The role of chronic pain and suffering in contemporary society

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Contents

Original research article

The paradox of modern suffering

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Since the end of the 18th century, many people in the developed Western countries have experienced an increase in housing conditions, income, security, health, and education levels as well as a progress in human rights and democratic values and institutions. These trends are often perceived as signs of a positive development towards a higher level of happiness and a lower level of suffering. Nevertheless commentators have pointed out how several studies and surveys seem to indicate that the levels of existential suffering and mental distress have not decreased in line with this political, economic, and social development The article introduces the thesis of the paradox of suffering in modern Western culture. The concept of this paradox designates how modern Western culture is centred on a pursuit of happiness and avoidance of suffering, but continuously involves widespread existential suffering and mental distress. Furthermore, the main point of the article is to demonstrate how the cultural pursuit of happiness, paradoxically, is what causes a lot of the present suffering.

Introduction

Since the end of the 18th century, many people in the developed Western countries have experienced an increase in housing conditions, income, security, health, and education levels as well as a progress in human rights and democratic values and institutions. These trends are often perceived as signs of a positive development towards a higher level of happiness and a lower level of suffering (Harris, 2008: 2; Hundevadt, 2004: 12; Milsted, 2007: 25).

Nevertheless, commentators like therapist Russ Harris and social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen have pointed out how several studies and surveys seem to indicate that the levels of existential suffering and mental distress have not decreased in line with this political, economic, and social development (Harris, 2008: 3; Eriksen, 2008: 7). Focusing on the growing standard of living, economist Richard Layard likewise remarks how people in the modern Western world experience existential suffering despite the ambition to create a happy society:

> There is a paradox at the heart of our lives. Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet, as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier. (Layard, 2006: 1).

The article introduces the thesis of the paradox of suffering in modern Western culture. The concept of this paradox designates how modern Western culture is centred on a pursuit of happiness and avoidance of suffering, but continuously involves widespread existential suffering and mental distress. Furthermore, the main point of the article is to demonstrate how the cultural pursuit of happiness, paradoxically, is what causes a lot of the present suffering.

In the article, I discuss the paradox of suffering in modern Western culture from the perspective of an existential analysis of culture, aiming at elucidating the fundamental connections between human existence and culture. Originally, existential analysis is a philosophical therapeutic method created by psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss primarily concerned with investigating the existential condition of individuals (Binswanger, 1975: 124). I argue why existential analysis as a new instrument of research to the field of cultural analysis can be fruitful to examining the inner relations between dominant cultural trends and the existential condition of mankind.

According to existential philosopher Martin Heidegger's conception of the history of being, the human way of experiencing being – including its own existence – is characterized by fundamental patterns that change throughout history and

are expressed in dominant culture (Heidegger, 1977: 24). The existential analysis of culture in this article partly draws on Heidegger in viewing modern Western experience of existence as increasingly including a widespread existential pursuit of happiness linked to the avoidance of mental and existential suffering. The article examines different aspects of this double-sided existential strategy of pursuance and avoidance and its effects on the existential condition of human beings living in this culture. This research field is examined by addressing different theoretical and practical problematizations of human happiness and suffering as they explicitly and implicitly appear in political and institutional documents and in literature on scientific research and philosophy because these problematizations might be regarded as reflective expressions of dominant cultural ways of experiencing human existence and its condition.

The pursuit of happiness

The view in this article is supported by existential therapist Emmy van Deurzen according to whom it is taken for granted in late Western modernity to view the main objective of human existence as the achievement of the highest possible level of happiness (Deurzen, 2008: 59). Likewise, philosopher Wilhelm Schmid makes it clear how happiness is a new norm in the modern world (Schmid, 2007: ch. 2), and philosopher Daniel Haybron describes the pursuit of happiness as the defining theme of the modern era (Hayborn, 2008). Philosophical psychologist Ziyad Marar elucidates how modern Western culture embodies a tormenting dream of happiness that is a recent and local invention (Marar, 2006: 12), and positive psychologist Michael Argyle states that the mundane lives of modern people in the Western part of the world are spent in the pursuit of happiness as the most important component of existence (Argyle, 2004: 1). This explains some of the reason why the existential question of happiness is increasingly becoming an objective in politics, economics, philosophy, and scientific research.

The philosophy behind the modern cultural pursuit for happiness can partly be traced back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment where it is most explicitly articulated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. They both argued that the purpose of human actions should be "to bring the biggest measure of happiness to the greatest number of people" (Bentham, 1973; Mill, 2002). Bentham wanted to provide the real road to human happiness, and this involved the removal of all unnecessary pain and suffering. For Bentham, suffering had no value in itself and it should give way to happiness. Likewise, Mill stated that the principle of

utility not only pursues the increase of pleasure but also the decrease of pain and suffering.

