Career Happiness Among Asian Americans: The Interplay Between Individualism and Interdependence

Sheila J. Henderson and Anne Chan

Career happiness is reexamined for relevance to non-Western cultures. Joseph Campbell’s (1968, 1972, 1988) interpretations of myth are reviewed for individualistic vs. interdependent themes and critiqued in light of Asian American vocational concerns, with examples from Chinese culture. Counselors are encouraged to reflect cultural sensitivity and understanding through collectivist interpretations of mythological archetypes and metaphors.

As the forces of cross-cultural psychology continue to affect other traditional disciplines in the field, trends in vocational psychology are shifting. If the aim of cross-cultural psychology is to push cultural context and diverse worldviews to the forefront in education, research, and counseling, then traditional methods in career counseling must change. One psychology can no longer fit all people, nor can vocational counseling have just one lens. The goal of this article is to examine the current notions of career happiness in cross-cultural terms.

Career happiness is a philosophical concept founded on the archetypes and metaphors offered by the late philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell (1968, 1988). The themes of the Hero’s Journey and “follow your bliss” offered perspectives for counselors helping clients to create continuity from oftentimes divergent life and career experiences (Henderson, 2000). Campbell’s focus on the quest for happiness and meaning came at a time when Western people were reevaluating the meaning of vocation in their lives (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994). A wellspring of popular literature exploring meaning, purpose, and soulfulness within the career experience emerged. Many Western career psychologists began departing from traditional ideas of “job satisfaction,” in-
stead offering direction toward a more profound level of “happiness” in one’s career (Henderson, 1999–2000).

The applicability of these themes to less individualistic or non-Western cultures has yet to be explored. Using concrete examples from the Chinese culture to extrapolate to the larger Asian American population, this article addressed the relevance of these concepts for Asian Americans, who may or may not embrace the individualistic cultural values that underpin some of Campbell’s popularized ideas. In addition, the article challenges counselors to consider alternative concepts of happiness, to interpret myth in collective terms, and to consider the profound meaning that may be derived from contributions that are family or community oriented, rather than self-oriented. This article suggests that if counselors are flexible as well as thoughtful in their individualist-collectivist interpretations of myth, then Campbell’s metaphors of the Hero’s Journey and following your bliss may be useful for inspiring the careers of Asian American clients.

career happiness and joseph campbell

Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey (1968, 1988) was derived from a common theme he found in mythology across culture and across time. The mythological archetype of the Hero’s Journey is a unique experience of life involving a search for deep meaning and purpose as well as fulfillment of one’s potential. Campbell (1988) coined the phrase “follow your bliss,” which illustrated the mythological hero’s commitment to listening to his or her inner thoughts and emotion and, most important, to choosing experiences that are likely to be challenging and stimulating. Campbell (1988) suggested that the archetypal Hero’s Journey may offer inspiration for the career journey, especially for those in pursuit of work experiences that are personally meaningful. Through “follow your bliss,” Campbell encouraged modern people to know their talents and invest in those activities that both draw on and ultimately reflect their natural abilities and zest for life (Campbell, 1988). The phrase “follow your bliss” became somewhat of a cultural buzzword—it seemed to be tailor-made for those hungering for a deeper meaning in life. Its impact on public imagination can be seen in the growth and popularity of Campbell’s work throughout the last three decades (“About Joseph Campbell,” 2002).

career happiness in a non-western context

Given the diversity of cultures and beliefs in the United States, it is imperative to review career happiness and its founding metaphors in terms of their relevance and adaptability to the career aspirations and lived experiences of people of non-Western culture. Advances in multicultural counseling demand that psychologists reach beyond White monocultural assumptions and revise their counseling, training, education, and research methods to respond to the specific needs of
different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups (American Psychological Association, 2002). In this respect, notions of career happiness must be considered within the context of ethnic and racial diversity in the United States and cultural differences between Western and non-Western cultures across the world.

