreover, many scholars themselves are situated within such contexts, which influences their perception and interpretation of the world. For instance, Becker and Marecek (2008) submit that, in positive psychology, its conceptualisations of wellbeing have been influenced by a Western tendency towards individualism and the self-interested pursuit of happiness.

As a result, the current nomological network in psychology is arguably incomplete, having been largely founded upon concepts that happen to have been identified in the English language. The aim of the lexicography project is therefore to augment this network with constructs which have not yet been identified in psychology, as signalled by an untranslatable word. Clearly, a wide range of phenomena are potentially of interest. As such, to narrow the focus of the lexicography to a manageable area of enquiry, its focus is on wellbeing, one aspect of which is ambivalent emotions. Thus, this paper endeavours to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic through the study of relevant untranslatable words.

Methods

Initial Data Collection and Analysis

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. These words were analysed using analytic strategies borrowed from GT, a qualitative methodology which allows theory to emerge inductively from the data, via three main coding stages: open; axial; and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, in a process of open coding, the data – the 216 words and their definitions – were examined for emergent themes. Then, axial coding involved comparing themes with one another, and aggregating these themes into categories based on conceptual similarity. Six main categories were produced, which in turn were paired into three meta-categories: feelings – comprising

positive and ambivalent; relationships – comprising love and pro-sociality; and psychological development – comprising character and spirituality.

Subsequent Data Collection and Analysis

Subsequent to the publication of the initial paper, the lexicography has expanded to nearly 1,000 words. This is partly through contributions to a website created to host the evolving lexicography, and partly through follow-up enquiries into the categories generated in the original paper via conceptual snowballing. The term snowballing derives from recruitment, whereby recruited participants recommend or facilitate the participation of additional people, particularly those who may be hard to reach (Sadler et al., 2010). Similarly, conceptual snowballing refers to the process by which enquiries into a particular concept – in this case a given untranslatable word – leads researchers to encounter related concepts. However, despite the addition of numerous new words, these terms have not altered the overall structure of the lexicography, i.e., they were accommodated within the existing framework of meta-categories and categories.

This present paper focuses on the category of ambivalent emotions, which comprises 30 words here. Although all these words do pertain to wellbeing – valued in their respective cultures, and regarded as integral to a well-lived life – they are a complex blend of light and dark states of mind. These words were again analysed using the same analytic strategies, borrowed from GT, as the original paper (Lomas, 2016). In open coding, words were examined for thematic content, and analysed conceptually. Next, words were grouped together into five themes. For example, numerous words pertained to forward-looking feelings of hope and anticipation, and so were grouped into a category on that basis, labelled hope. As a final point, as is common in qualitative analyses, the conceptual boundaries between themes were not always clear-cut, but were fuzzy and overlapping. Indeed, a different researcher, undertaking the same analysis, may well have configured the themes in a

different way. Thus, as is generally the case in such analyses, the configuration of themes essentially represents a judgement call on the part of the author. This point shall be returned to in the conclusion.

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified five themes: hope; longing; pathos, appreciation of imperfection; and sensitivity to mystery. These will be discussed in turn, featuring a selection of relevant words. First though, the analysis begins with an untranslatable concept that, although not an emotion, constitutes an overarching motif for this category as a whole *yin-yang*.

Yīn-yáng

The Chinese concept of *yīn-yáng* is emblematic of the notion that Eastern cultures are more attuned to dialectical modes of cognition than those in the West (Nisbett et al., 2001). (That said, while acknowledging the possibility of such East-West differences, one must be wary of engaging in Orientalism (Said, 1995), i.e., homogenising the East as the Other, and juxtaposing this construct in simplistic ways with a similarly homogenised West.

Nevertheless, the final three themes here do mainly include words from Eastern cultures, particularly Japan.) The notion of *yīn-yáng* is central to Taoism, a philosophy and way of life indigenous to China. Taoism centres on the *Tao*, which Oldstone-Moore (2003, p.6) describes as a ‘nameless, formless, all pervasive power which brings all things into being and reverts them back into non-being in an eternal cycle.’ The origins of Taoism lie in the *I Ching* – or Book of Changes – which began life as a shamanic practice among the Chou people, crystallising in written form around 1150 BCE. The overarching principle of the *I Ching* is change, paradoxically the one immutable law at work in the universe. As Wilhelm (1950) explained when introducing his translation of the text, ‘he who has perceived the meaning of change fixes his attention no longer on transitory individual things but on the eternal, immutable law [i.e., the Tao] at work in all change’ (p.59).