This ideal of happiness has driven a lot of the political, social, and economic progress in the Western world in the last two hundred years. For example, the behavioral economists Dan Ariely, George Loewenstein, and Jonathan Schooler describe how "the assumption that the explicit pursuit of happiness is and should be the primary source of motivation" is a cornerstone of modern Western thought (Schooler 2003: 41), and the United States Declaration of Independence from 1776 pronounces all men as possessors of an "unalienable" right to "the pursuit of happiness" (U.S. Congress, 1776: section 2). Correspondingly, the objective of the modern state is to ensure, sustain, and improve the lives of each and every one, and the happiness ideal can be said to be part of this concern to govern for the welfare of the citizens (Foucault, 2003; Sumner, 1999).

On a political level, improving people's happiness has increasingly become a key challenge to the ambition of improving the quality of life for each and every one. To illustrate this: At the turn of the millennium, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that Western governments had succeeded in delivering greater and greater wealth as measured in economic growth (Blair, 1999). But he also stated that money was not everything in life and that politicians had failed in translating development into an increase in happiness. From now on, improving people's happiness should be a main priority for politicians, and Tony Blair and Tory leader David Cameron even appeared to agree that more people now put happiness as a priority in their lives, rather than merely paying the bills (Brown, 2007). According to this new 'happiness agenda', welfare gets so closely connected with happiness that the objective of the welfare state is almost seen as a government for the happiness of each and every one of its citizens. What ought to be distributed by social policy is not just money but well-being and satisfaction.

If the politicians want people to be happier, they need to know what conditions generate happiness and how to cultivate them. Parallel to the political happiness agenda, the idea of measuring happiness for purposes of government and social policy has conveniently emerged. This idea is associated with the emergence of an ambition to make happiness a scientific object: The causes of happiness and the means to affect it have become a matter for evidence-based research in the fields of economy, sociology, medicine, neuroscience, and psychology (Dworkin, 2007: 2). According to many of the main psychologically oriented authors of this movement, happiness is a concept defined as subjective well-being (Diener, 2008: 4). More specifically, the rapidly growing field of 'the science of happiness' at-

tempts to understand people's evaluations of their lives in terms of components such as life satisfaction, presence of positive emotional experiences, and absence of negative emotional experiences and to identify the means to make life more fulfilling (Jacobsen, 2007: 25-26). The number of scientific articles and books on the subject appears to explode at the moment, and the objectification of happiness is distributed in different organizations and linked to the emergence of new institutions. Hosted by the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the international World Database of Happiness is one of the institutions to play an important role in the continuous registration of scientific happiness.

Happiness and suffering in present times

If the pursuit of happiness is the signature tune of our present time, it raises a question to the general state of happiness and suffering in modern Western societies:

In 1993, the present director of the World Database of Happiness, Ruut Veenhoven, was one of the first of many social researchers to produce a survey of the relative levels of happiness among nations (Veenhoven, 1993). In 2006, another researcher, Adrian White from the University of Leicester, employed the responses from 80,000 people worldwide to make a World Map of Happiness which showed different nations' level of subjective well-being (White, 2007). Denmark came top, closely followed by Switzerland and Austria. As other surveys show, average happiness seems to be highest in rich, developed, democratic, Western nations and lowest in poor, undeveloped, non-Western nations. Adrian White, who is a social psychologist, especially noticed that a nation's level of happiness was most closely associated with high levels of health, prosperity, and education. To promote these circumstances for each and everyone has exactly been an ambition of North-Western European and especially Scandinavian welfare states and in this way they can be said to be successful. That is, the greatest satisfaction with worldly life is experienced in those societies that have seen it as their primary task to raise life satisfaction through the improvement of health, prosperity, and education among the citizens.

Interestingly enough, White published his world map almost at the same time as the American sociologist Phil Zuckerman put Denmark and the Scandinavian welfare states – as paradigmatic examples of North-Western European culture - in the center of another picture of the world: Here are the most secularized nations in the world where belief in God has largely disappeared from public existence (Zuckerman, 2008). And these nations seem to be filled with citizens who score

at the very top of the 'happiness index' and benefit from their healthy societies, which have some of the lowest rates of violent crime in the world, high level educational systems, strong economies, free health care, and egalitarian social policies.

Looking only at the surveys of the relative levels of happiness in nations, it seems that people in North-West Europe, and in particular in Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia, are very satisfied with their lives. A related impression of high existential satisfaction is found in other Western nations where the pursuit of happiness is similarly widespread.