**happiness and individualist-collectivist cultures**

Markus and Kitayama (1991) characterized the Western view of the self as “an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity who (a) comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g., traits, abilities, motives, and values) and (b) behaves primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes” (p. 224). This independent view of the self is explained as “the basis of such processes as ‘self-actualization,’ ‘realizing oneself,’ ‘expressing one’s unique configuration of needs, rights, and capacities,’ or ‘developing one’s distinct potential’” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). In contrast, the interdependent view of the self is contingent on the other in a relationship and is therefore actualized when operating within the context of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 227). Furthermore, the motivations of the person with an interdependent view vary from the motivations of the person with an independent view: The former is motivated toward strengthening connectedness to others, whereas the latter is motivated toward self-expression and independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 230). As such, there may be essential differences in the ways independent and interdependent people experience positive emotions.

These differing views of the self are the basis for an understanding of the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Hui and Triandis (1986) defined individualism as “the subordination of the goals of the collectivities to individual goals, and a sense of independence and lack of concern for others” (p. 245). On the other hand, collectivism is viewed as a grouping of a diverse array of beliefs and behaviors that fall under seven categories: “Consideration of implications (costs and benefits) of one’s own decisions and/or actions for other people, sharing of material resources, sharing of nonmaterial resources, susceptibility to social influence, self-presentation and facework, sharing of outcomes, feeling of involvement in others’ lives” (Hui & Triandis, 1986, pp. 227–231).

It is important to note that individuals vary in the degree to which they uphold individualistic or collectivistic values. In particular, within-group factors such as acculturation, generational status, and ethnic identity can influence an individual’s orientation toward these values (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998; Sue & Sue, 2003). However, the potential for such marked differences in personal beliefs and goals points to the need for a revision of prominent career theories that would take into consideration how an individual’s career expectancies and perceptions of happiness are shaped by individualistic or interdependent notions.
In his books and interviews, Joseph Campbell (1968, 1988) discussed individualism as a great contribution of Western culture. His notion was that Westernized individuals are not "cookie molded" (Campbell, 1988, p. 151) by the expectations of others but rather have the opportunity to forge a career/life path based on their own enjoyment, interests, and talent. Campbell (1988) stated, “This, I believe, is the Great Western truth that each of us is a completely unique creature and that, if we are ever to give any gift to the world, it will have to come out of our own experience and fulfillment of our own potentialities, not someone else’s” (p. 151). Campbell’s theme of “follow your bliss” emphasizing individual interests, talents, and potentiality in career planning fits in well with mainstream vocational psychology focusing on career guidance for dominant U.S. culture (see Clark, 2000; Henderson, 2000; Potter & Orfali, 1994).

Are the Hero’s Journey and “follow your bliss” irrelevant as guiding archetypes and metaphors for people who hold collectivist values rather than individualist ideals? It is important to note that the myths Campbell studied were deeply rooted in cultures far different from his own and spanned cultures on the vast continuum between individualism and collectivism. Campbell did refer to collectivist ideals in his writings, although these were not dominant themes. For example, the Hero’s Journey is described as a spiritual path involving separation, an initiation involving sacrifice of the self-aggrandizing ego, then transformation symbolized by finding the healing elixir for the home community to which the Hero returns and ultimately belongs (see Campbell, 1968, p. 30). Campbell also offered interpretations of myth that emphasized collectivist concepts of community and spiritual unity. For example, Campbell wrote that the final “transformation of the hero” happens in the return from the journey. The Hero’s journey involves not only a “waking of individuals in the knowledge of themselves” (Campbell, 1972, p. 266) but also a consequential commitment to the larger community. Elsewhere, Campbell (1988) wrote:

If you realize what the real problem is—losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another—you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and or own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. (p. 126)