The *I Ching* did not only recognise the fundamental ubiquity of change, but also identified the mechanism through which it occurs: dialectical interaction between opposites (Fang, 2012). This dialectical philosophy was subsequently captured symbolically by the *yīn-yáng* motif. *Yin* means cloud or cloudy, whereas *yang* means sun or sunlit; symbolically then, as Fang explains, it encapsulates various ‘tenets of duality’ (p.2). The tenet of holistic duality means that reality comprises co-dependent opposites (as per the principle of complementarity above). Moreover, the tenet of dynamic duality holds that these opposites mutually transform into each other in a dynamic process. As Fung (1948, p.19) articulates it, ‘When the sun has reached its meridian, it declines.’ Thus, *yīn-yáng* does not simply present a pair of static opposites, but includes an element of darkness in the light, and vice versa, capturing the ceaseless process of becoming. Taoism’s overarching message is that a deep experiential understanding of the *Tao* is the path to psychospiritual liberation. Most of the terms discussed below reflect the principles outlined in this paragraph. With that in mind, the analysis turns to the words themselves, beginning with hope.

Hope

Although hope tends to be portrayed as a positive emotion (e.g., Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991), Lazarus (2003) suggests it is actually inherently co-valenced. The feeling inescapably involves confidence that a desired outcome has a chance of occurring, yet also anxiety that it will not, without which one would have certainty. Nevertheless, it is widely recognised as pertaining to wellbeing. As such, it substantiates the general point that wellbeing can involve a complex balance of light and dark feelings.

A comparable balance is found in words which all bring different inflections to this area. In some, the balance of expectation is weighted more towards optimism than pessimism, suggestive of greater certainty in the outcome. For instance, German and Dutch have nouns which translate as pre-pleasure, *Vorfreude* and *voorpret* respectively, articulating the kind of

anticipation derived from imagining or looking forward to future pleasures, particularly ones with a high certainty of occurring (Weigand, 2004). Anticipation is also expressed in the Inuit verb *iktsuarpok* – albeit that this also embeds elements of impatience and frustration – which is described by De Boinod (2007) as expressing the idea of frequently going outside to check if a person for whom one is waiting has arrived.

Somewhat less confident than these anticipatory terms – which imply that the desired event is likely to occur – are words that just express hope that it will. Again, some are tilted more towards optimism than others. For instance, expressing a high level of confidence is the Icelandic phrase *Betta reddast*, roughly translatable as ‘it will all work out ok,’ which is used especially as a rallying call when outcomes do not appear overly promising (Einarsdóttir et al., 2015). Confidence of a somewhat different sort is reflected in terms that allude to destiny, or to forces outside of one’s control, like the Arabic phrase *In sha’ Allah*, which translates as ‘God willing’ (Nazzal, 2005). Similar, albeit less theistically-oriented, is the Russian particle *avos*, which expresses faith, trust or hope in luck or fate. Such terms do not exactly express confidence that an event will occur, but rather that whatever does actually eventuate, it is already willed by God or fate. Such beliefs can be powerful, even salvational, as for example Eltaiba and Harries (2015) observed in patients struggling with psychiatric conditions.

Finally, the analysis uncovered some rather more wistful words, where the balance of expectation is tilted more towards pessimism, but crucially which are still not without hope. These include the Italian adverb and interjection *magari*, and the Indonesian auxiliary verb *belum*. Roughly translatable as maybe or possibly, these can be used to imply equivocation, e.g., ‘I’ll possibly be there later,’ but also to express hopeful longing or wistful regret, e.g., ‘If only ...’. Lastly, almost entirely at the dark end of the spectrum is the Korean noun *hahn*. Although conveying sorrow and regret, it is nevertheless presented as culturally important, as reflected in Willoughby’s (2000, p.17) depiction as a ‘Korean *ethos* of pain and suffering’

(my italics). Moreover, Korean speakers have attested that the term contains some flickers of hope, of waiting patiently in the belief that the adversity causing the sadness will eventually be righted (Choi & Lee, 2007). A similar yearning is conveyed in the next theme.