Focusing on Denmark, another type of investigation shows a very different picture. In 2007, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development published a survey which showed that Denmark is the OECD country with the highest growth in the use of antidepressant medication (OECD, 2007). Other figures from the Danish Psychiatry Fund state that every second Danish family comes into contact with care due to mental illness, which contests the idea of widespread happy living (Milsted, 2007: 38-39). Additionally, an analysis from 2006 by the New Economics Foundation shows that the Danes actually have not become more satisfied with life in recent decades, although the welfare in Denmark has risen fairly constantly (New Economics Foundation, 2006). The situation does not differ in the rest of North-West Europe and the Western world. According to the OECD, depression is the leading cause of disability in high-income countries, and in the United States and Europe, it is estimated that every fourth adult suffers from a mental disorder in one given year (OECD, 2008).

Throughout the Western world, the number of stress-related disorders grows and stress has become a crucial pathogenic factor in modern Western societies (Slater, 2008). According to the American Journal of Psychiatry, the rates of depression across almost all demographic groups have risen in the United States during the 1990s (Comton, 2006). Other results from epidemiological studies point to the view that the overall frequency of depression and anxiety is increasing in Western countries (Blazer, 2005: 114; Borch-Jacobsen, 2009: 198). Michael Norden explicated in his book Beyond Prozac what is in some ways implicit in this research (Norden, 1995). He suggested that we are experiencing a worldwide epidemic of depression centred in the Western countries. Overall, there is a trend that may suggest that mental distress as well as the level of existential suffering in Western populations has not decreased in recent decades.

The paradox of suffering in modern western culture

Some commentators would argue that the trends described indicate that our society has become better at promoting happiness and detecting human suffering and mental distress, so it can be eliminated though therapy and prevention (Nordentoft, 2007; Rosenberg, 1997: 7). Other commentators like medical scientist John Schneider and psychoanalyst Darian Leader argue that the present trends reflect a medicalization or pathologicalization of human conditions, and that people do not necessarily become any happier by this development (Schneider, 2000: ch. 1; Leader, 2009: 2-3). Finally, commentators such as Norden believe that the level of existential suffering and mental distress is actually rising in modern Western culture, indicating that the existential condition of humanity is getting worse in present times. The question is how an existential analysis of culture should deal with these three angles and with the relationship between culture and the existential condition of humanity?

Deurzen describes existential analysis as a therapeutic approach with the aim of helping a person face his existential dilemmas, paradoxes, and contradictions by understanding the whole of his existence (Deurzen, 2007: 6). An existential analysis of culture likewise takes the view that focus must be shifted from simple one-sided trends, issues, and accomplishments to the wider perspective of the whole of shared cultural existence. From an understanding of the how of this social being-in-the-world and the cultural attitude toward human existence and world, this kind of analysis elucidates the inner paradoxes and contradictions pervading the whole of cultural existence. What is interesting is not necessarily whether or not the level of happiness and suffering has actually decreased or increased, but the paradoxical fact that existential suffering and mental distress continue to be widespread in a culture that is centred on an ambition to maximize happiness and eliminate suffering through economic, social, political, and scientific development.

Premodern Christian theology presented a conception of the paradox of suffering that can be stated as follows: If God is good, as well as all-powerful, why do innocent people suffer? (St. Anselm, 1956: 190). The concept of the paradox of suffering in modern culture is different in highlighting the contradictions and oppositions in man's own way of being in and giving meaning to his world. Some researchers have addressed a modern paradox of suffering on a minor level, such as cognitive therapist Aaron Beck who describes depression in terms of its paradoxes:

There is, for instance, an astonishing contrast between the depressed person's image of himself and the objective facts. (Beck, 1970: 3).

Athropologist Gregory Bateson explains the alcoholic as having adopted a variant of the dualistic epistemology characteristic of Western civilization involving a paradoxical attempt to control existence and arrive at existential solutions through drinking that is bound to fail (Bateson, 1971). From a broader perspective, Schooler, Ariely, and Loewenstein describe how psychological research suggests that the explicit effort to maximize one's individual happiness as a primary human goal may be a self-defeating task by undermining "the ability to achieve happiness" (Schooler, 2003: 43). Equally focusing on the psychological dimension, Harris advocates that the pursuit of happiness catches many people in a "vicious circle in which the more we try to find happiness, the more we suffer" (Harris, 2008: 1). In his philosophical book Glück. Alles, was Sie darüber wissen müssen und warum es nicht das Wichtigste im Leben ist, Schmid likewise asks the question whether it is precisely the constant hunt for happiness that makes us unhappy? (Schmid, 2007, ch. 2). And from an existential therapeutic perspective van Deurzen points to "the well-established human evidence that existential misery persists regardless of our attempts at getting rid of unhappiness" (Deurzen, 2008: 11).