Other circles in American culture included both the individualistic and collectivist interpretations of Joseph Campbell’s work. The illustration of the Hero’s individual journey within, rites of passage, and ultimate transformation of the
individual’s role in the larger community is evident in the media (Koepp, 1999). Asian American women writers have used the Hero’s Journey in their own evaluations of Asian women’s journey in American culture (see Eng, 1999; Nam, 2001). Although Campbell’s work was not centered on the interdependence of the Hero and the community, his collectivist references can serve as a guide for counselors more interested in interdependent interpretations. In a global world of multicultural diversity, it would behoove psychology researchers, educators, and counselors to consider Campbell’s work in a fuller perspective of both individualism and collectivism.

individualism versus interdependence in multicultural career counseling

How do these two seemingly opposing dimensions of individualism and interdependence converge in understanding career development and happiness in multicultural context? Most important, how does one attend to these differing notions of being in a culturally sensitive counseling manner? Among the major multicultural groups in the United States, Asian Americans were chosen as a case study for our examination of career happiness because they are often regarded as a more interdependent than individualistic culture. This article explores the interplay of individualism and collectivism on the career and life happiness of Asian Americans, using references to Chinese culture as illustrations. We acknowledge that our use of examples from the Chinese culture prevents us from making gross generalizations about all Asian Americans; however, our points have some broad implications for thinking about and working with this heterogeneous population.

career happiness among Asian Americans

When applying concepts of career happiness to the Asian American population, it is first critical to understand that this is a markedly heterogeneous population comprising over 25 diverse racial and ethnic groups from different parts of the world, all with myriad intergroup as well as intragroup differences. In fact, the groups labeled as “Asian” include such distinct cultures as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong, among others. Adding to this complexity is the influence of numerous variables that further shape the uniqueness of each Asian American’s life experience; such variables include educational level, immigration history and status, generation level, acculturation, socioeconomic and class status, conditions in the home country, religious beliefs, and ethnic identity (Leong & Serafica,
Not only does such heterogeneity require a careful guard against making stereotyped overgeneralizations and assumptions, but it also demands sensitivity to the unique makeup of each individual and to all possible dimensions of human functioning that can shape experiences of happiness. People of non-Western culture may not even have the same interpretation or understanding of the word *happiness* compared with Westerners. For example, in Mandarin, happiness is not a single-word concept. Rather, *gao xing, kuai le,* and *xi* are each used to denote happiness. Despite being referents for happiness, these words do not connote the same depth of feeling that the English word *happiness* might for Western individuals. *Gao xing,* for example, refers more to high spirits than deep happiness (the character *gao* is used to denote high, and the character *xing* refers to spirits, mood, or interest). Likewise, *xi,* when used as a verb, connotes liking or enjoying more than soulful fulfillment. *Xi,* used as a noun, is most popularly used in the ideogram for “double happiness,” specifically denoting marital bliss. *Kuai le* may be the best equivalent phrase for happiness, but it is most commonly used as a birthday wish. It is perhaps an insight into this culture that the words *fu qi* are used to describe someone who has a happy life, yet the Chinese character *fu* can be used to describe happiness as well as good fortune and blessings, thus implying the role of predestination in one’s happiness.

In addition to language differences, initial research findings suggest that Asian Americans may have conceptions, expectations, and experiences of career and life happiness in contrast to those of Euro-Americans. It has been argued by some researchers that East Asians have a markedly different philosophy of happiness: Unlike Campbell’s notion of “follow your bliss,” a common East Asian belief centers around the idea of happiness being predetermined and the importance of being satisfied with one’s allocated amount of bliss (Suh, 2000). Indeed, contrary to the emphasis on the “pursuit of happiness” as a national value, some East Asians believe that individual happiness is not a supreme life goal.

Likewise, comparative studies of happiness in college students found that happiness is more strongly valued by American than by Chinese students (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995). Furthermore, the essence of happiness may be differentially defined with respect to culture. Kitayama and Markus (2000) have suggested that some East Asians perceive of well-being in terms of “self-criticism, failure, and suffering” (p. 129) in contrast to the American idea of happiness as being free of worries and having high self-esteem.

