



**Quality of Life around the world:
an introduction**

The Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life

In the manner of an in-house 'think-tank', the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life is inspired by Sodexo's deeply held conviction that improving Quality of Life leads to the progress of individuals and contributes to the performance of organisations. Its role is to gather and develop insight to help Sodexo understand better the levers of Quality of Life. Guided by this conviction, the Institute remains conscious of Sodexo's position that to 'define' Quality of Life in narrow terms is to overlook the remarkable diversity found among its employees, clients and consumers. In 2017, Sodexo is present in over 80 countries worldwide, it employs over 425,000 people and serves 75 million people daily at over 30,000 locations.

About this report

Inspired by the round-the-world journey of Marie Desjars de Keranrouë, a French expert in intercultural thinking, the purpose of this report is to shed light on Quality of Life around the world through an intercultural prism. In distilling the essence of 288 pages of insight that Marie gave us, our journey has been far less physically and emotionally challenging than hers but we also feel that we have travelled and now understand better what quality of life means to different people in different places. We are grateful to Marie for inviting us to share her experience and insight, we hope the readers of this report will find it equally enriching.

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Before thinking about how to improve quality of life, there is much to be explored in terms of how different people respond to the concept: what it means to them, the similarities that unite people, also the differences and tensions that can arise

Introduction

As a concept, quality of life has become common currency among the general public and in organisations. However, before thinking about how to improve quality of life, there is much to be explored in terms of how different people respond to the concept: what it means to them, the similarities that unite people, also the differences and tensions that can arise. To develop this understanding is the purpose of this report. We start with a reminder of quality of life and wellbeing concepts in some of the world's main traditions, ideologies and cultures, both ancient and modern. Using an intercultural approach, the rest of the report draws on the remarkable experience of an intercultural expert's eight-month journey around the world with a mission to gather a unique insight into quality of life.

Ancient and modern perspectives on quality of life

In popular, aspirational terms, to live 'the good life' is to enjoy a high level of wellbeing. These few words are often used quite freely in modern culture to denote something difficult to define but close enough to a life of some ease and pleasure for the words to be generally understood without further explanation. However, the philosophical concept of 'the good life' that occupied the great classical thinkers of Ancient Greece is very different. Among them was Aristotle¹, for whom 'the good life' was the *most worthwhile or desirable life*. Unlike some of the other approaches we will encounter below, the Aristotelian 'good life' is one that should be sought as an end in itself, not as a means to achieving something else, for example 'happiness' or 'enlightenment'.

In the modern age, the Aristotelian tradition has informed psychological wellbeing models that combine self-acceptance, personal growth, relatedness, autonomy, relationships, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Personal autonomy² is closely related to these models³ as it attaches importance to individual agency and making choices, choosing to be 'virtuous' through one's actions, leading a meaningful life in the Aristotelian tradition.

¹ Greece, 4th century B.C.E.

² See: Personal autonomy, Quality of Life, and the progress of individuals; Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life, 2015.

³ E Deci & R Ryan, Hedonia, Eudaimonia and wellbeing - an introduction, Journal of Happiness Studies, vol. 9, 2008, pp. 1-11.

This emphasis on personal autonomy in favour of virtuous behaviour for a meaningful life is nevertheless at odds with other approaches.

At the core of Buddhism⁴, for example, is an approach that is fundamentally different to the Aristotelian 'good life' and modern Western concepts based on individual autonomy. These concepts are built on the notion of an individual 'self' but, in Buddhism, the highest form of wellbeing – known as 'enlightenment' – can only be achieved through the realisation that *there is actually no such thing as the individual self* because every person is interdependent with other beings and the environment, hence the importance of compassion and loving-kindness for all things found in Buddhism.

Aspects of both the Aristotelian and Buddhist approaches can be recognised in the Confucian⁵ tradition. It echoes the Greek concept of eudemonia in the belief that short-lived positive personal emotions or pleasures cannot account for the good life or an enduring sense of happiness that is instead borne out of satisfaction or fulfilment from how one lives. Oriented in a similar direction to Buddhist thinking, the Confucian notion of 'self' points beyond the individual to living in harmony with other people and the much wider social context we find ourselves in. This includes family, friends and community, with an emphasis on the importance of ritual, culture and tradition in the path to living well.

In the Hindu philosophy that stretches back some 4,000 years, life satisfaction is to be found within a person's higher order 'self', not by fulfilling lower order desires but by quelling them, by rising above subject and object to embrace the entire universe. With practice, Hindu thinkers expand their awareness so that their sense of 'self' develops and becomes based on a far broader awareness than the narrow individual self. This ultimate Hindu wellbeing, the real purpose of human life, is achieved by living values that support personal growth and the growth of others. As in the Buddhist and Confucian approaches, life satisfaction or ultimate wellbeing is incompatible with the notion of an individual self.

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⁴ The Buddha lived in the 5th / 6th century B.C.E in what is now India.

⁵ Confucius lived in the 6th – 5th century B.C.E in China.

To compare quality of life across cultures in simplistic terms with reference to one particular model is to risk missing a key characteristic of cultures and quality of life; their diversity

So far, we have touched on a few elements of ancient philosophies that underpin the cultural backgrounds of billions of people across the world and inform the way they think about themselves and their lives. To a significant extent, these cultures jostle against and are overlaid by 'consumerism', a seemingly irresistible philosophical approach that attaches utmost importance to the individual self and the satisfaction of lower order desires.

There is a strong temptation to assume that consumerism, the philosophy most closely connected to today's political economies, is entirely modern. It is certainly the result of people's vastly increased ability to consume manufactured goods since the industrial revolution of the 19th century and especially since the post-Second World War liberal capitalist era, but that is not the full picture. The maximisation of personal pleasure and the avoidance of pain associated with easy gratification that underlies consumerism can be traced back to the notion of *hedonic* wellbeing that the ancient Greek philosophers grappled with.