The existential analysis of culture partly follows in the footsteps of these researchers by turning the attention to the specific shared cultural ways in which modern Western people attempt to manage their being in the world through a pursuit of happiness that paradoxically involves suffering by partly being a self-defeating existential strategy. In other words, the argument is that the pursuit of happiness in modern Western culture contains a fundamental paradox by not only bringing happiness but also by itself bringing much of the suffering that it intends to free us from.

Being, suffering, and culture

According to Binswanger, existential analysis is a scientific approach that makes statements about "actually appearing forms and configurations of existence" (Binswanger, 2004: 192). This existential analysis of existence is furthermore based on the assumption that every human being is intrinsically related to itself, other people, and the world as a being-in-the-world. In this respect, the existential analysis of culture is focused on the consequence that sociality is fundamental to existence furthermore conceived as being-with (Binswanger, 1963: 31; Heidegger,

1996: §§26-32) or being-for-others (Sartre, 2008, part 3). Human beings exist in a cultural way since culture is to be understood as an integrated pattern of shared experience, knowledge, belief, and behavior belonging to this relational being. From an existential phenomenological perspective it makes no sense to separate an inner consciousness from an external sociocultural context of meaning. Rather meaning is part of our conscious way of relating to our own existence and, as existential analyst Alice Holzhey-Kunz states, each culture is a structure of collective meanings which embody basic existential experiences (Holzhey-Kunz, 2008: 216).

Individuals personify their sociocultural settings, and dominant cultural problematizations of happiness and suffering embody different aspects of the cultural experience of existence. Some of these aspects are directly expressed in governing popular or common understandings of existential matters, and some aspects are concealed in the cultural ways in which existence is experienced. Whereas existential psychologist Bo Jacobsen merely refers the general term of suffering to an experience of enduring physical or mental pain (Jacobsen, 2007: 23), Hozhey-Kunz goes deeper by relating the experience of existential suffering to a special sensibility to one's own being-in-the-world (Holzhey-Kunz, 2001: 150). Such fundamental dimensions of existence stay mostly hidden to human beings because people are absorbed in the common understanding of the world in each culture, including the common existential sense which guides their life (Heidegger, 1993: §27, 33). Every essential aspect of our being-in-the-world is meaningful, but most of the time this meaning remains concealed to us because we have a deep wish to neglect our basic situation, and successful everyday living actually demands this forgetting in commonness. The symptoms of existential suffering express various experiences of existential unpleasantness that are understandable when they are related to different modes of reaction to threatening issues of one's own being-in-the-world. The experience of existential suffering in modernity therefore expresses a disillusioning confrontation with the facticity of existence that is based on a loss of ability to share the public interpretations of existence and existential demands embodied in modern Western culture:

> A suffering from one's own being related to the challenge of pursuing happiness and avoiding suffering (Holzhey-Kunz, 2001: 312).

The hypothesis about a close link between culture and existential suffering and mental distress is not new. For example, Sigmund Freud's theory in Civilization and its Discontents was that the conflict between sexual needs and cultural mores is the source of mankind's propensity for dissatisfaction, aggression, hostility,

and, ultimately, violence (Freud, 2001). In his monumental work on the history of medicine, The Greatest benefit to mankind, the British historian Roy Porter in another way stated that the history of human suffering is the history of human civilization: Ever since human beings began socializing in advanced cultural settings, the spreading and pattern of mental and physical suffering have mirrored the changing ways in which humans have organized their common existence (Porter, 1997, part 1). Theories like these describe how the sources of suffering and people's ways of experiencing suffering are influenced by dominant cultural categories of understanding and prevailing sociocultural conditions of life (Wilkinson, 2005: 20). Furthermore, the common conceptions of human suffering have constantly shifted throughout history, and different cultures have each had their own way of dealing with suffering (Jacobsen, 2007: 30). The existential analysis of culture approaches this problem by elucidating modern Western culture as an existential strategy that involves a certain intentional way of relating to human existence.

Modern western culture as an existential strategy

As philosopher Charles Taylor states, every person and every society lives by some conceptions of the context and meaning of human existence and what constitutes a fulfilled life (Taylor, 2007: 16). If we want to look closer at the present experience of suffering, it is possible to understand the modern Western culture as a life form embodying the pursuit of happiness as an existential strategy based in four cultural dimensions: anthropocentric existence, technological self-relation, secular salvation, and existential exorcism:

Anthropocentric existence

Taylor uses the term 'exclusive humanism' to describe the transitions in the conditions of belief from the eighteenth century onwards that have culminated in a view of the world where human flourishing is the highest good which we cooperate towards, but without reference to God or any kind of transcendent reality (Taylor, 2007: 20). Taylor is mainly concerned with the North Atlantic societies but this development is even more pronounced in North-West Europe. As already stated in the case of Scandinavia, this is a part of the world where the belief in God is diminishing, while the U.S. to a higher extent is a nation where religiosity is left as one among other existential options. However, it is a recurring feature of modern Western culture that humanity is now seen as forming societies under

the secular political principle of mutual benefit and constituted as individuals in a "disenchanted" world who are fulfilling their purposes of human flourishing by using the aid of disengaged reason.

