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RESEARCH PAPER

Chinese and South Asian Conceptions of the Good Life and Personal Narratives

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Abstract Are cultural visions of a good life reflected in how people narrate the personal past? Do they tend to emphasize experiences that correspond to their cultural commitments about what is important and worthwhile in the life they are hoping to live? To examine this possibility, Chinese and South Asian international students at a Canadian university were compared on the content of their narrative accounts of their post-arrival experiences. Predictions about how these groups differ in the prevalence of various topical categories were made on the basis of previous research on cultural conceptions of a good life. A majority of the predictions were confirmed, supporting the general claim that Chinese tend more toward practical and prudential concerns, and less toward spiritual and beneficent concerns, than do South Asians.

Keywords Good life · Narrative · Culture · China · South Asia · Cultural differences

1 Introduction

We all have some substantive conception, however unarticulated and unexamined, of a good life. Most of us can provide a description of what constitutes such a life (Caunt et al. 2012; Tafarodi et al. 2012), indicate which of its aspects are more important than others (Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 2006), and provide some account of our hopes and fears in this regard (Markus and Nurius 1986). Research also reveals significant sociocultural variation in beliefs about the good life (e.g., Inglehart 2006; Schwartz 2006; Tafarodi et al. 2012)

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and on what it means to be a good person (e.g., Erikson 1950; Rosenthal and Roer-Strier 2001).

This study examines cultural commitments about the good life as expressed in life narratives. Specifically, South Asian and Chinese international students at a Canadian university are compared on their narrated experiences. Group differences in narrative content are predicted on the basis of earlier work (Bonn and Tafarodi 2013; Tafarodi et al. 2012) that showed these two broad cultural groups to hold, on the whole, differing visions of a good life. Confirmation of the predicted differences would indicate that beliefs about the good life are significant for guiding what individuals focus and elaborate on in the interpretation and memorial reconstruction of everyday experience.

1.1 Narrative Conceptions of the Good Life and Identity

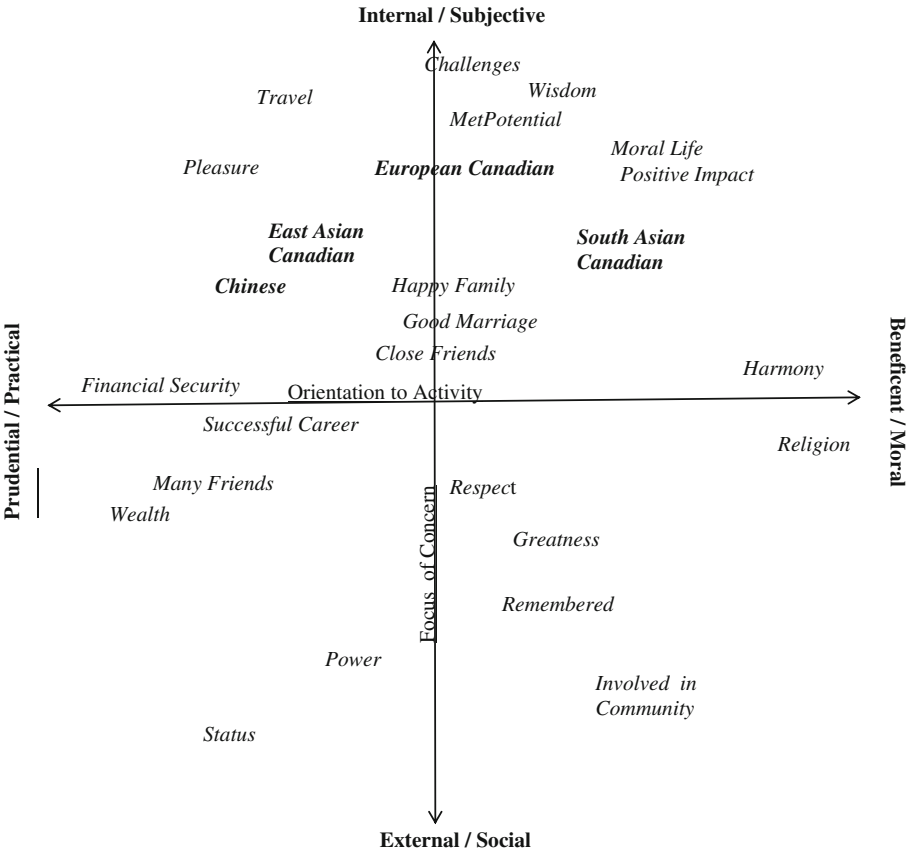
It is a core tenet of cultural psychology that how one understands, interprets, and relates to the surrounding world is guided largely by cultural models (Markus and Kitayama 2003; Quinn 2003; Shore 1996). The social scripts (Miller et al. 1996, 1997) and biographical templates (Habermas and Bluck 2000) that are recognized from early childhood onward provide ready-made patterns through which individuals learn to organize their own internal narratives and evaluate their experiences. Stories reproduced within social contexts provide frameworks within which activities and experience can be causally and thematically connected to each other: They allow for the meaningful contextualization of isolated experiences (Berntsen and Bohn 2009; Snibbe and Markus 2005).