Longing

Longing is an archetypally ambivalent emotion, being described by Holm et al. (2002, p.608) as ‘a blend of the primary emotions of happiness and sadness.’ More poetically, Feldman (2001, p.51) defines it as ‘an emotional state suffused with a melancholic sweetness that fills the souls with longing, desire and memory.’ This tantalising ambivalence – at once painful and precious – is captured by the German noun *Sehnsucht*, which roughly translates as life-longings. This word is particularly interesting, being one of the few here to have been analysed psychometrically. Scheibe, Freund, and Baltes (2007, p.779) found that it comprised six different components: (a) utopian conceptions of an ideal path of life development; (b) a sense of life’s incompleteness and imperfection; (c) a conjoint focus on the past, present, and future; (d) ambivalent, bittersweet emotions; (e) deep reflection on life; and (f) a mental world imbued with symbolic richness. Overall, they describe *Sehnsucht* as ‘a constructive sense of the highs and lows, the gains and losses of life; its emotional tone is fundamentally bittersweet, perhaps even closer to sweet–bitter.’

Being bittersweet, longing is inherently ambivalent. Nevertheless, it can be perceived as integral to wellbeing, with the words included here being highly valued in their respective cultures. Some terms articulate longing for one’s homeland – blending nostalgia, wistfulness, and yearning – including *toska* in Russian, *hiraeth* in Welsh, *saudade* in Portuguese, and *morriña* in Spanish and Galician. However, such words can sometimes also imply that this longed-for goal may be tragically unattainable, which takes this theme in a rather different direction to that of hope. For instance, the writer Robert MacFarlane (2017) defines *hiraeth* as an ‘acute longing for a home-place or time to which you cannot return and without which

you are incomplete.’ Moreover, these terms are not necessarily generalizable words for longing, but are frequently specifically tied to cultural heritage and national identity. For instance, Coupland, Bishop, and Garrett (2003, p.164) explicitly describe *hiraeth* as ‘a Welsh cultural longing for Wales,’ highlighting its use in a Welsh tourist initiative appealing to the ‘Welsh diaspora’: ‘No one with a half drop of Welsh blood should fail to explore this land of *hiraeth*.’

Thus, such words tend to be held in high regard as emblematic of national character. For instance, echoing the depiction of *hiraeth*, Feldman (2001, p.51) describes *saudade* as ‘an emotional state that pervades Brazilian culture and thought,’ while Silva (2012, p.203) calls it a ‘key Portuguese emotion.’ Likewise, Wierzbicka (1989, p.41) suggests that *toska* is ‘one of the leitmotives of Russian literature and Russian conversation.’ She uses the term as an argument against the universality of emotions, depicting it as one of three ‘key’ words that define Russian character and culture. (The other two are *duša* and *sud’ba*, which roughly mean soul and fate respectively.) Thus, should someone from these cultures *not* experience such feelings, these theorists imply that life would be incomplete, or the person would be lacking some vital cultural sensibility.

Conversely, other words are more evocative of freedom, of longing for new places and experiences. The German *Fernweh*, for example, combines *fern*, far or distant, with *Weh*, woe or pain, and is described as the ‘call of faraway places’ (Gabriel, 2004, p.155). Although it can pertain to one’s homeland, the construct can even depict a yearning for hitherto unknown or unvisited places. In that sense, *Fernweh* may function as a counterpart to *Heimweh* (regular homesickness). Indeed, Diriwächter (2009) suggest that people – especially the young – may oscillate between the two, desiring to explore the world – and so experiencing *Fernweh* – yet also craving the safety of home, thereby experiencing *Heimweh*. Relatedly, *Wanderlust* conveys a yearning for roaming or wandering, or more literally,

hiking. Such terms are inherently ambivalent: to an extent they express dissatisfaction with the status-quo; however, they are also frequently positioned as admirable romantic sensibilities that give depth to life, and reflect well on a person's character (Shields, 2011). A similar valorisation can be found with respect to *pathos*.