The modern humanism can be described as a moral, esthetic ideology that in a broader sense is associated with a new kind of existential approach to reality. As Heidegger and philosopher Michel Foucault have described, in modernity human being begins to understand itself as a being which is able to recognize and interact with itself, the social order, and nature (Foucault, 1997b: 341; Heidegger, 1991: 230). Society, nature, and the self are experienced as rationally designed structures that humanity can explain and control through technology, science, and political management (Heidegger, 1977). Rather than being a helpless creature, human beings can understand and master the forces that govern reality, and man's ultimate control becomes an ideal. Thus, humanity no longer understands suffering as a condition which it is merely a subject to, but as something that it can explain by dividing it into different types: physical and mental suffering as well as a type of influence.

Technological self-relation

In Brave new World, Aldous Huxley described in an ironic way how it is a part of modern man's vision of rational control to imagine that he will be able to eliminate all discomfort in his life and achieve continuous success (Huxley, 2004). Huxley thereby points to the fact that as human beings begin to experience themselves as able to understand and shape their own lives through science and technique, the goal of existence becomes happiness. Taylor furthermore describes how this idea of existential fulfillment implies that human beings are left to find, create, and fulfill themselves as authentic selves with inner potential (Taylor, 1992). Suffering, on the other hand, is experienced as the state in which people have to endure the unbearable: to be subject to loss or defects that prevent them from achieving their specific opportunities.

Just like happiness is something that we have to create ourselves as human beings in a knowledge- and skills-based society, suffering is something that we must deal with by the use of technology and scientific knowledge. As David Morris explains, modern culture has succeeded in convincing us that suffering is entirely a scientific and technological problem which can be defined exhaustively through logical conceptualization and treated or prevented by using different kinds of manmade remedies (Morris, 1993: 2). Various researchers have tried to

describe how more and more aspects of existence related to suffering and emotional distress are being conceived as negative and therefore problematic and have become subject to a therapeutic culture that will not accept but instead remove these aspects from society. Experiences like madness (Szasz, 2003; Foucault, 1997a), psychosis (Bentall, 2004; Laing, 1984), sadness (Horwitz, 2007), vulnerability (Furedi, 2004), melancholy (Healy, 2000), and shyness (Lane, 2008) are thus being transformed into pathological phenomena by a technological reason in the fields of psychiatry, medicine, and psychology. These instrumental practices offer us the possibility of a reasonable understanding of our troubles and the promise of a targeted relief.

Secular salvation

The literature suggests that the fact that it becomes a matter for individuals to succeed and rid themselves of suffering is associated with a secularization of the Christian salvation (Sørensen, 2005: 24). In every culture, humans have identified a place of fullness to which they orient themselves morally or spiritually: the presence of God, the forces of nature, or something else. Typically, this is in the sense of remaining open to and receiving a power that transcends us and is placed outside the self (Taylor, 2007: 8). Often, this sense of orientation in fate is associated with an underlying melancholic certainty of incapacity ever to reach this place in worldly life. However, since faith is placed in a fuller condition outside of worldly life, this existential approach involves a coming to terms with the struggles of everyday life. Contrary to this, as Taylor describes, modern man wants this life to be fully satisfactory and wants to feel that he is constantly progressing towards a whole sense of fullness (Taylor, 2007: 6). There is no final goal beyond human flourishing, and modernity is characterized by our experience of and search for fullness as something placed 'within' human life.

In continuation of this argument, our present understanding of happiness might be characterized as an expression of a secularization of the Christian idea of everlasting salvation from the suffering of sin and the fall of man and salvation for participation in the Reign of God (Sørensen, 2005: 27. That is, our secular understanding of human fullness is partly based on an anthropocentric idea of making human life and human endeavor an end in itself, partly on an idea to create and fulfill ourselves as authentic selves, and partly on a religious idea of deliverance from worldly suffering to a heavenly condition.

In the Bible, there is no clear explanation of suffering, but it is associated with something evil, which is a part of human life (Sørensen, 2005: 35). The Old Testament contains some of the background for the Christian vision of man, and according to this book, suffering is a punishment for man's sins in accordance with the fall of man. Several of the Bible stories depict suffering as a remedy that man can learn to accept and overcome by faith, which is perhaps most clearly seen in the book of Job. The New Testament states that Christians must take the life of Jesus as a divine model for all who suffer because he, despite suffering and doubt on the cross, held on believing in God and was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. The Son of God, who has assumed human suffering, taught us that in our own suffering we should follow in his steps by accepting in faith the meaning and value of the cross (NT, 1 Pet 2:21). Through faith, Christians get relief in earthly life by obtaining part in the salvation from death, suffering, and sin. However, people will only find salvation in full after the resurrection from the dead where they have access to an eternal existence in the kingdom of heaven.