Likewise, the sense of personal coherence and sameness that allows a mature person to plan for the future and commit to given courses of action and relationships (i.e., *identity*; see Erikson 1950, 1968) is highly dependent upon role-based expectations defined within the context of cultural narratives. The story lines along which individuals organize their lives, the scripts that they see and hear played out in their surroundings everyday, become the templates by which they learn to structure and evaluate their own personal narratives (Bauer et al. 2008; Hammack 2008; White 2006). Individuals' internal narratives, the stories they tell themselves about who they are, emerge from a lifelong process by which personal experiences are reconciled with the stories that prevail within the social milieu (McAdams 2001; Quinn 2003).

Conceptions of a good life can be thought of as cultural narratives describing how a desirable life would play out, a subset of what Habermas and Bluck (2000) refer to as "cultural concepts of biography." Given its unique economic and historical pressures, each culture begets a set of traditions regarding what constitutes a good person (e.g., Lutz 1983; Miller et al. 1997; Rosenthal and Roer-Strier 2001), as well as the desirability and value of various goals and activities (Fryberg and Markus 2007; Strauss and Quinn 1997). Such ideas, over the generations, become encoded in cultural stories portraying lives in context, placing value on certain ways of living over others, and dramatizing the results of different attitudes toward living. These conceptions of the good implicitly work themselves into individual identities by providing points of motivation, comparison, and evaluation within personal narratives. Individuals internalize a sense of what is good or worthwhile from their surroundings. This anchors their internal evaluations and provides context for how they construct stories about their lives and how they come to understand themselves. Whether their related experiences are positive or negative, individuals can be expected to speak more about topics that are culturally emphasized than those that are not.

1.2 Conceptions of a Good Life in Chinese and South Asian Culture

Recent research (Bonn and Tafarodi 2013) suggests that students of South Asian and Chinese heritage differ in how they define a good life. Specifically, Chinese were found to be more practical and prudential in their focus than South Asians. The latter, for their part, appear to place greater emphasis on spiritual or beneficent concerns (See Fig. 1). Past research has also shown that the stories individuals tell about themselves and their experiences reveal what they believe to be relevant and noteworthy (Hammack 2008; McAdams 2001). Given that Chinese and South Asians differ in their visions of a good life as just mentioned, we predicted corresponding differences in how members of these cultural groups would describe the actions and events in their lives.



Schematic map of multidimensional scaling results for empirically derived (Tafarodi et al., 2012) criteria for a good life. Italics represent criteria derived from open-ended descriptions given by Canadian, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese participants. Bold italics represent preference positions or ideal points of cultural groups relative to these criteria.

Fig. 1 Multidimensional scaling map of cultural groups and their beliefs about a good life

1.2.1 South Asian and Chinese Views of the Good Life

As Fig. 1 illustrates, the Chinese definition of a good life appears to emphasize practical concerns to a greater degree than that of South Asians, who give greater weight to moral and beneficent concerns (Bonn and Tafarodi 2013). These findings are broadly consistent with an overall emphasis on practical effort and security in Chinese culture (Nakamura 1997; Yao 2000), as well as a high value placed on social status and connections (*guanxi*) (Gold et al. 2002; Gunde 2002). The tendency for South Asians to define a good life in spiritual, moral, and beneficent terms, on the other hand, is consistent with scholarly characterizations of Indian culture as essentially spiritual and tolerant of diversity (Palkivala 2002; Vyas 1992).