In consumerist cultures, individual purchase and ownership of goods are the norm so material wellbeing is less directly dependent on extended family or community involvement than in other cultures. There is little incentive to nurture the sort of interdependence identity found in many of the ancient philosophies and much to distract from the nurture of eudemonic wellbeing, quality of life derived from virtuous acts for meaning, purpose and life satisfaction. In its simplest form, consumerist wellbeing is predicated upon *"increasing possessions and exercising greater and greater control over the environment"*. According to the same critique, it fails to realise that *"An independent self ignores the broader societal and ecological context within which we are embedded, live and grow"* whereas *"Our existence demands transcending the boundaries of body and ego and moving toward relational existence which encompasses family, community, and environment"*⁶.

Across geographies and time, different philosophies have developed a variety of approaches to wellbeing and quality of life: what it is, how to improve it, the very notion and role of the individual. The cultures shaped by these philosophies behave, think, write and speak differently about their approaches. To compare quality of life across cultures in simplistic terms with reference to one particular model is to risk missing a key characteristic of cultures and quality of life; their diversity. To approach them through an intercultural lens is to value this diversity and foster productive exchanges.

⁶ G Misra, Self and Wellbeing, Psychological Studies, vol. 54, June 2009, p. 85.

Intercultural frameworks and quality of life

Existing Intercultural frameworks

We often think we are looking at things *as they are*. However, we also soon recognise that what is obvious in a given cultural environment is strange or inappropriate in another. This is because the things we do and say are shaped by values, norms or standards that vary significantly. A number of intercultural frameworks exist to account for these differences, including:

HOFSTEDE

Geert Hofstede is a Dutch sociologist who built a framework by analysing mass-sent questionnaires in about 100 countries while working for IBM in the 1970s. Hofstede's 'matrix' helps to understand key characteristics of cultures by looking at individual behaviours within organisations. His original theory proposed four aspects of cultures through which to observe them:

- individualism versus collectivism
- uncertainty avoidance
- power distance (i.e., the strength of social hierarchy)
- masculinity-femininity (i.e., task orientation versus person-orientation)

Two further aspects were added later: long-term orientation and indulgence versus self-restraint.

SCHWARTZ

Shalom Schwartz is an Israeli sociologist who identified fundamental values in cultures. His system is based upon seven cultural values in three pairs: embeddedness (sustaining traditions and social order) versus autonomy (affective and intellectual), mastery (emphasis on success through personal action) versus harmony (emphasis on group equilibrium), hierarchy versus egalitarianism. As with Hofstede, Schwartz analyses cultures at the national level.

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SAUQUET

Michel Sauquet, a French sociologist, uses four pillars to differentiate between cultures: vision of the world, identities and status, professional cultures and languages and communication:

- *visions of the world* include relations to times, space, nature, religion, mind, body and death
- *identities and status* include the conceptions of individual/collective, difference, social status and masculine/feminine
- *professional cultures* relate to time, conflict, money, authority, norms, work acquaintances
- *languages and communication* include languages and translation, communication and interpersonal relationships

Hofstede and Schwartz's classifications relate to *behaviours* whereas Sauquet's relates more to specific aspects of daily life, such as money and time. The first two present national culture through indexes whereas Sauquet's classification is descriptive.

Critiques and limitations

Although these classifications inform to what extent individuals respond to the concepts in them, they tend to leave aside all the differences that exist within the countries and only rely upon what individuals report. The general classifications tend to look at countries as homogeneous entities and overlook regional differences. The classifications also tend to look at cultural characteristics as fixed and identities as unique. However, individuals have multiple identities and these change over time, they are constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. While multiple selves each play significant roles in different contexts or at different stages of life, they may also exist simultaneously. The sociological classifications set out above tend to overlook the versatility and multiplicity of identities.

NEED FOR CAREFUL UNDERSTANDING AND FIELD APPROACH

There is a need to go beyond general classifications, to grasp differences with a more precise understanding of the phenomena in question. It is important to complete quantitative indicators with qualitative fieldwork. Whereas sociological classifications can give an indication of the direction to look in, fieldwork shows just how complex, multifaceted and even contradictory cultures can appear.

Individuals have multiple identities and these change over time, they are constructed and reconstructed through social interaction

The main objective of Marie's mission was to gain insight into the diversity and richness of meanings in quality of life across cultures

An intercultural expert's journey into quality of life

In March 2016, Marie Desjars de Keranrouë, a French expert in intercultural relations began an eight-month journey to explore the multiple interpretations and components of quality of life in ten countries: South Africa, Namibia, India, the Philippines, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, Chile and Brazil. With support from the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life and the network of the *Alliance Française*⁷, she conducted interviews with local professors, administrative staff and students of all origins and generations to find out how they perceive Quality of Life through their own local culture. The main objective of Marie's mission was to gain insight into the diversity and richness of meanings in quality of life across cultures. Thanks to her professional expertise, through her journey we take a closer look at the variety of ways in which quality of life is conceived of and experienced across cultures through the real-life accounts of the 95 people Marie interviewed from Windhoek in Namibia to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

The questionnaire used for semi-structured interviews was based on the four pillars developed by French experts in intercultural relations, Michel Sauquet and Martin Vielajus in their book '*L'intelligence interculturelle*' ('Intercultural Intelligence'), a robust framework to help navigate a complex topic. Based on this framework, the next section sets out excerpts from the interview insights in three sections:

- our place in the world (according to our perception of time, space, nature, religion and the body)
- our relation to others (the importance of family, the balance between the individual and the collective, relation between male and female in society)
- our navigation of professional cultures (our attitude towards work, conflict, money, authority, norms and knowledge)

⁷ *The Alliance Française* is an international organisation that aims to promote French language and culture around the world. Created in Paris in 1883, its primary concern is teaching French as a second language. Today, the Alliance has approximately 800 centres in 132 countries, on five continents.