Existential exorcism

The moment we enter a secular age and human existence is conceived as finite, salvation becomes a task that we must solve in our earthly life. Paradise is no longer about transcending the self and receiving a godly force that goes beyond us, but about an intrinsic fullness which we have to find and fulfill in this life. Hell and evil are similar conditions arising out of man himself and not from external forces that interfere with human life. The battle between good and evil in the universe becomes a struggle between opposites within man: goodness and evil, life and death, sickness and health, safety and danger, happiness and suffering, etc. (Sørensen, 2005: 27).

In modern culture, it is not possible to tolerate the negative dimensions of existence since access to paradise and salvation from hell, suffering, and sin must be found in this life. The technological way of existence is associated with a social and existential exorcism that perceives suffering, disorder, and death as unwelcome parts of life which must be removed by using ever more sophisticated forms of technology (Levi-Strauss, 1992). The primary aim of human, social, and medical technology is to get rid of our experiences of mental anguish or suffering, social disorder, and useless life forms as well as physical distress rather than helping people to integrate these experiences into their existence (Sørensen, 2002). The

pursuit for happiness is the front of an existential strategy, whose back is about to exclude all the aspects of life that we understand as negative parts of ourselves.

Existential ideals as sources of suffering

Modern man is engaged in an existential strategy that involves a certain orientation towards fullness conceived as happiness in this life through self-realization and liberation from discomfort by the aid of science, technology, and politics. The idea of this fullness includes certain existential ideals to be pursued as components of happiness. As we will see, the paradox of suffering covers that the pursuit of these ideals is not only part of a happy life but also a possible source of suffering. In other words, these dimensions are features of our contemporary culture and societies that people understand as values, but at the same time tend to experience as causes of discomfort:

Individualism

As Taylor states, it is not unusual to consider individuality as one of the highest achievements of modern Western culture (Taylor, 1992: 2). According to Heidegger, this experience of individuality is a product of man's secession from being understood in a comprehensively religious or cosmological order of being and a move away from a collectivistic ideology as well as a narrow cultural categorization and social framework (Heidegger, 1977: 128). As a consequence of this we no longer understand ourselves as finally defined by a transcendent structure or by everlasting traditions or types of class, caste, sex, location, and traditional notions of hierarchy but as individuals with a self-identity (Elias, 1987: 210; Jørgensen, 2002: 121) Moreover, the last two hundred years of social development mean that we no longer live in sustained, social communities, but at all times and at different places are left to establish and interrupt social relationships with other people (Jensen, 2005: 73).

This social and cultural process of individualization is linked to individualism as an ideological and moral framework which stresses self-reliance and independence while opposing that group, communal, societal, or national goals as well as any kind of tradition, religion, or other form of external moral standard should take priority over the individual's choice of actions (Lukes, 2006: 2). The individual is a being that experiences and practices existence as a process which is detached from transcendent structures and largely independent of relations to other human

beings. Taylor describes how modern people sacrifice intimate and committed relations for the sake of self-fulfillment because they feel they have to (Taylor, 1991: 17). Sartre's conception of the others' look might be read as an expression of the way in which modern sociality contains an element of alienation (Sartre, 2008: III, 4). As a human being, I am handed over to be with the others but there are no necessities or ties that bind neither them nor me. Similarly, existential philosopher Martin Buber stressed how modernity increasingly involves a move from open, intimate, loving I-Thou modes of involvement to merely instrumental, mechanical, narcissistic I-It ways of interrelating (Buber, 2004).

According to existential phenomenology, human beings are fundamentally beings-with, and individuality is a mode of existing in a socially and culturally structured world in which relations are experienced as the contingent and fragmented basis of shared reality. This is also reflected in identity being perceived as fluid and multiple and as something which the individual constantly has to explore, create, and maintain at all times. In relation to a study of American communal values, sociologist Robert Bellah has described, modernity is characterized by a common faith in the individual and individuality as positive ideals (Bellah, 1996: 142). However, it increasingly gets clear to researchers in the fields of sociology, psychology, and psychotherapy that people find it difficult to live in a changing world of fragmented meaning (Jensen, 2005: 86). Paradoxically, individualization and the pursuit of individuality seem to involve the development of what psychologist Philip Cushman calls alienated, fragmented selves that experience an absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning (Cushman, 1990: 601).