Pathos

Appropriately enough, *pathos* is itself a loanword, borrowed from Greek in the 16th Century. In its original context, it tended to denote suffering, or more generally emotion. However, in English, the term has come to refer to the capacity of phenomena to *evoke* suffering – particularly sadness – in people. In contemporary culture, one often encounters a tendency to regard sadness as invidious, and even a mild form of depression (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007). However, some scholars have argued that sadness can be valuable, reflecting a moral sensitivity to suffering (Decety, Michalska, & Kinzler, 2012), and indicative of a refined aesthetic sensibility (Sachs, Damasio, & Habibi, 2015). Indeed, the ability to be moved by art has been directly linked to wellbeing, including through: regulating negative emotions, such as through processes of catharsis; retrieving valued memories; and inducing connectedness (Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014).

Words valorising the capacity to be moved by the world include the Spanish term *duende*, which can denote a heightened state of passion, particularly in response to art (Miller, 2012). Here it is relevant to note the etymology of passion, deriving as it does from the Latin *pati*, meaning to suffer or endure. Used in an artistic context, *duende* epitomises this dialectical notion of passion, reflecting an openness to both the highs and lows of life. For instance, the artist Nick Cave (1999) argues that all love songs – if they are to be genuine – ‘must contain *duende*’: ‘The writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love.’ Such sentiments align with a broader Romantic sensibility that has been influential within Europe

from the 18th Century onwards. Emphasising the importance of emotion, Romanticism encompassed the idea that melancholic sensitivity to suffering is the mark of a refined character, of even being *too* refined for the coarseness of the world, as epitomised by Goethe's (1774) tragic novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). In this context one finds the valorisation of terms like *Weltschmerz*, expressing a non-specific world-weary melancholy arising from the 'pain of living' (Rudnick, 2000, p.155).

Valorisation of *pathos* is not limited to Europe. Woolfolk (2002) suggests a similar aesthetic came to be revered in Japan, as captured by the eighteenth century scholar Motoori Norinaga, who coined the term *mono no aware*, combining *aware*, i.e., sensitivity or sadness, and *mono*, which means 'things.' As Woolfolk explains, the concept reflects the capacity to be 'touched or moved by the world' (p.23). However, *mono no aware* expresses a somewhat different sensibility to *duende* or *Weltschmerz*, which carry connotations of being tumultuous and heavy respectively. By contrast, *mono no aware* pertains more to a delicate appreciation of the ephemerality of life. This mood is reflected in the opening of *The Tale of the Heike*, the 14th Century folktale: 'The sound of the *Gion shōja* bells echoes the impermanence of all things... The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night' (cited in Smethurst, 2002, p.5).

Here one can appreciate the idea that Eastern cultures have developed a particularly refined sensitivity to dialectics. The emergence of the *mono no aware* sensibility can partially be attributed to the influence of Zen upon Japanese culture, with Zen being a branch of Buddhism that flowered in Japan from the 12th Century onwards (Suzuki, 1959). A central idea within Buddhism is that notion – referred to in Sanskrit as *anitya* – that existence is impermanent and ephemeral. *Anitya* is regarded as one of the three defining features of existence, along with *anātman*, which captures the idea that all phenomena lack an intrinsic or fixed identity, and *duḥkha*, which translates as suffering or dissatisfaction. Essentially,

Buddhism teaches that people usually are in denial or ignorance about the reality of *anitya* and *anātman*, and thus crave and attach to phenomena that are intrinsically subject to change; these tendencies lead inexorably to *duḥkha*. Thus, one can find liberation through deep appreciation of *anitya* and *anātman*.

This teaching helps contextualise the significance of *mono no aware*. Among the distinguishing features of Zen is its emphasis on artistic expression and appreciation as a way of communicating its spiritual teachings. The rationale is that artistic pursuits are particularly efficacious at revealing the truth of reality, far more than discursive prose (Hisamatsu, 1971). As part of this process, Zen – and Japanese culture more broadly – not only encouraged acceptance of impermanence, but elevated such acceptance into an aesthetic sensibility that to an extent can even *appreciate* this ephemerality. Such appreciation does not mean impermanence is celebrated; there is still pathos at this transiency. However, *mono no aware* is a complex state in which this sadness is combined with gratitude for life's beauty, however briefly it is experienced. Moreover, its ephemerality is recognised as being integral to its very beauty. As expressed by Yoshida Kenkō (1283-1350), 'If man were never to fade away... how things would lose their power to move us!' (cited in Keene, 1967, p.7). As Prusinski (2013, p.23) puts it, 'the beauty lies not in the object itself, but in the whole experience, transformation, and span of time in which the object is present and changing.' Intriguingly though, the ephemerality of *mono no aware* is counterbalanced in Zen by a complementary emotional mood, which reflects an appreciation of imperfection, as the next theme explores.