Our place in the world probes how we see things, our outlook on the world. Our relation to time, space, nature, religion and the body frames how we perceive our environment in the broadest sense. For instance, two people can look at the same situation and feel completely different, one irritated and the other one not so, simply because of their relation to time. Human beings are by nature social animals so our relation to others is of primary importance, independent of culture. However, the importance of family, the balance between the individual and the collective, relations between male and female in society vary significantly across cultures and this in turn influences our quality of life. Finally, our professional environment is characterised by certain factors, such as our attitudes towards work, conflict, money, authority, norms and knowledge which inevitably play a role in our quality of life at work and how we manage our work and non-work lives.

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An intercultural view of time helps us to understand its symbolic meaning and importance

Exploring quality of life through an intercultural lens

Our place in the world

> TIME

The concept of time is central to a dimension of Quality of Life related to the *ease and efficiency* with which individuals can undertake their daily activity, whether in education, in the workplace, in leisure or care environments. In many respects, the concept of time has been reduced to a matter of measure, to the sub-division of time and its passing. However, an intercultural view of time helps us to understand its symbolic meaning and importance. For example, while many anecdotally oppose national or regional stereotypes of tardiness (e.g. African time, Indian time, Filipino time) to punctual globalised business time, within countries (e.g. in Namibia), individuals' approaches to time can be indicative of ethnicity (German or African) within a multi-ethnic country or of urbanisation in a rapidly developing country with very marked contrasts between rural and urban lifestyles. While many cultures that value punctuality less are comfortable using city traffic as a universal and accepted cause of lateness, in China – which suffers from city congestion as bad as anywhere else – arriving on time remains a matter of respect and politeness.

“ In relation to time, we often arrive early. We respect people in advance. When you have a meeting, being on time is polite. Usually, we arrive five minutes early. ”
Ai - China

➤ SPACE

The concept of personal space - which is closely linked to social interaction, is related both to actual physical space and to verbal communication among strangers or between a person at work and a consumer:

“One of the things that helps a lot is the fact that we South Africans speak to one another... I never thought that was something that helped until I met Europeans on travels abroad. It is almost that you [need to] have a good reason to speak to someone or the others look suspicious... I never thought of it a different way. For us we just speak to the people...”

Sarah – South Africa

Across cultures, different approaches to personal space are evident in meeting and greeting etiquette, also in public displays of affection between mixed and same-sex relations, whether in business, friendship or family contexts. The key factors at play include organisational hierarchy, socio-economic background, age, gender and religion. For example:

“In relation to personal space, it depends once again on the ethnic group. Generally, in Malaysia, Chinese people don't kiss to greet – only those who've been exposed to foreigners. High society people do it more but it's seen as something awkward. To kiss is a bit superficial. Between Malays, a Muslim and a non-Muslim, between a Muslim man and a woman, you can shake hands but not with the woman. We have to watch out in relation to what we do concerning physical contact. With Chinese women it's easier, it's not a problem with Indian women either.”

Shawn – Malaysia

In the realm of personal space, more social interaction is not necessarily 'better'. For example, in Chinese society there is a preference for being able to maintain some distance from new acquaintances while determining if and how one should engage with them:

“We keep a bit of space to evolve, to develop. We keep a bit of space to observe, to advance or draw back. That's the habit of Chinese people. We don't come all that close because we watch. We stay somewhere in the middle, a bit neutral, to see if we can advance.”

Ai – China

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➤ **NATURE**

For most of human history, humankind's daily experience has been directly and intimately linked to nature in our quest for food, water, thermal comfort and safety. With the exception of agriculture, all of the most significant changes in our experience of nature have taken place in just the last 250 years; our languages, religions, cultures, philosophies and arts remain imbued with reverence and respect for nature, stewardship of its resources, rituals, rights and prohibitions related to nature. To inform our understanding of the *physical environment* as a dimension of quality of life, different contemporary conceptions of nature can serve to inform us.

Across the world, nature is pitted against economic development with reports of a rising tide of litter on beaches, new roads, malls, office buildings and flats. However, looking at the detail reveals a more nuanced picture that yields further insight. For example, positive awareness and behaviour towards nature are seen by some as a function of educational attainment and / or age with the young being particularly linked to conservation and campaigning:

“ Many people campaign for the environment, especially the young and very, very well educated... ”

Angelo – Philippines

Propensity for pro-environment behaviour is often linked to socio-economic prosperity:

“ It's even worse for those who don't have money; they don't think about sorting [waste] if they have other problems in their life. ”

David – Indonesia

In more positive terms, in relation to socio-economic development, the affinity and ability to enjoy nature pursuits in leisure time:

“ The standard of living has risen in China, many Chinese like to go away at the weekend, camping, on walks, leisure activities that were unheard of ten years ago. There's a quest for green space; as basic needs are met people seek nature whereas ten years ago this was less the case. ”

Chan – China

Some go so far as to make a connection between nature and the balance of all things including humanity:

“Nature is about the five elements: gold, wood, water, the earth and fire. In Chinese culture, nature is entirely linked to the five elements. It's also a balance of everything, there is a loop in nature so we mustn't block or damage it. Everyone understands that. For example, Chi Kong, Tai Chi, Chinese traditional medicine are linked to nature. Without nature there's no humanity....”

Cai - China

Others identify nature as a key element of religious observance:

“Nature is one of the important parts of a religion because we are not allowed to touch... or destroy...without... reason. In our country, if we have nothing going on we can't just go and destroy anything that we have. In Islam, we can't destroy the nature; we can't hurt animals.”

Alan - Malaysia

Views and attitudes towards nature encompass far more than instrumental (economic) value versus intrinsic value with trade-offs rising rapidly to the surface.