Chinese culture emphasizes a practical Confucian philosophy extolling the virtues of hard work and education, the importance of role-dependent obligations, and the cultivation of relationships. Maintaining and/or improving social standing is, in this view, a central indicator of a successful life and the individual's significance within the community (Gunde 2002; Hunter and Sexton 1999; Yao 2000). South Asian culture, on the other hand, is bound to a more transcendental worldview, derived from Hindu, Muslim, and other more ascetic traditions. It emphasizes the importance of virtue, good work, selfless service, purity, and a balance between worldly and sacred concerns (Jahanbegloo 2008; Mongia 2005). Much of this can be understood in relation to the concept of *karma*—the belief that one's actions matter for spiritual progression; that good and bad intentions and deeds are rewarded or punished, whether in this lifetime or the next. This spirituality is evident in the worldview of many South Asians (Babb 1983).

1.3 Life Stories of International Students

This study examined whether theoretical differences in cultural orientation are reflected in how individuals recount their life experiences. Because there is a dearth of research comparing Chinese and South Asians, we were primarily interested in using data-driven methods to examine whether differences exist in how these groups tend to talk about their lives. Specifically, we wanted to know whether they tend to emphasize different aspects of their experience. Furthermore, we were interested in whether cultural beliefs about the good life would be consistent with any differences that exist. Thus, rather than using a theoretically-derived set of codes which would limit the analysis to a narrow set of hypotheses, we took the more neutral approach of deriving a new set of codes directly from the narrative content. Likewise, we reasoned that open-ended and spontaneously generated narratives would provide a truer reflection of cultural differences than responses to a set of questions reflecting preconceived categories.

With these points in mind, we were able to utilize a subset of interviews collected as part of an earlier unrelated study that asked international students from several countries to discuss their experiences. In this study, participants were simply asked to speak honestly and openly about their experiences since arriving in Canada—to relate, in chronological order, what had happened to them. For this analysis, we selected only those narratives provided by Chinese and South Asian students who had arrived 4–6 months prior to being interviewed.

1.4 Predictions

From the foregoing description of cultural differences in conceptions of a good life, we predicted that, in general, Chinese would emphasize concrete goals and formal relationships

in their narratives, whereas South Asians would speak more about abstract moral and spiritual concerns.

We also predicted in relation to the content categories listed in Table 1 (the derivation of these categories is described in the "Method" section) that Chinese participants would be more inclined to speak about pragmatic concerns, namely (1) *academics* and (2) *achievement/success*. Regarding attitudes toward relationships, we expected Chinese to speak more often about (3) *friends/peers* and (4) *clubs/sports/group activities* than South Asians. Similarly, based on the hypothesized South Asian emphasis on spirituality and moral concerns, we expected that instances of content coded as (5) *well-being/balance* (in the sense of personal development and/or spiritual/psychological well-being), (6) *multiculturalism/diversity* (a moral and social concern), and (7) *independence/responsibility* would be more prevalent in South Asian narratives.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

There were 43 participants, all of whom were international students in their first year of study at the University of Toronto in 2007. Twenty-four (11 men, 13 women) were mainland Chinese, from the People's Republic of China. The remaining 19 (13 men, 6 women) were South Asian, from either India or Pakistan. All had been in Canada 4–6 months. The mean age of participants was 18.95, with a range of 17–21.

2.2 Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually. They were asked to spend 30 min talking about their experiences since arriving in Canada. Interviewers were paid research assistants extensively trained to act as interested and empathic listeners, encouraging participants to continue their personal stories with minimal prompting and simple references to their earlier discussion: For example, "You just spoke about *x*….What else do you remember? The initial instructions given to participants were: "We are interested in you and your experiences since coming to Canada. Please tell us the story of your life since you arrived here. Feel free to speak about whatever comes to mind, when you reflect upon your time in this country." Participants received a payment of 10 dollars for the session. Interviews were recorded in full and transcribed for later analysis.