Appreciation of Imperfection

While *mono no aware* points towards the inevitability of erosion, Zen also seeks to show that, in this process of changing, a certain beauty is nonetheless retained. As such, the term *wabi-sabi* conveys an appreciation of what is normally regarded as imperfect – which as such, seen with the right spirit, is no longer so. As Prusinski (2013, p.25) puts it, *wabi-sabi* depicts 'a

crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity.’ Although *wabi* and *sabi* each bring subtly different qualities to the compound – roughly, rustic and aged beauty respectively – they form a coherent aesthetic, characterised by austerity, imperfection, and awareness of the passage of time (Park, 2005). This aesthetic is depicted by Tanizaki (1933, pp.11-12), who describes preferring a ‘pensive lustre to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity... We love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them.’ To appreciate the nuances of this sensibility, let’s examine its components in turn.

With *wabi*, appreciation of the impermanence of existence is reflected in the notion we ought not only to value that which appears perfect and complete. As the 14th Century monk Kenkō asked, ‘Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, at the moon only when it is cloudless?... Gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration’ (cited in Keene, 1967, p.115). This mode of appreciation means not disdaining phenomena for being imperfect, but rather valuing their unique gifts. This aesthetic is epitomised by the art of tea, where flawed utensils are more prized than ‘perfect’ one. Reactions to these items thus illustrate a person’s understanding of life; as Sen no Rikyū put it, ‘There are those who dislike a piece when it is even slightly damaged; such an attitude shows a complete lack of comprehension’ (cited in Hirota, 1995, p.226). Reflecting this philosophy, Zen has developed an approach to ceramics known as *kintsugi*, in which broken pieces are repaired using gold lacquer (*kin* means golden, and *tsugi* means joinery). Fault lines are not hidden or regarded as blemishes, but rather are accentuated as indicative of the object’s history and character. Thus, the *wabi* aesthetic reflects a deep acceptance of life, and its imperfections, in contrast to the futile quest for perfection. As Hirota (1995, p.274) explains, ‘*Wabi* means that even in straitened circumstances no thought of hardship arises. Even amid insufficiency, one is

moved by no feeling of want... If you complain that things have been ill-disposed – this is not *wabi*.’

Similarly, *sabi* captures the dark elegance of aged or ancient phenomena, the rustic patina that lends these gravitas and significance. Even as things change and age – as per *mono no aware* – beauty is found in this process. *Sabi* thus distils the notion of aging well, being ‘ripe with experience and insight,’ together with the ‘deep solitude’ that can accompany the passage of time (Hammitzsch, 1979, p.46). A haiku by Bashō (1644-1694 CE) – generally considered the foremost proponent of the art – conveys the lonely beauty of *sabi*: ‘Solitary now —; Standing amidst the blossoms; Is a cypress tree’ (cited in Dyrness & Kärkkäinen, 2008, p.66). Zen argues that sorrow at impermanence and the passage of time might be transmuted if one could see it through such eyes. As such, its art aims at this kind of re-evaluation of beauty, finding value in what was previously judged to lack it (Cooper, 2013). Above all, Prusinski (2013, p.32) suggests that Zen art aims to engender a ‘heightened spirituality’ in people, engendering appreciation of the principles at the heart of Buddhism – e.g., impermanence – by evoking *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*. This ‘heightened spirituality’ is epitomised by the last theme here.

Sensitivity to Mystery

This final theme features just one term, but one that nevertheless epitomises the ambivalent feelings above, namely, *yūgen*. According to Watts (1957), this constitutes the third main perceptual-emotional mood that Zen aims to evoke (alongside *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*). Parkes (2011) describes it as the most ineffable of aesthetic concepts, although he tentatively renders it as ‘profound grace’ (section 5). In philosophical texts *yūgen* tends to mean means dark or mysterious; as Suzuki (1959, pp. 220-221) elucidates, both *yū* and *gen* denote depth and remoteness, and thus together convey unknowability, impenetrability, obscurity, beyond intellectual calculability, but not ‘utter darkness.’ As a result, the term can

describe the unfathomable depths of existence – the ‘mysterious quiescence beneath all things’ (Kaula, 1960, pp.69-70) – and the inability of the mind to comprehend these depths.