“I would say it is a difficult relationship because some of us are trying to live sustainably and care for the environment and giving the environment a voice, and we [are] almost labelled as living like hippies or being too backward minded in this very consumerist, capitalistic world of just eating and industrializing everything. So the relationship I would say is one of conflict. The other conflict is when it is too much and when it is hindering us growing as a nation economically, industrially and where do we draw the line between what we should preserve and what we value and what we should exploit and what we should solve. So, I think that is a conflict too.”

Abigail - South Africa

➤ RELIGION

Religion may not appear as a single universal organising influence in relation to quality of life in the modern world but its enduring mark is frequently evident in the ways that people think about and experience aspects of quality of life: from illness and death to nature, from the

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etiquette of social interaction to the very hallmarks of identity and culture. Religion is variously seen as being tantamount to identity and culture in some multi-ethnic societies such as those found in Malaysia and Indonesia, a barrier to economic development and personal growth, health and wellbeing in terms of access to education, healthcare and jobs, in societies. Religion is still seen as a force of social and community cohesion in many areas, but also a barrier to national unity where populations are divided across religious lines. Religion remains an important influence across many aspects of people's experience, starting in the family in childhood:

“**Religion in the Philippines tends to be Roman Catholic so it's somewhat imposed on children. So, I was Catholic and didn't really have any choice. It was cultural. You're Catholic by birth and don't have the choice. For example, my grandmother is used to imposing Catholicism. Of course, if you have your own faith, emancipation is on the rise but it gives rise to certain pressures.... Cultural traditions are good, religious traditions are more difficult.**”

Joseph - Philippines

We are also reminded of the enduring links between religious affiliation and education:

“**From very early on I had to stay silent in relation to religious matters because I went to a Catholic school as the best primary and secondary schools here are Catholic and private, run by untaxed congregations and nuns. This was a problem for me as my parents are very liberal and were obliged to send me to a Catholic school as it was one of the best. I wasn't open-minded towards religious education or Bible-study, it was a bit overwhelming for me.**”

Anna - Philippines

Even in adulthood, some feel that they must be seen to conform to the dominant religion:

“**Everyone in the Philippines is Roman Catholic. I can't tell others that I don't believe in religion because they'll say that I'm weird.**”

Angelica - Philippines

Many of those interviewed recognised a certain homogenisation of cultures driven by modern consumerism but this is not universal; religion continues to play a significant role in relation to rights that have been fought for, emerged and been challenged since the mid-20th century:

“There are many evangelists and we are losing the rights we had acquired. The traditions hamper a bit the evolution of rights such as those of gays, the right to abort. We are in country that is so Catholic or Evangelical that it’s difficult to have access to those rights.”

Ana – Brazil

Some opinions also look much further back in history, over centuries, to explain contemporary values:

“In general, Brazilians are a bit totalitarian, they’re not accepting of differences and we see that in religion. We have an Iberian heritage, of those who supported the counter-reformation; religion is very marked and sometimes people impose their values.”

Gabriel – Brazil

➤ BODY

Alongside education, *health and wellbeing* are cited across cultures as being at the heart of quality of life. However, it is as well to remember that to speak of illness and death remains taboo for many, for example in China, Chile and Brazil.

“Illness is a bad thing but death is something we avoid mentioning.”

Bao – China

Indeed, there is a time and place to talk about certain things:

“In China we don’t like to talk of illness or death.”

Huan – China

“To speak of illness or death is very surprising for Chinese.”

Mei – China

Or perhaps not:

“It’s taboo here.”

Catalina – Chile

It is as well to remember that to speak of illness and death remains taboo for many

Attitudes towards illness that are founded on religious belief vary widely, from seeing it as a form of personal repentance to linking illness with the harmful intent of others

Inequalities related to access to healthcare are deplored by many but Western reductionist approaches are by no means universal as religious belief and spirituality remain significant influences on how people think about illness:

“**There is no specific thinking on illness in Bali but there is mystical illness that is not physical illness, it’s a sort of shared belief in Bali.**”

Angga – Indonesia

Such beliefs may now be time-bound as younger generations seem less inclined agree:

“**Of course, there are those who still believe in illness, in black magic... For example, my father was among traditional healers, he loved natural traditional remedies, and sometimes spoke to the spirits when I was ill... Things are changing among people of my age.**”

Farah – Indonesia

Attitudes towards illness that are founded on religious belief vary widely, from seeing it as a form of personal repentance:

“**Illness is a way of repenting, after suffering illness one is pure...**”

Haziq – Malaysia

To linking illness with the harmful intent of others:

“**If my uncle is ill, he’ll say it’s a spiritual problem, that because he has a business someone wants to harm him. People believe more that sort of thing than the official culture.**”

David – Indonesia

A degree of religious fatalism sometimes remains:

“**I am more accepting of what the creator has done for your journey and how he would like to end it or how she would like to end it.**”

Abigail – South Africa

A return to a divine being’s side is reflected by many, as depicted in the following statement:

“**In the Philippines, we believe that when we die, we go to heaven and we’ll be with Jesus and God... That’s what people believe.**”

Angelica – Philippines

To others, there is no finality of life in death at all:

“As I am Catholic, death is a life in God. It’s a continuation of life in heaven with God. For me, religion says that death is part of life.”

Angelo – Philippines

The world’s major religions and its more local traditional beliefs make for great diversity in people’s ways of thinking, feeling and speaking about health, illness, life and death, ultimately their quality of life.

Our relation to others

➤ RELATIONS BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL, THE FAMILY AND THE COLLECTIVE

This concept is evidently linked to the *social interaction* dimension of quality of life but it also impacts widely on most of the others. Indeed, as inherently social creatures, the nature of our relation with the collective will inevitably affect our ability to learn from others and progress in professional circles (*personal growth*). It contributes to our sense of feeling valued for the work we do (*recognition*) and it impacts our ability to carry out activities smoothly by interacting with colleagues (*ease & efficiency*). All of these dimensions contribute to our general sense of purpose, mental health and wellbeing (*health & wellbeing*).