2.2.1 Generation of Content Categories

Six coders unfamiliar with the purposes of the study independently read through the transcripts and created a list of distinct topics addressed. The focus was on literal topicality or reference (i.e., "*What* is being talked about here?"). The resulting lists of topics were then compared and reduced to a single, unified list by superimposing, harmonizing, and combining the narrower or idiosyncratic topics. In this way, the initial total of several hundred topics was reduced to 30 clearly represented and sufficiently inclusive categories (see Table 1). This provided an appropriate level of resolution for statistically reliable comparative testing.

Table 1 Topical content categories listed in order of the number of participants (out of 43) that discussed each

Content category	Number of participants
Academics	42
Friends/peers	41
Difficulty/disappointment	36
Living situation/roommates	35
Entertainment/outings	33
Time management	32
Cultural adjustment	30
Independence/responsibility	30
Multiculturalism/diversity	29
Well-being/balance	27
Clubs/sports/group activities	26
Language	25
Bureaucracy/relation to authority	24
Physical environment/surroundings	24
Finances/rent/tuition	23
Loneliness/homesickness	22
Holidays/special events	22
Cultural understanding/cues	21
Food	21
Weather	21
Future concerns/career/residency	16
Returning home	14
Employment-related concerns/visa/permits	13
Achievement/success	13
Family importance/missing family	13
Being a face in a crowd/deindividuation	12
Family obligation/parental sacrifice	12
Sightseeing/vacations	11
Romantic relationships/partners	9
Parental approval	7

2.2.2 Parsing of Narratives

To create a basis for applying and quantifying the coding scheme, two coders independently divided each narrative into blocks of text where the speaker was "talking about the same thing" (describing an event, making a sustained point, interpreting or evaluating somebody or something, drawing conclusions about a particular state-of-affairs, etc.). These self-standing blocks were of three types: narrated *events* (past happenings, set in time), *summaries* of past events or experiences, and time-independent (generalized) *interpretations*. Events, for coding purposes, were descriptions of discrete experiences that occurred at a specific time, such as, "On New Year's Eve, we went to watch the fireworks downtown…." Summaries were non-specific or general statements about activities or

experiences that took place over a period of time, such as, "I spent a lot of time in the library studying…." and "It was really cold during the winter and it snowed a lot…." Interpretations were time-independent impressions or opinions that the speaker expressed, such as, "I don't like the food in Canada very much" and "Canadians are difficult to get to know sometimes. They are friendly or polite enough but they often don't say what they mean." If a narrative block was a mixture of two or all three types, as was infrequently the case, it was categorized as the type that characterized it the most. For example, the following was coded as a summary, although it places the experience in a specific month: "I spent pretty much all of November in the library. It was so boring. But I was able to catch up with all my assignments and get prepared for exams."

The coders agreed in their use of this three-category scheme for 89% of the 383 narrative blocks, with $\kappa = 0.83$, demonstrating adequate intersubjective agreement. All disagreements were resolved through discussion. Coders also judged the valence of the coded narrative segments as positive, negative, or neutral in subjective valence. Agreement here was again adequate at 92% and $\kappa = 0.88$.

2.2.3 Topical Coding

To look at topical prevalence, each narrative block was independently categorized by two pairs of coders using the 30-category scheme derived earlier. Coders were allowed to assign as many content codes as required to describe the themes present within a given block. For example, if the block described a particularly difficult period of the semester when the participant was studying constantly but in the end managed to finish all assignments and achieve high marks, it would be assigned codes for *academic concerns, overcoming obstacles,* and *success/achievement*.

To ensure consistency in application of the codes, the coding process was done by pairs of coders in two redundant rounds. Thus, each transcript was coded twice in its entirety, each time by a separate pair of coders. Afterwards, the two sets of codes were compared and discrepancies resolved by the primary investigator. Because multiple content codes could be applied to each block and the number of codes assigned per block was variable, intercoder reliability was calculated on a block-by-block basis. Percent agreement for each block was calculated between each pair of coders, as well as between rounds by dividing the number of agreed-upon codes by the total number of codes assigned. Averaging agreement between coding pairs as well as between coding rounds resulted in an overall agreement rate of 87%.

3 Results

3.1 Preliminary Comparison of Groups on Block Type and Valence

A preliminary concern was the possibility of group differences in the prevalence of block types. For example, if one group tended more toward interpretations than the other, and particular topics are, on the whole better suited to interpretation than, say, the recounting of specific events, then group differences in the prevalence of such topics might be more reflective of narrative style than cultural orientation to the good life. Similar problems might arise if one group tended to be more negative, positive, or neutral than the other in their narratives. To examine these possibilities, a total of 13 exploratory univariate

analyses were conducted, applying a Bonferroni-corrected significance level of 0.003 to protect against familywise alpha inflation.