There appear to be similarly differing conceptions of happiness in the workplace. Weaver and Hinson’s (2000) comparison of job satisfaction in Asian Americans and Euro-Americans found a comparatively low level of job satisfaction for Asian Americans, even after factors like occupation type, education, income, and age were taken into consideration. Weaver (2001) proposed two explanations for this phenomenon: first, that Asian Americans have higher job expectations than other cultures; second, that jobs are not a source of happiness for Asian Americans as they may be for people with a Western orientation. Findings from Weaver’s study provide limited support for this latter explana-
tion. Studies on the occupational values of Asian Americans have also found that the prestige of careers (Leung, 1993), money, and task satisfaction (Leong & Tata, 1990) were valued over personal interests and aptitudes in their career decision making. These studies point to the possibility that some Asian Americans may not deem work to be a source for personal fulfillment but may instead possess other expectations of work.

It is important to note that such findings may be tempered by effects of acculturation: One study of Chinese American children’s values has shown that the children tended to place more importance on self-realization as they became more acculturated (Leong & Tata, 1990). This interaction effect suggests that those who have adopted Western values may regard work as an expression of the self, whereas those who hold traditional Asian values may instead view work from within a framework of group obligation and contribution. Gender is another mediating factor that appears to shape individual expectations and experience of work in Asian Americans. In a study of Chinese American children, Leong and Tata found that the boys valued object orientation, self-realization, and ideas more compared with the girls, and the girls valued altruism more compared with the boys.

The following aspects of Chinese culture may be relevant to an understanding of experiences of career and life happiness in individuals from interdependent cultures. These cultural aspects were chosen for in-depth discussion because they are particularly relevant in the work context and because they have relevance for the Chinese culture as well as other Asian groups.

DEFERENCE TO AUTHORITY AND FILIAL PIETY

A central value in Chinese culture that shapes an individual’s ideals of happiness, harmony, and behavior is that of filial piety (xiao), which can be roughly translated as having respect, obedience, and devotion for one’s elders. Xiao may be expressed directly and indirectly in a variety of ways, from being respectful and caring to providing financial aid. This sense of obligation and respect to the parent can be a factor in an individual’s career decision making. For instance, one study of 30 second-generation Chinese students at a research university found that the students felt a deep sense of filial piety toward their parents. Several of these students expressed a strong commitment to caring for their parents’ welfare and happiness; one even mentioned that he “owed” his father a doctorate because the father discontinued his own doctoral studies when his first child was born (Liu, 1998, p. 579). These feelings of xiao may play a significant role in the Chinese client’s feelings of obligation toward his or her parents and may thus affect his or her sense of happiness in life. Most notably, it can cause great anxiety when the wishes of the individual’s parents conflict with those of the individual, as is sometimes the case with career choice (Fang & Wark, 1998, p. 67).
This cultural dilemma challenges the idea of following one’s bliss when the personal is intimately entwined with the familial (Pope, Cheng, & Leong, 1998). In such cases, Leong (1993) argued that it would be *culturally dystonic* for career counselors to urge their Asian American clients to “follow their own interests.” Other scholars have suggested that family issues be addressed to assist Chinese and other East Asian clients in fulfilling and maintaining their roles in the family so as to preserve familial and individual equanimity (Cheng, 1990, p. 513).

**HUMILITY**

Another cultural value that can affect an individual’s career advancement and happiness is that of humility. One study comparing the self-concept of White Americans and Chinese Americans found that the latter scored significantly lower on self-reports of attractiveness, flexibility, beauty, being sharp, and being active (White & Chan, 1983). The authors of this study concluded that the Chinese culture’s emphasis on humility and modesty can shape a person to become less independent and autonomous. It is not hard to imagine that individuals who adhere to cultural values of modesty and self-effacement might find themselves being overlooked for promotions or advancement and might thus feel frustrated and unhappy. Career counselors who are sensitive to these issues in their clients can do much to help them explore different ways of acting and being in the work world so that they can be true to their values as well as be recognized for their efforts.