Although Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures are traditionally perceived as more individualistic compared to the collective orientation of Latin American and Asian cultures, a strong desire is emerging among the latter’s younger generation for greater autonomy and more freedom in relation to traditional values honed by the family. As such, while some link their own purpose and quality of life directly to the welfare of the family...:

“For Filipinos [...] for example when doing a job, it’s always for the family, it is seen as a social obligation. [...] it’s not framed in individualism, the quality of life depends on the family, the life it shares.”

Anna – Philippines

...others appear to start questioning the implications of such strong family unity in terms of their own sense of individuality:

As inherently social creatures, the nature of our relation with the collective will inevitably affect our ability to learn from others and progress

While the collective is considered to be an invaluable resource for some, it is seen as a restriction for others

“For me, I’m Chinese and we place a lot of importance on the family unity, we keep really good relations between the different members of the family, very often we are a united community. The aspect of the family community is very strong, the links are very strong, it’s very difficult sometimes to distinguish oneself as an individual and I find that we all do the same thing.”

Shan – Malaysia

This tension appears especially true for women in some cultures who perceive independence as a chance:

“I am still with my family, I didn’t get the chance to live alone, to be independent. [...] Living with the family helps us to find solutions to problems, we can find solutions together, if we are alone, we find people to share what is happening in our life. If we live with our family, it’s easier to share together.”

Tanvi – India

Tension also appears for some men in traditional societies, when their objectives in life are not considered to be in line with those of the family:

“I prefer the individual system [...] but at home I still live with my parents, I have one sister and two brothers, so the individual system doesn’t really work. I think I’m lucky because I have enough autonomy and that makes me happy. But my objectives in life are not in line with those of my parents because I really want to live abroad... I’m only Filipino on my passport.”

John – Philippines

While the collective is considered to be an invaluable resource for some, it is seen as a restriction for others:

“I hate the collective, for me it’s a restriction on my life. For me, society is simply made up of individuals in free association, you join or you leave, as you wish, for your own benefit. [...] With the collective, something becomes compulsory. If I’m not happy with that, I believe it impairs my freedom.”

Chris – Australia

In some cultures, the collective is a sacred way of life, inseparable from the individual:

“When I think, I think for the community.”

Kayla – South Africa

Both forces are considered to be intrinsically complementary:

“The individual life is the communal life. We can't live without a community. I think that [...] in the traditional way of life, personal life doesn't exist; all your time is spent working, helping the community. When you are in the community you hope that they will help you in return and that's how it works in communities, if your house burns down and you never helped others, they are not going to help you.”

David – Indonesia

This complementarity may also be considered as an inherent characteristic of the human condition, allowing the individual to enhance their own capability...:

“I'm an individual [...] but I have a place in a larger collective; I need to recognise my power as an individual and that this power is magnified when I am in the collective. If I don't recognise the collective, I lose as an individual.”

Lise – Namibia

...or even to be geared towards achieving a greater good:

“One man cannot make a society. If I am here I am because of my father and ancestors so everybody in society should make a common object. That objective should be fulfilled by a collective, not an individual hand.”

Raj – India

➤ **ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHERS/STRANGERS**

The way in which we perceive and behave towards others who are unlike us, whether they have come from a different country or they represent a minority where we live, is closely linked to *social interaction* and a key element of our identity. How do individuals and social groups define what constitutes a “difference” and the implications for the person or social group involved? Globalisation has brought us all closer in terms of physical space but does that mean that we necessarily get on and accept to co-exist with those who are different from us? As human beings, we are prone to three common characteristics: (1) fear, (2) the need to categorise others

Globalisation has brought us all closer in terms of physical space but does that mean that we necessarily get on and accept to co-exist with those who are different from us?

It is interesting to look at the variety of interpretations of the concept of the 'stranger' and range of attitudes towards this person who can instil a sense of curiosity for some and suspicion for others

(with physical characteristics being the most visible attribute for this) and (3) the need for self-esteem (one way of increasing one's self esteem is by distinguishing oneself from another group and discrediting it). As such, it is interesting to look at the variety of interpretations of the concept of the 'stranger' and range of attitudes towards this person who can instil a sense of curiosity for some and suspicion for others:

“ **Namibians are very friendly towards foreigners, they get very curious and excited when they see a foreigner, they want to know where are you from and how is your life over there? Things like that.** ”

Lahja - Namibia

...generalised judgment for others...:

“ **Who is the stranger for me? People who live in the province... These people always take up bad habits or come along with their ancient ideas. For me they are the strangers.** ”

Ai - China

...also threat on the job market depending on the proximity of the person's place of origin:

“ **I really enjoy speaking with foreigners, they are welcome. Today, it's more complicated because of Peruvians and Colombians. Chileans think that they want to take their jobs. With Europeans and Americans it's different.** ”

Catalina - Chile

Nevertheless, it remains critical for some to find the different ways of connecting with the unknown, especially in countries relying on a critical tourism industry...

“ **If we're not nice with strangers, what's tourism about? It's hospitality. Being nice with foreigners is important, it's been part of the Indonesian culture for a very long time.** ”

Arief - Indonesia

...or to take up jobs which local people do not want:

“ **I am very grateful towards foreigners, because in hospitals especially, many of them take on jobs that others do not want. It's very difficult and they take on those jobs and do it very well. I don't want to take these kinds of jobs so I'm very grateful!** ”

Sarah - Australia

➤ SOCIAL STATUS

The criteria used to determine social status range from a person's professional situation, to their academic achievements, or artistic talent, age, heredity, to name but a few. It may be useful to question our own perceptions in this regard to avoid offending anyone by minimising something which they consider to be prestigious or to inconvenience them by boasting qualities which they do not value. It is important to avoid falling into the trap of referring to different representations of social status which verge on the cliché by taking into account the rapid evolution of local political and economic contexts (e.g. changing demographics, economic crises). To further inform our understanding of *social interaction*, personal growth and *recognition* as dimensions of quality of life, different contemporary definitions of social status can serve to widen our understanding:

“The social ladder for me may mean different things: financially, psychologically, intellectually. For me the most important ladder is psychological and cultural. When we die we can't pick up the money, it's useless. It's over then. For me the social ladder is not about money. We can climb the social ladder through education [...].”