However, although the mystery of existence may elude rational understanding, *yūgen* also reflects the possibility that it nevertheless may be intuited in some inchoate way (Tsubaki, 1971). As Suzuki continues, ‘It is hidden behind the clouds, but not entirely out of sight, for we feel its presence, its secret message being transmitted through the darkness however impenetrable to the intellect.’ Moreover, *yūgen* does not simply reflect one’s awareness of these depths, but the way one might be deeply moved by them, without quite knowing why. As the 13th Century Kamo no Chōmei (1212) elucidates: ‘It is like an autumn evening under a colorless expanse of silent sky. Somehow, as if for some reason that we should be able to recall, tears well uncontrollably’ (cited in Dyrness & Kärkkäinen, 2008, p.65). Thus, *yūgen* epitomises the strange potency of ambivalent emotions, and their capacity to elevate one’s experience in unusual and yet profound ways.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a range of ambivalent emotions which together militate against the notion that wellbeing only involves subjectively pleasant emotions. Instead, the concepts explored above show that wellbeing also includes subtler feelings that may not be entirely comfortable, but which are nevertheless important. The words in this category were grouped into five broad themes: hope; longing; pathos; appreciation of imperfection; and sensitivity to mystery. This thematic structure somewhat aligns with a comparable taxonomy of ambivalent emotions identified by Moss and Wilson (2015), who suggested that such emotions can be aggregated into four main constellations: nostalgia (cf. longing in the present paper); hope (as per the present paper); awe (cf. sensitivity to mystery); and compassion (cf. pathos). Indeed, the extent to which the taxonomies align is notable, especially given that the schema in the present paper was generated inductively, without reference to this earlier study. However, the

two taxonomies also diverge in interesting ways. For instance, compassion tends to occur in relation to the suffering of sentient beings, involving ‘feelings of love and concern that individuals feel towards either their children and pets or other vulnerable people and animals’ (Moss & Wilson, 2015, p.42). In that sense, *pathos* is perhaps a broader category of emotion, since this feeling may be evoked without reference to other people at all, such as arising out of an awareness of the transiency of the world, and of one’s own life.

A further point of tension between the taxonomies is the intersection of hope (which is in both schemas), longing (which is just in the present one), and nostalgia (which is just in Moss and Wilson’s). All three express a yearning for something that is, for whatever reason, not presently available or assured. In the case of Moss and Wilson, this yearning has been refracted according to a temporal lens, with hope pertaining to the future, and nostalgia pertaining to the past. By contrast, in the current paper, in addition to hope is the more general theme of longing, which is strictly atemporal, i.e., it can apply equally to phenomena located in the past, present, or future. Arguably then, one could regard hope simply as a subset of longing. However, here it was deemed preferable to have these two as separate themes. This decision arose from a reflection on their respective subjective dynamics. The crucial distinction seems to concern the possibility of the desired outcome being attainable. With hope, this possibility is still open, no matter how small. However, being graspable in this way can also introduce elements of anxiety, i.e., in case this outcome might prove elusive. By contrast, longing does not require that the outcome be attainable, which seems to lend the feeling a tone that is rather more melancholy, but yet also more resigned and accepting. This melancholic sensibility is reflected in Robert MacFarlane’s (2017) aforementioned definition of *hiraeth* as an ‘acute longing for a home-place or time to which you cannot return and without which you are incomplete.’

Future research will help to further elucidate the points of convergence and divergence between the two taxonomies, and may perhaps result in a more expansive combined schema. That said, it bears emphasising that these two taxonomies are of words that are contingently attached to complexes of emotion or feeling, rather than of actual embodied experiences per se. In analysing how people draw selectively on cultural resources (particularly language) to stabilise the meaning of affective experience, both taxonomies have slightly different emphases and conclusions. It is not that one taxonomy is necessarily more correct or accurate than another. Consider the possibility – endorsed here – that affective experiences are filtered through linguistic-conceptual schemas, as per Feldman Barrett’s (2006) conceptual-act model. As such, these two taxonomies might simply constitute subtly different schemas, each being valid on their own terms, since there are many viable ways of conceptually ‘carving up’ and representing subjective experience.