**BELIEF SYSTEMS**

The individualistic notions of “follow your bliss” and the Hero’s Journey are predicated on the assumption that the individual can make choices to fulfill his or her potentiality (Campbell, 1988). Campbell’s description of the journey advocates a “dogged investment of energy and consciousness into those activities that generate a significant emotional blissfulness” (Henderson, 2000, p. 305). These ideas of destiny and emotional investment may run counter to some of the philosophical and religious belief systems of Asian Americans. First, those who subscribe to Buddhist or Confucian precepts may place less emphasis on the pursuit of happiness as an appropriate life goal but may instead regard eliminating desire as a more appropriate life goal (Pope et al., 1998). Second, Confucian texts have also warned about the dangers of possessing individual overreaching desires:

> Man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied for him, he cannot but seek some means to satisfy them himself. If there are no limits and degrees to his seeking, then he will inevitably fall to wrangling with other men. . . . The ancient kings hated such disorder and therefore they established ritual principles (*Li*), in order to curb it, to train man’s desires and to provide for their satisfaction. They saw to it that desires did not over-extend the means for their satisfaction and material goods did not fall short of what was desired. (Tzu, 1963, p. 89)
Third, Asian Americans differ in their belief about fate and predestination. According to Li (1998), the Buddhists believe in *yin yuan* (predetermined cause) and may thus feel that their circumstances are not within their control. On the other hand, those who follow Confucius’s teachings believe in the power of individual effort to change circumstances and thus may be more motivated to make choices for change. Other Asians may be influenced by both Confucianism and Buddhism and may view individual effort within the framework of *yin yuan*. In addition, those who were exposed to Marxist teachings may ascribe societal causes to an individual’s problems and may thus interpret happiness through a societal structures lens (Li, 1998). Still others who are of Christian faiths may subscribe to belief systems that inform their work philosophy, such as the Protestant work ethic or a belief in God’s calling. These varying notions of individual choice and happiness point to the need for appropriate interpretation of the ideas of the Hero’s Journey and “follow your bliss.” Some Asian Americans may well resonate with the notion of individual happiness. For others, the notion of “follow your bliss” would have to be expanded to include notions of collective well-being and contribution to the larger collective.

**external forces impeding career happiness**

The quest for career happiness for minorities can often be derailed or impeded by systemic forces of oppression such as racism, discrimination, homophobia, and sexism. These impediments to personal fulfillment can be particularly pernicious and damaging for minority women, who face the triple jeopardy of having to deal with cultural injunctions against sexual equality, existing gender and racial differences in society, and the emotional toil of having inadequate support (Yang, 1991). Although these forces profoundly affect an individual’s internal processes and striving for life satisfaction, it is important for counselors to be aware that the etiology of these problems are external to the client and are situated within the intolerant environments in which they live (Lee, 1997). At the same time, it is imperative for counselors to be proactive in assisting, empowering, and teaching clients to overcome these difficult barriers to career happiness. Interpretations of the career journey for an Asian American might include examples of how prominent Asian American figures have persisted despite adversity and found alternative routes to their destination.

**recommendations for counselors**

One relevant guideline in this discussion of career happiness is Chung and Bemak’s (2002) concept of *cultural empathy*, which partially refers to the need for counselors to understand and accept the importance of family and community when working with clients from collectivist cultures. To be culturally em-
pathic, counselors must maintain a lifelong commitment to questioning their biases, be accepting of radically different worldviews, and continue learning from cultures different from their own.

Both qualitative and quantitative studies have recently shown a significant correlation between multicultural competence of counselors and the satisfaction of clients with their counseling experience (Constantine, 2002; Pope-Davis et al., 2002). A counselor’s ability to assess accurately where a client falls on the individualism-interdependence continuum is therefore of paramount importance in designing a culturally appropriate approach to vocational counseling. Counselor efforts to openly discuss this issue with clients may yield a rich discussion about the client’s beliefs and philosophy about happiness, work, and life and may also enhance the therapeutic rapport of trust and engagement in the process. Such efforts may also help to increase overall client satisfaction with the counseling process.