John – Philippines

For some women, it is important to show that they are independent and successful in order to thrive in men's circles. Some recognise different strategies to thrive in a male-dominated culture and a female-dominated culture, respectively:

“At the end of the day I feel like I have to show people that I have a bit of money... I want to show them that I'm an independent woman, I have money. Hopefully this will help me climb the ladder in men's circles. But when it comes to women, it has more to do with buying friendship, so I'm not so sure whether me showing people that I have a little bit more money than they do is going to help me climb the social ladder.”

Sarah – Namibia

Modesty remains a central value in some traditional cultures:

“A Chinese proverb says: the tallest tree attracts the wind. In other words, if we want to show off, people will see us more and the wind will crush us. I don't like to show off my success. It depends, in most cases, I remain discreet.”

An – China

It is important to avoid falling into the trap of referring to different representations of social status which verge on the cliché by taking into account the rapid evolution of local political and economic contexts

So there is this side where you don't want to show off because you are afraid of the consequences but indirectly you are very proud of your achievement and you want to show what you have

While showing success is a way of earning respect for some who came from disadvantaged backgrounds...:

“ Frankly, yes, I like to show my success like other people here. Because people will look at me, consider me as we have something to look at, like a house or a car. They are going to respect us, if we have nothing, nobody respects us. ”

Kevin - Indonesia

...the collective's hold over the individual in traditional cultures may instil a sense of fear of being rejected by the community as a result of becoming 'too successful':

“ A friend of mine was very poor as a child. Today he is rich and he shows it, he has a car. On the one hand he is afraid that people will see him differently now that he is rich and they might take a bit of distance so people may try to keep a humble spirit to be still accepted in the community. So there is this side where you don't want to show off because you are afraid of the consequences but indirectly you are very proud of your achievement and you want to show what you have. ”

David - Indonesia

Difficult historical events resulting in a nation's wounded identity as a result of an unforgiven past –

“ There is a big wound that profoundly affects Chile, we never found out the total truth, people disappeared and were never found [...] there is a lot of mistrust. ”

Constanza - Chile

– are seen as one of the reasons for people to attempt to construct their identity in terms of material possessions through newly found purchasing power:

“ Yes we are very ambitious [...] there is a problem between 'to have' and 'to be'. Chileans will purchase in mass, a new television, this American vision of always buying something. It's a question of being, identity, memory, the period of the Coup that wounded us deeply. We don't talk about it, we create families, we earn money. Chile's wounded identity... we moved on very quickly, without working on forgiveness. ”

Javiera - Chile

➤ **MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY**

The relation between men and women directly informs the nature of *social interaction*. Cultural differences in relation to the place of women and men in society, their respective roles, status and spaces vary widely and are often caricatured. Although the role and independence of women in different societies have evolved, much is still to be done.

“ I think women are not selfish enough. Many women don't take their right to happiness. Maybe they are afraid to take it for themselves. ”

David – South Africa

For some, the relationship between men and women is perceived as very complex. In particular, there seems to be an incompatibility between a woman's independence and companionship with a man:

“ [...] But men have privileges and women are a resource for them. But they are very refreshing. They are very different to women and therefore they are interesting. Their company is very interesting and I wouldn't try to do without them. Women's independence is very important and wonderful. The only sad thing to it is that it seems that you have either independence or a man, not both [...] It seems difficult to have both which is a pity that you have to give up the companionship of these poor men or that you have to buy it with your timidity. ”

Sarah – South Africa

Our work cultures

➤ **WORK**

Work evidently impacts all dimensions of quality of life and is currently undergoing profound mutations driven by the forces of globalisation, rapid technological change and demographic shifts. To inform our understanding of these changes, it is important to know how work is perceived across different cultures. Organisations are increasingly challenged by tensions and trade-offs between traditional, pyramid-style hierarchy and flatter models. The culture of organisations remains closely related to the hierarchical relationship between managers and their teams, also the extent to which private and work lives overlap and accommodate each

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Most interviewees' organisations were still based on a strong pyramid-style hierarchy

other. When asked about their work, interviewees sometimes focused on their role (*'What do I do?'*) but sometimes also on their status (*'What is my position in the organisation?'*). In China, most respondents focused on the latter, their status. In some cases, the relation between status and role was clear while in others, such as in Asian countries, it was more ambivalent. Most interviewees' organisations were still based on a strong pyramid-style hierarchy. This type of organisation is either supported (as in Brazil and Malaysia), respected (Chile, China, India) or criticised by interviewees, as in Indonesia.

“**Respect is given by hierarchy. You need to respect your immediate superior, your directors, CEOs. To start with, we don't call them by their first name. Hierarchy is important and there are actually levels which are very strong. It's also important to see how you dress up to work because it shows your respect to office. A lot of Malaysian come well dressed to office because they would love to come in bright clothes. You can see even the receptionist. Her salary may not be huge but she dresses very well because she respects the hierarchy, whom she is going to receive, the bosses are coming here, the public comes. So, these kinds of things are important. Even outside it's very normal if you are with a Malaysian and the taxi man is an old Chinese man, they say OK, Uncle we need to go here because saying 'Uncle' is giving respect, even to the man on street, even to a neighbour.**”

Afiq - Malaysia

In Western countries such as Australia, work relationships are based on well-defined hierarchy but to a lesser extent.