Overall though, the analysis lends credence to the idea that wellbeing does not merely involve positively-valenced emotions, but also includes the kind of complex, ambivalent feelings adumbrated above. For instance, as noted in the introduction, ambivalent emotions have been associated with a raft of beneficial outcomes, from judgement accuracy (Rees et al., 2013) and creativity (Moss & Wilson), to resilience in coping with stress and distress (Hershfield et al., 2012). As such, this emergent literature, together with the analysis here, points towards the need for a more expansive view of wellbeing than is provided by current dominant models, which tend to restrict their focus to positively-valenced feelings and to overlook the value of ambivalent emotions. For instance, positive psychology includes two main overarching models of wellbeing: subjective, or hedonic (Diener, 2000); and psychological, or eudaimonic (Ryff, 1989). With the former, in terms of its affective dimension, negatively-valenced emotions are unambiguously regarded as detracting from wellbeing. The latter is less concerned with affect per se, and comprises, according to Ryff,

six main components: purpose in life; autonomy; positive relations; environmental mastery; self-acceptance; and personal growth. One could perhaps make the case that ambivalent emotions pertain to some of these categories, such as self-acceptance. For instance, in Ryff's psychometric scale, self-acceptance is assessed on the basis of such questions as 'I made some mistakes in the past, but I feel that all in all everything has worked out for the best.' One could possibly read a degree of ambivalence into that sentence; however, it is rather implicit and understated.

As such, a more explicit acknowledgment of the value of ambivalent emotions in fields like positive psychology would be welcome. Doing so would help to redress one of the dominant messages associated with the field, namely that wellbeing is essentially a question of positively-valenced emotions. Not only is that message somewhat inaccurate – as revealed in the studies cited above on the value of ambivalent emotions – but it may be actively unhelpful. Critical theorists such as Held (2002, p.965) have accused positive psychology of contributing to a 'tyranny' of positive thinking. For instance, as explored by Ehrenreich (2009) and Davies (2015), in certain contexts – such as the business sphere – positively-valenced emotions can become expected, even obligatory. This trend may mean a culture of implicit blame and stigmatisation towards those who fail to achieve this goal, with unhappiness denigrated almost as a personal failing. Moreover, this process can even have the paradoxical effect of increasing unhappiness, since in being exhorted to pursue positive emotions, people are continually prompted into feeling that they are falling short. In that context, an emphasis on the value of ambivalent emotions would provide an antidote to the pressure to continually feel positive that many people can experience.

Before closing, it is worth noting that the analysis has its limitations. First, the treatment of the words has been inevitably restricted by attempting to convey an overarching comparative analysis – rather than focusing in-depth on a small number of terms – within the

constraints of a short article. Moreover, given that translation is such a problematic and contested exercise, the descriptions of the untranslatable words may not satisfy all speakers of the donor language. Finally, in addition to issues around translation and hermeneutics, the analysis, and the lexicography itself, are by no means exhaustive. The lexicography is a work-in-progress, with many more potential terms remaining to be identified.

Nonetheless, the analysis still offers a useful cross-cultural appraisal of ambivalent emotions, limited and partial as it may be. Future research will hopefully build on this study, developing an even more comprehensive cross-cultural conception of this important but underappreciated dimension of wellbeing. The topic is relevant to diverse fields, not only positive psychology. For instance, disciplines such as architecture and urban planning may be able to glean insights from aesthetic concepts such as *wabi-sabi*, and from the general notion of appreciation of imperfection. Similarly, therapeutic psychological disciplines may find it useful to help people to cultivate these kinds of emotions. For instance, recent years have seen a wealth of initiatives based around the idea and practice of mindfulness, which derives from the Pāli term *sati* (Lomas, 2017). There may be therapeutic value in developing similar initiatives around the ambivalent terms explored above, from *mono no aware* to *yūgen*. One hopes that these possibilities will be explored over the coming years, thereby realising the potential of ambivalent emotions.

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