Throughout human history, loneliness and lack of close and meaningful contact with other people and transcendent beings have been designated as the main source of suffering. We see this reflected in, among other things, the tragedy of Oedipus who was excluded from the Greek polis (Sophocles, 1994) and in the biblical stories of Job and the crucified Jesus who feared being abandoned by God. In our present culture, widespread poor or missing relations to others become a major source of suffering. To psychotherapists like psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell and existential analyst Ernesto Spinelli, this has been a reason to describe man as a creature who first and foremost is looking for close relations, and whose mental disorders and existential troubles occur in poor relationships (Mitchell, 2003; Spinelli, 2008). As modern man increasingly experiences a lack of close and stabile relationships, he therefore gets exposed to an increased risk of developing related disorders. Other researchers like sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and psychologist Carsten René Jørgensen have pointed out how the historical changes in

social relations have not only liberated people from unpleasant social traditions and institutions, but also created new kinds of fear and suffering (Bauman, 2006: 3; Jørgensen, 2002: 133, 2006, 2008: 103-113).

According to existential analyst Viktor Frankl, the search for meaning is the primary motivation of humans, and when a person cannot realize his or her »Will to Meaning« in their lives they will experience emptiness and meaninglessness that might give rise to existential suffering (Frankl, 2004: part 2). In modernity, human beings tend to consider it as a benefit that they do not have to take over traditional views but are able to seek and create meaning in their own individual lives. The autonomous individual has become the basic unit of modern Western culture. However, as Bauman has pointed out, the price of this cultural liberation is an increased uncertainty and a lack of orientation among many people (Bauman, 2001: 43). Paradoxically, the absence of shared traditional values has given some people problems, which, Jørgensen argues, affect the increased incidence of certain forms of existential suffering as anxiety, suicide, and depression (Jørgensen, 2002: 127).

Freedom

In Samuel Huntington's analysis of the dominating source of conflict in modernity as cultural, he describes how the countries of Western civilization share ultimate goals of freedom (Huntington, 1993). Likewise "freedom, equality, and brotherhood" was the credo of the French revolution and ever since the European and American Enlightenment, the concept of freedom has been linked to the concept of happiness (Veenhoven, 2003: 258). **In most of Western history, and to non-West-**ern cultures, values other than freedom have been supreme. The modern conception of freedom and the ideal of the free subject are recent inventions arising during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the wake of the Enlightenment and capitalism (Rose, 1999: 66). In our history of modern Western culture, it is possible to distinguish between two different formulae of freedom:

(1) For many years, the ideas of freedom were shaped within political and philosophical conceptions of human communities and defined in essentially negative terms as the absence of domination or inclination: Freedom is understood in terms of the act of liberation from something (Berlin, 1958). In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 2008: Ch. 1) as a reaction against the social norms that defined people's roles in life in relation to God and monarchy. A few decades later, Kant wrote how "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" by being the

progress of a society through the free activity of rational thought and scholarly critique (Kant, 1977: A481). As the Christians believed that man stands in need of salvation from sin and suffering, for 250 years modern man has been in need of liberation from the negative aspects of worldly existence and from being a subject to power as well as to any kind of tradition, religion, or other form of external moral standard.

(2) This negative concept of freedom has been linked to a more positive idea of freedom as a pursuit of individual autonomy in which the chief goal of human action is the realization and maximization of self-imposed behavior: The liberation from destiny, God, and nature enables people to become more like the guardian and managers of their own being in the world (freedom for something). That is, since Kant, this ideal of the subject has been the conception of a thinking self, who is free by being morally responsible for his own actions (Kant, 1993). The modern experience of freedom cannot be separated from the experience of responsibility. Furthermore, this made Sartre state that we are condemned to be free because we have no choice in the matter of being free (Sartre, 2007: 38). Sartre insists that the only foundation for values is human freedom and argues that one cannot escape responsibility, as each time one attempts to part oneself from one's freedom of choice, the very act in itself is a choice exercised freely. Likewise, sociologist Nikolas Rose describes how modern man is forced to be free and construct his existence as a product of choices between different possibilities (Rose 1996: 78). This argument points to a paradox of modern existence as human freedom is not always a blessing but involves the possibility of fear, defeat, and guilt (Liisberg, 2005: 119). The enormous amount of possibilities of choice in late modernity give many people a constant feeling of worry and bad consciousness because it involves a constant awareness of the risk of making the wrong choices (Jørgensen, 2008: 106). As existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom states, this constant awareness of responsibility and freedom of choice might become the source of great suffering and distress (Yalom, 1980: 276). In a similar way, sociologist Anthony Giddens describes how modern individuals are more and more confronted with the freedom of choice that is linked to fundamental responsibility and anxiety (Giddens, 1991). According to Heidegger and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, freedom and possibility are related to the experience of existential anxiety and insecurity to such a degree that most people tend to escape their own basic situation and live a life in conformity (Heidegger, 1996: 114; Kierkegaard, 1989: 191). Kierkegaard states that a modern human being tends to deceive itself confronted with the possibility of freedom and imagines itself to be happy as dominant culture prescribes it

to be, but in reality it is constantly characterized by a deep sense of inner despair (Kierkegaard, 1989: 199).