“**The feeling of collegiality is very important in Australia. I don't think Australians really respect hierarchy. I have worked in several Australian companies and it is very collegial. We start at 9 am and finish at 5 pm. Then we go and drink together, we go to the pub on Friday evening, we go out with the boss, interns, it is very egalitarian.**”

Emily - Australia

Some see their work environment in a very functional way whereas others look at it in a community way; work is more than just about making money; it also defines identity and influences social life.

“**The Bayanihan (pronounced as buy-uh-nee-hun) is a Filipino custom derived from a Filipino word “Bayan,” which means nation, town or community. The term Bayanihan itself literally means “being in a Bayan,” which refers to the spirit of communal unity, work and cooperation to achieve a particular goal.**”

Mark – Philippines

In particularly mixed cultures, people often use identities as differences and positions in hierarchical structures are expressed differently across cultural groups.

“**The Malays are generally more laidback [than Chinese work cultures], not so bothered about climbing the hierarchy.**”

Anis – Malaysia

Regarding the distinction between work and private life, many respondents, in particular female respondents, insist on the importance of separating private and work life, regardless of country:

“**I separate my private life from my work. So, if anything happens to a person or there is stress at home, I will not bring it to work. Firstly, it’s unprofessional. Second of all, I can’t burden myself twice with stress of work and relations. So, as I can’t bring my work environment stress to my home, I am able to separate these two things.**”

Alan – Malaysia

Some areas are characterised by strong differences in social mobility and access to work such as in South Africa, where significant differences exist between social classes and ethnic groups:

“**So, I think traditionally there have been differences and unfortunately we do need to speak about those but, for my side, I have been privileged to be able to have the education and the opportunity, and the work opportunity that I’ve had.**”

Patrick – South Africa

Work is more than just about making money; it also defines identity and influences social life

Asian cultures are often depicted as avoiding conflict whereas Western cultures are seen to tackle conflict more directly

In many societies, access to work opportunities can also stem from acquaintances:

“ I think the best way to climb up the social ladder is to know people or people who are more successful than you, who are famous, and also to work hard as because if it is a social status, it usually comprises of popularity, being rich, being somebody who has a high status. To know people in best way is to have contacts of people, to get to know the other people in advance, to get more privileges. ...you get to know them in advance and you get to work with these people in your country whatsoever. That will help you in in the long run in social status.”

Anis - Malaysia

➤ CONFLICT

Conflict may help us to better understand the implications behind *social interaction*. In the literature, Asian cultures are often depicted as avoiding conflict whereas Western cultures are seen to tackle conflict more directly. Part of this is related to the concept of ‘embeddedness’ referred to above whereby sustaining social order by avoiding conflict may be more important than winning an argument in some cultures or vice versa in others. In spite of recent societal changes and the influence of Western culture in Asian countries, these differences seem to endure.

“ I know in certain Asian countries like China and Japan they try to avoid conflicts and I think, as a part of my culture, we try to avoid it as well but we run away and come back to the conflict later. We don’t forget, we go somewhere else and come back again.”

Alan - Malaysia

While none of those interviewed claim to enjoy conflict, there are marked differences between acceptance and avoidance:

“ It depends what kind of conflicts, you know. Obviously at work you have situations where you have conflict between employees and, you know, I play a mediator role, but at the same time being firm. If it impacts on the business, I will take a stance on it, OK. I have often seen my role in conflict is more to diffuse a situation. I don’t react to it or get upset about it, I would rather diffuse the situation and manage it with the people and come up with a solution.”

Patrick - South Africa

Whereas others try to avoid it as much as possible:

“Run! Hide! Because I really hate confrontation. Typically, I have to prepare myself for confrontation, I have to prepare what I am going to say, how I am going to say it... My way to deal with conflict is to prepare a discussion. Ok? Let's think about this...So, I know what I am going to say in advance and my approach is to save the relationship, not to lash out as if you are never go to see this person again.”

Sarah – Malaysia

In some places, conflict is everywhere:

“I would say it is a difficult relationship because some of us are trying to live sustainably and care for the environment and give the environment a voice, and we are almost labelled as living like hippies or being too backward minded. In this very consumerist, capitalist world of just eating and industrializing everything. So, the relationship I would say is one of conflict. The other conflict is when it is too much and when is it hindering us growing as a nation economically, industrially and where do we draw the line between what we should preserve and what we value and what we should exploit, and what we should solve? So, I think that is a conflict too.”

Abigail – South Africa

In some areas, it is simply not possible to say 'no'.

“The most important here is that we cannot say 'no'. We always say 'yes', even if our heart says 'no'. Some expats take advantage of that situation.”

Henry – Indonesia

Some of it is linked to the fear of losing face, an important consideration in Asian and South American cultures:

“Any conflict with a colleague must be done in private since Malays are very proud and would not accept to be reprimanded or screamed upon in public. Malays are not direct. They will let you know that everything is fine, until they tell you something is wrong.”

Anis – Malaysia

The fear of losing face is an important consideration in Asian and South American cultures

In most regions, interviewees say that money contributes to their happiness but not in an unconditional manner

Approaches to conflict may be linked to whether individuals consider themselves as an individual or as part of a whole.

“ Yes, like I used to feel really safe in Namibia. [...] You know I’m always in conflict with one person or another whether it is in a shop or a taxi, in a public place, wherever. I just feel like there will always be conflict. And I do not know - is it because I have changed or what? But I think Namibians have really changed a lot and have become more selfish. ”

Lahja – Namibia

➤ MONEY

In most regions, interviewees say that money contributes to their happiness but not in an unconditional manner. Some refer to the rich as stressed, arrogant and never satisfied nor really happy, while others envy them. Money is a means to live more comfortably (*physical environment*), to have access to education and decent healthcare (*health & wellbeing*), to seize more opportunities (*personal growth and recognition*), and more broadly to ‘exist’ in society. More than money, some refer to God (Indonesia), the community or the family (Indonesia, South Africa) or indeed culture (Chile).