The groups were compared using 2 (nationality) × 2 (gender) ANOVA tests on the total number of narrative blocks (an index of overall volume); proportion of the blocks accounted for by narrated events, summaries, or interpretations; the proportion of blocks that were positive, negative, or neutral in valence; and the proportion of positive, negative, and neutral blocks for events, summaries, and interpretations considered separately. No significant differences for gender or nationality were found in any of these comparisons.

In summary, it appeared that Chinese and South Asian students, and men and women, produced much the same sorts of narratives in terms of basic block type and valence, suggesting equivalence in overall structural composition. For this reason, it seemed justified to combine events, interpretation, and summary content in looking at topical content categories. All three types of blocks as well as all valence types, thus, were coded for content and used for group comparisons.

3.2 Comparing Groups on Topical Content Categories

3.2.1 Modeling of Topical Prevalence

Block frequencies were coded into three ordinal categories: 0, 1, and >1 (see Table 2). Frequencies were then analyzed by means of a cumulative logit model (McCullagh 1980), which uses the strategy of averaged dichotomization, to examine whether the likelihood of higher prevalence for each topical category differed across nationality and gender. No significant gender differences or gender by group interactions were found. Gender was therefore dropped from the model.

3.2.2 Between-Group Differences

The results for the reduced model revealed significant or marginally significant between-group differences for 6 of the 30 coding categories: *independence/responsibility*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.47$, $p = 0.06$, *well-being*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.20$, $p = 0.07$, *friends/peers*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.46$, $p = 0.06$, *clubs/sports/group activities*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.72$, $p = 0.02$, *romantic partners*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.96$, $p = 0.05$, and *language*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 17.91$, $p < 0.0001$. The form of these differences was as follows. Consistent with prediction, South Asian students were 1.59 times as likely (adjusted odds) as Chinese students to have one or more (as opposed to zero) narrative blocks, and two or more (as opposed to one or zero) blocks, that referred to *independence/responsibility*. Also consistent with prediction, South Asians were 2.84 times as likely as Chinese to refer to *well-being* with greater frequency. Chinese, consistent with prediction, were 8.49 times more likely than South Asians to refer to *friends/peers* with greater frequency, and 4.27 times more likely to refer to *clubs/sports/group activities* with greater frequency. Chinese were also 9.29 times more likely to refer to *romantic partners* with greater frequency, and 448.07 times more likely to refer to *language* with greater frequency. These last two differences were not predicted based upon previous findings. (Nonetheless, the finding for language was hardly surprising given the disparity in English language schooling between the two groups.) Predicted differences for *multiculturalism/diversity, academics,* and *achievement/success* were not confirmed. In summary, 4 of the 7 predictions were confirmed (at least marginally in terms of significance) and two unpredicted differences were found. We will explore this mixed pattern of results in the next section.

Table 2 Number of narrative blocks referring to each topical content category by group

	Number of Blocks					
	South Asian			Chinese		
	0	*1*	*>1*	*0*	*1*	*>1*
Academics	0	0	19	1	0	23
Friends/peers	2	3	14	0	1	23
Difficulty/disappointment	5	2	12	2	11	11
Living situation/roommates	5	5	9	3	7	14
Entertainment/outings	3	2	14	7	5	12
Time management	5	2	12	6	7	11
Cultural adjustment	3	9	7	10	4	10
Independence/responsibility	5	3	11	8	11	5
Multiculturalism/diversity	9	7	3	15	6	3
Well-being/balance	4	7	8	12	6	6
Clubs/sports/group activities	11	5	3	6	7	11
Language	18	0	1	0	8	16
Bureaucracy/authority	7	5	7	12	8	4
Physical environment/surroundings	9	2	8	10	8	6
Finances/rent/tuition	10	5	4	10	9	5
Loneliness/homesickness	9	7	3	12	5	7
Holidays/special events	10	6	3	11	8	5
Cultural understanding/cues	12	4	3	10	7	7
Food	11	7	1	11	9	4
Weather	9	5	5	13	6	5
Future/career/residency	13	3	3	14	6	4
Returning home	13	6	0	16	8	0
Employment concerns/visa/permits	15	3	1	15	6	3
Achievement/success	15	4	0	15	7	2
Family importance/missing family	13	4	2	17	4	3
Deindividuation	12	5	2	19	5	0
Family obligation/parent sacrifice	14	3	2	17	7	0
Sightseeing/vacations	13	5	1	19	5	0
Romantic relations/partnerships	18	1	0	16	5	3
Parental approval	15	2	2	21	2	1