One quick way to assess a client’s worldview is by using scales that measure individualism and collectivism, such as the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) or the Asian Values Scale (Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999). A combination of conversation and formal assessment may assist counselors in understanding how to adapt archetypes and metaphors that will resonate with the client’s individualist or collectivist orientation.

For some Asian clients, the goal of following one’s bliss or fulfilling one’s potential may not be culturally syntonic. In working with such clients, counselors should be particularly attuned to underlying beliefs and philosophies that may be framing the client’s attitude toward work and happiness. It may be helpful to counselors working with Asian American clientele to become familiar with books by Asian authors that illustrate career and life experiences of other Asian Americans (see Eng, 1999; Pham, 1999) and with Asian folktales, such as the Monkey King.

If needed, counselors should be open to the need for redefining therapeutic goals, even if these are contrary to the therapist’s own beliefs and assumptions about happiness and careers. For other clients, the language of career happiness may have to be adapted to the spoken word of their culture. Because Asian American clients may not have the same notion of happiness as a Western counselor or even the same language conventions for discussing the concept, multiculturally competent counselors need to modulate or change their language to better address the philosophical needs of an Asian American client. Rather than asking, “What does career happiness mean to you?” a culturally sensitive counselor might ask, “What do you hope for in your career?” or “What are the hopes of your family for you?” In fact, conversations about creating balance in work, family, and community life may be more appropriate, especially in the case of some East Asians for whom the concept of balance is essential to the notion of overall well-being. With such clients, a culturally appropriate question might be to ask, “How would you like to balance time and energy spent at work with your other commitments to family and community?”
While working within the frame of the client’s worldview, it is also important to remember that many Asian Americans work within the context of workplaces that are dominated by Western values and ideologies of rugged individualism and autonomy. Unfortunately, those who depend on interdependent notions of work may be (mis)labeled as “passive,” “unable to take initiative,” or “too quiet.” It might be useful for counselors to teach such clients how they can be effectively bicultural, so that they can stay true to their internalized values as well as be successful and respected in the workplace.

**Conclusion**

Advances in cross-cultural psychology challenge us to examine hitherto long-held basic assumptions in vocational psychology. One such assumption examined in this article is that of individualism and individual happiness as universal values. It should be noted that many psychological models are based on research framed by individualist notions, even though individualist nations do not represent a majority in the world (Oishi, 2000). As such, it is important to heed Kitayama and Markus’s (2000) warning that well-intended attempts to apply Western theories of happiness to other cultures may misrepresent them. At the same time, current findings indicate that happiness and well-being are culturally influenced but not culturally deterministic. Asian clients who are more acculturated to Western orientations may express themselves more individualistically. Those same individuals, however, may still maintain an interdependence with their community where tacit signals of approval and support from family members are influential in their individual decision making. This constant interplay between independence and interdependence is particularly complex in the lived experiences of Asian Americans who come from collectivist cultures and who face additional influences of adjustment and acculturation in the United States.

In contrast to Campbell’s discussion on individualism, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that the interdependent self would derive happiness through “fulfilling the tasks associated with being interdependent with relevant others: belonging, fitting in, occupying one’s proper place, engaging in appropriate action, promoting others’ goals, and maintaining harmony” (p. 242). In understanding and applying career happiness through this lens of interdependence, it thus becomes necessary to redefine career happiness to be inclusive of relevant others as well as to rethink what it means for an interdependent self to express his or her self. For some Asian Americans who fully embrace interdependent values, the ultimate meaning of true self and career fulfillment might fall within the context of social relationships. In these instances, collectivist interpretations of Joseph Campbell’s mythological archetypes and metaphors are essential. For others who have adopted values of independence and autonomy, Campbell’s notion of fulfilling one’s individual potential may be more applicable.