“ Money has a vital role in our lives because if you want a good standard of living then money is needed because it’s a time of materialistic life ... money is a vital aspect. ”

Raj – India

By contrast:

“ You know I don’t think money is made for happiness. Family and enjoyment for family is made for happiness, but at the same time money helps a lot. I would see that it would allow you to have a home... We spoke about space earlier around you. So it does give you the opportunities, but I don’t think it makes you happy at all. I think you will get some multi-millionaires who are unhappy people and some poor people who are happy people. ”

Patrick - South Africa

Money can also be seen as a means of emancipation, in particular for women:

“ I think what will make women more happy is when they are more independent, if they have money and a good job and they do not have to depend on a man. ”

Lahja - Namibia

The relation to money seems to change people and their relation to others:

“ I just feel that the Namibian people could be more friendly. They were much, much friendlier than they are today. I think this becomes more individualistic. I think everybody is forgetting their culture and just chasing the MTV dream – more money, more this and that, to buy this car, to buy this house, have this girl, so I think people have become money orientated. ”

Lahja - Namibia

In relation to showing success or not:

“ Frankly, I like to show my success as other people around here. People here will consider you if you have something to show such as a house or a car. Indonesians like to show their success and that’s normal according to me. ”

Kevin - Indonesia

Most regions in the study are characterised by strong inequalities and these often lead to resentment. Interviewees often referred to the notion of opportunity through education. The role of the government is also often referenced, either to help the economy run, to redistribute or to provide access to social services. More generally, the government is responsible for social harmony but the community also has a role in redistributing money (Indonesia and Australia).

“ I think it is very important that the rich do help the poor. I mean, seriously, there are people that have so much money and they do not know what to do with it. So why can they not invest in community projects that will uplift our society and try to get everybody at the same level, and help people who are struggling, because if we make everybody happy we will have a healthy society and there will be no one that needs to come and steal someone’s things like the poor go to the rich - that sort of thing? ”

Lahja - Namibia

The government is responsible for social harmony but the community also has a role in redistributing money

Generational differences are important regarding the emergence of technology and the ubiquity of Western culture

➤ **KNOWLEDGE**

Western culture is largely based on written communication. However, most countries in the world actually rely on oral communication. This is the case for most of the countries investigated in this study.

“ **Education is just important because this is just the way South Africa has turned out and become. It is almost that there isn't the alternative to the Western way and the Western way requires education. ”**

Sarah – South Africa

The choice between direct and indirect communication is more ambivalent, it depends on the context (India, Indonesia Malaysia) of the use or idiosyncratic preferences. Despite the oral nature of much communication, online social networks were mentioned regularly by interviewees. Generational differences are important regarding the emergence of technology and the ubiquity of Western (often called American) culture.

“ **Go to the train station and take the train and you don't need to ask anybody anything because it is all written. Everybody is literate. Get into the train, you wait to get off, you don't talk to any people because everybody is listening to music or reading. You get to your work. You only talk to the people that you have to talk to. At the end of the day you leave in the dark. You don't talk to anybody. And then you go home...Ah ah ah, that's terrible. I never thought of it a different way; for us, we just speak to the people. Those are norms which I appreciate, which I never thought about before. In their way, they are a hindrance. Okay that norm is not a hindrance itself. In South Africa we don't write much. Things are not well signed. Sometimes the people that are supposed to help you, just hinder you. So you have to speak to people even if you don't want to. And sometimes you just want information. You don't want to chat about the weather, you just want information because you are in a hurry. ”**

Patrick – South Africa

The diversity of dialects and languages is seen as a cultural richness by most interviewees, even in Australia where English is the official language. Only in Brazil and Chile the place of dialects is somewhat ambiguous. This linguistic diversity is usually related to cultural heterogeneity (Indonesia, Australia) to regional identities, to ethnic diversity (Namibia, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, India, China). This can lead to a hierarchy among languages, as in India or in the Philippines, and between communities (ethnic diversity as in Malaysia), but also a lack of conflict (Indonesia).

The diversity of dialects and languages is seen as a cultural richness by most interviewees

We should seek to develop a more nuanced perspective from deep insight that combines the person, place, community, moment in time, situation and culture

Conclusion

As human beings we are instinctively drawn to patterns of all sorts, for example in our environments, behaviours and cultures. We derive comfort from 'rules of thumb', short cuts that can help us make sense of the variety and diversity of the circumstances we find ourselves in. On one level, this deeply ingrained habit helps us to make decisions quicker and more easily. However, in intercultural contexts and when dealing with a concept such as 'quality of life', there is a risk that our temptation to go fast leads us to overlook fundamental drivers of the way we think, behave, and therefore interpret others and the world around us.

Even today, the ways we think and act remain deeply ingrained by culture, and the way we feel about this depends significantly on our experience of other cultures. This is borne out by the remarkable journey of Marie Desjars de Keranrouë whose central narrative reminds us that there is much common ground worldwide in relation to the determinants of quality of life. The narrative includes the foundational importance of social and family relationships, material considerations, the role of education and the need for access to adequate healthcare. At the same time, significant differences are evident in the way quality of life is experienced within and mediated by culture, across countries and within them, also across socio-economic, ethnic and religious lines. Indeed, inequalities and differences in healthcare, in education and between the sexes, also the influences of religion, tradition, family life, the challenges of environmental sustainability and the fragility of linguistic diversity, are all highlighted by globalisation and its communication.

Frameworks that help us understand and track improvements in quality of life through its various dimensions are a useful way to bring structure and coherence. However, we should always question the temptation to devise and apply universal rules. Instead, we should seek to develop a more nuanced perspective from deep insight that combines the person, place, community, moment in time, situation and culture. Only then can we truly understand what it means to improve the quality of life of individuals.

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