Table values represent the number of participants falling into each frequency category

3.3 Representative Examples

Our general prediction, based upon the dimensions illustrated in Fig. 1, was that Chinese participants would tend to focus more on concrete goals and formal relations and South Asians would be more concerned with abstract concepts such as personal growth, morality, or spirituality. Because the coding categories are only represented by short labels throughout this paper, it is important for readers to get a clearer sense of what the codes

refer to, and therefore what differences in frequency might mean. For example, readers might have their own ideas of what the term *well-being* means, but the label *well-being* in the present coding scheme refers to a collection of statements judged by a group of trained coders to bear similar qualities. These qualities may or may not coincide with the specific conception of *well-being* held by a particular reader. Representative quotes are provided here to better convey the meaning behind these labels. This is done not for the purpose of drawing solid conclusions, but in an attempt to provide readers with a sense of *how* participants discussed these topics. Readers will thereby be better able to draw their own conclusions about what any cultural differences mean.

For the sake of brevity, examples are given only for those categories which produced significant or nearly significant group differences in the statistical analysis of prevalence. It is assumed that differences in emphasis or prevalence are often accompanied by contrasting orientations to a topic, with the latter possibly helping to explain or account for the former.

The five categories in which Chinese and South Asians meaningfully differed in prevalence were *group activities/clubs/sports*, *romance*, *friends, well-being*, and *independence*. (*Language* is not included here because of the self-evident differences in language training between the groups.) To select these quotes, we used the NVivo software package to separate out blocks coded with these topical categories for both groups. Three coders then individually read through the grouped sets of text blocks and selected representative quotes from each group for that coding category. The examples below were selected by at least two of three coders as representative of that group's discussion of the category in question. Our interpretations are based on these selected quotes as well as our reading of the transcripts in their entirety. Each of the six topical categories will be addressed in turn.

3.3.1 Well-Being/Balance

The category labelled *well-being* was three times as likely to be mentioned with higher frequency by South Asian participants. Blocks coded in this way sometimes referred to physical health, but more commonly to balance, psychological well-being, and personal growth. South Asians often spoke of balancing the demands of social and practical concerns. One student provided the following example: "I am still struggling to achieve a balance because…I think I was a little too distracted… which was stressful. Finals are coming up. I feel very comfortable now. I think I can do well in my studies, I can do well socially…everything." Here we see a concern with the negative impact of socializing too much or spending time with friends at the expense of school work and other priorities. Others spoke of the need to establish an identity separate from parents and friends (e.g., "In a family setting, you have responsibilities and certain obligations, but once you're here, you're sort of free from that, you know, in a good way…in a way that can be productive. You can make your own time, be, like, yourself, not do what everyone else wants all the time. I wanted to have time to myself. That was my main priority."). This example reflects the greater desire on the part of South Asians to balance the sometimes conflicting demands of social life, schoolwork, and personal development.

3.3.2 Romantic Relationships/Partners

The category of "romantic relationships/partners" was nine times more likely to be mentioned with higher frequency (averaged across dichotomizations) by Chinese than South

Asian participants. Most commonly, instances of this category referred to feelings of homesickness and depression. Romantic partnerships were often seen as a salve for loneliness and depression, a surrogate family within which the participant could share experiences and feel connected. The following quotes from Chinese participants are good examples of this theme. "If I feel sad… he always comforts me so if I feel happy I can share with him. So I feel so happy to have a boyfriend here. I think many Chinese girls think the same thing. Because here you feel homesick and when you feel sad or happy you have no one to share it with." Another student: "I think most international student would do is, making girlfriend or boyfriend because they are…uh…alone here. So for me, I need to talk to someone. Well…I cannot phone my, call my dad or mom all the time. So I need to find someone."

Romantic references by South Asian participants, on the other hand, more often illustrated the challenges or difficulties involved in maintaining a romance and negotiating one's needs with those of one's partner. A South Asian woman provides an example: "I think around, like after, Valentine's Day, we had like this huge fight and stuff like that. So that kind of, I guess, that kind of also slowed me down from studying and stuff like that. We did eventually work things out but that was definitely a really bad month for us."

3.3.3 Group Activities/Clubs/Sports

The category "group activities/clubs/sports" was four times more likely to be mentioned with higher frequency by Chinese than South Asian participants. This refers to recreational activities with peers, such as sports, clubs, and parties. The following are typical examples from Chinese narratives. "Sometimes I go to, like, yoga or some dance class. Yeah, it's quite interesting. Yeah…doing some exercise and going to the gym with friends," A second student: "I'm also thinking, like, more participate in the school activities, like… joining student unions. I wasn't able to do any of these this time. I think I'm going to join some during the summer."

South Asians sometimes referred to such activities as distractions that interfered with effective time management. For example, a South Asian male participant explained: "I was going out and doing things with a bunch of people from res [residence hall]. Going out to hang out and it was taking a lot of time. Like, everyday was something. Instead of being the social guy, I decided maybe it's time to take some time off from the social activities. So I stopped trying to get in touch with them. It's time to study a little bit." Chinese participants, by contrast, often claimed to be too busy for social activities and hoped to engage in such activities more in the future.

3.3.4 Independence/Responsibility

Finally, South Asian participants were three times more likely than Chinese to make statements related to independence or responsibility with higher frequency. These statements for both groups most often referred to moral or practical autonomy. On the practical side, there were many references to shopping, cooking, and laundry. This is clear in these quotes from the Chinese participants. "The main goal for me is I get used to the life here. I learn a lot of stuff, like, [laughs] how to do laundry, how to go grocery shopping, how to balance your budget, and everything." Also, "We have to buy the food and it's very expensive. So we have to go to grocery regularly and then buy the grocery and then they cook it. We try to learn it, but, back there in China, I asked all my friends—no one has ever used the knife to chop, like to cut. Yeah. Because food there is so cheap, like, we always eat outside, we don't really do that, or mom would do it sometime…."

Especially for South Asian participants, this category also often invited a degree of interpretation. They discussed what it *means* to live away from home – the more subjective kinds of personal challenges and rewards inherent in negotiating an independent life. For example, one South Asian woman gave this explanation: "When you're here and you have the chance to be a different person and maybe I mean be, you know, be different from what you were and do things you would not normally do. I like spending more time by myself and I never did that back home. I was always with somebody. I think it is [good]. I don't know…maybe it is bad." Thus, for South Asians there seemed to be a greater focus on personal exploration and establishing a separate identity.

4 Discussion

As we expected, the open-ended accounts provided by both South Asian and Chinese international students of their lives in Canada were largely dominated by the kinds of concerns typical of young adults entering university. They spoke at length about schoolwork, campus affairs, making friends, and adjusting to the new environment. Young adults everywhere share many of these concerns (Arnett 2002). They also spoke of matters perhaps more common among international students: social isolation (Sanner et al. 2002), language issues, and cross-cultural misunderstandings (Ho et al. 2007).

4.1 Comparing Chinese and South Asian Cultures

On the basis of previous findings, we predicted that Chinese would speak more about *friends/peers* and *clubs/sports/group activities* than did South Asians. Both of these predictions were confirmed. Also, previous multidimensional unfolding results led us to predict that South Asians would refer to *independence/responsibility, well-being,* and *multiculturalism/diversity* with greater frequency than the Chinese. The first two, but not the last, of these expectations were confirmed. Chinese were also predicted to refer more to *achievement* and *academics,* but this was not found.

The disconfirmed predictions (in regard to *multiculturalism/diversity, achievement,* and *academics)* might be seen as casting some doubt on our general hypothesis about the connection of conceptions of the good life to life narratives. It is important to bear in mind, however, that each of the topical categories used here refers to a broad range of potential content as well as context. Because the narratives centered on everyday life, and all of the participants were recently arrived international students at the same university located in a richly multi-ethnic city, it is perhaps not surprising that these three particular categories would be mentioned with similar frequency by both groups. All of the participants were describing life in a new physical, social, and cultural environment where issues related to ethnic/linguistic/religious diversity would be hard to avoid. Similarly, because all participants were first-year university students, it is hardly surprising that a preoccupation with achievement and academics was evident for both groups.

4.2 Cultural Themes

Reflecting more interpretively upon the examples provided, it seems that Chinese participants were more focused on establishing stable dyadic partnerships and membership in formal groups. South Asians, by contrast, appeared to associate more with loose-knit groups of peers, and to express greater interest in negotiating independent identities. Also,

although both groups discussed the importance of balancing school and social life, they seemed to approach this problem from opposite directions. Chinese participants most often began by discussing how focused they had been on their studies and how they needed to find ways to open up and develop social connections. South Asians, on the other hand, seemed to more naturally drift towards patterns of open socializing and exploration, and talked often of the need to be disciplined and task-focused, and deliberately limiting the influence of others.

As we expected, Chinese participants spoke in more concrete terms about their relationships (close dyads, romantic partnerships, and formal groups) and goals (feeling safe and secure in relationships and academic success). South Asians, on the other hand, appeared more diffuse, flexible, and outward-facing in their focus. They affiliated often with informal groups of peers and engaged in unplanned activities. South Asians also spoke more often about negotiating independence and relationship boundaries. They seemed to be concerned not only with maintaining a focus on specific priorities, but also with achieving a broad and balanced horizon of engagements.

Overall, the narratives analyzed in this study suggest that the divergent views of the good life promoted by Chinese and South Asian culture, as illustrated in Fig. 1 (see also Tafarodi et al. 2012), relate to different foci of concern in how individuals describe and interpret their lives. Some of our more specific predictions were not confirmed, but the overall pattern of significant differences, together with the evidence provided by examples of *how* these categories were addressed by the two groups, is consistent with the broad cultural orientations toward prudential/practical versus moral/beneficent goods described earlier.

Although these results do not amount to a clear-cut confirmation of predictions, we can tentatively say that the two groups tend to describe how they relate to others, pursue goals, and structure their lives in ways that are consistent with what they believe makes a life good or worthwhile. At a broad level, Chinese appear more invested in established patterns of practical investment and involvement, whereas South Asians are more interested in exploration and self-development. It is, however, important to also consider the high degree of similarity in the form and content of narratives across groups. Both Chinese and South Asian international students were primarily concerned with friends, school, and the practical challenges commonly faced by all students living away from home for the first time. Although South Asians and Chinese have somewhat different ways of making sense of common experiences, the obvious similarities in their narratives should not be overlooked.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this study deserve some mention. First, the exclusive use of international students at a prestigious university prevents any broad cultural or national generalizations. Such students are hardly representative of their cultural communities in their educational achievements, social connections, and willingness to pursue education abroad. In fact, given the commonalities of international students as a cosmopolitan group, the cultural differences between them are likely to be less pronounced than those which separate less educated and advantaged groups from the same countries (Adams 2007; Arnett 2002). The divergences in narrative content found here, then, represent a weak test of our cultural hypotheses. Any degree of confirmation they provide is all the more compelling as a result.

Second, both groups of participants expressed their life narratives in English. This may have presented a significant impediment, especially for the Chinese, despite the considerable

degree of English proficiency required of all international students admitted to the University of Toronto. More importantly, it raises the possibility that frequencies of topical content might have been different had participants been free to narrate in their familial tongue. It is well-accepted, after all, that language can modify how the self is experienced situationally (e.g., Kashima and Kashima 1998). It remains for future research to examine this possibility and what it means for how conceptions of the good life shape personal narratives.

A final point relates to whether the narrative differences found here can be assumed to reflect corresponding differences in real-time experience as events unfold and actions are undertaken. We expect they do, and have implied as much throughout this paper. However, it should be noted that the evidence provided here does not in fact address that claim. Directly investigating it might be accomplished through alternative methods such as experience sampling (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1987; Sloboda et al. 2001), which have the potential of tying cultural beliefs about what a good life consists of to specific interpretive and emotional aspects of immediate experience. In this way, the full significance of these framing beliefs for how we live our lives can be explored.

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