(3) The awareness of freedom as autonomy is related to an even more fundamental experience of freedom as self-realization through self-imposed behavior (freedom as something). In our modern age, this notion of individual self-realization or self-actualization has almost become synonymous with our concept of happiness as human flourishing and fullness: Each person is a unique being characterized by a wish to actualize as much as possible of his innermost potential in the world (Sørensen, 2005: 30). Self-realization is equivalent to secular salvation and is a task which we must resolve on our own in this life. According to existential psychologist Abraham Maslow's well-known theory of needs, the need for self-realization is the ultimate existential goal and it designates the full realization of one's potential (Maslow, 1987). Taylor describes this ideal as an ethics of authenticity: We are seeking fullness in life through self-fulfillment which is all about being faithful to ourselves and our true identity (Taylor, 1992). If we fail to do so, we are doomed to live a false and unsatisfying life. In this horizon, it becomes essential to reach a constant level of self-fulfillment, and, paradoxically, experiences of failure or resistance may lead to serious suffering. According to author Pascal Bruckner, we are condemned to be happy by perfecting ourselves and our lives, and we constantly suffer from not being happy enough and realizing all our innermost potentials (Bruckner, 2000: 76).

Like Bateson's description of the alcoholic, the quest for self-realization thus involves a paradoxical attempt to control existence and arrive at existential fullness through focusing on one's own self and experiences of self-satisfaction that are bound to fail because the notion of self is an abstraction from man's fundamental being-in-the-world that becomes uncontrollable by involving an inner relation to nature and other people.

Comparable to this notion, Holzhey-Kunz links the occurrence of depression in modernity to the Western ideal of the autonomous subject that is able to control its own existence. According to Holzhey-Kunz, depression is related to a radical and disillusioning confrontation with a basic nothingness of existence because the depressed person has lost faith in the common cultural illusions about the values and ideals of existence (Holzhey-Kunz, 2008: 306): The depressed person is not able to comply with the basic cultural demand of being a subject who takes responsibility for his own life and actions. That is, the ideals of autonomy and self-realization as components of happiness involve a paradox because their pursuance might involve great existential suffering.

Security

In our age, there is a general consensus that people need safety and security as a condition for a happy life. According to Maslow's theory of needs, the safety needs are even some of the most basic needs of the individual (Maslow, 1987:, 18). Others, like psychiatrist Anthony Fry, put the promotion of safety and security on top as our era's most urgent mental health needs (Fry, 1987). On a political level, Michael Dillon even defined occupation with the politics of securing the subject as the defining political thought of modernity (Dillon, 1996: 2). This ideal of security and safety has a complex background:

In the 1970s, Foucault set out to study the emergence of the modern nation state and the rationality of modern government (Foucault, 2007). He found that the mechanisms of power over population here became finely entwined with the technologies of security. That is, the increasing state concern with the well-being of each and every member of the population does not only include disease control and prevention, adequate food and water supply, sanitary shelter, and education, but also safety and security. According to Foucault, this concern reflects a transformation of the Christian pastoral of souls to a political government of men and populations that parallels the way in which the idea of salvation in the next life is transformed into a pursuance of salvation in this life (Foucault, 2007: ch. 9). In our modern welfare state, the notion of individual autonomy has not only been allied with a social security against risk, but with an overall effort to provide general security for each and everyone and therefore with an attention to anything that can be interpreted as risk factors. The technological aim of controlling all parts of social and individual existence is underpinning the welfare society conceived as a risk culture. Sociologist Ulrich Beck also called attention to the importance of the concept of risk and the practice of risk management as essential features of modern society (Beck, 1992). Beck noticed that the risks are often created in social systems which are supposed to manage the risky activity. That explains why modern man does not experience the world as safe and secure even though our present life is characterized by a greater safety and security than ever before. Paradoxically, the striving for safety and security has become that which itself produces risk and experience of insecurity. Or, as Simon Briscoe and Hugh Aldersley-Williams state:

> Above all, there is a paradox. Modern life has greatly reduced many of the risks that humankind has to face, and yet it is modern life that seems to spawn most of our fears (Briscoe & Aldersley-Williams, 2009: xv).

Philosopher Lars Svendsen and sociologist Frank Furedi have both diagnosed our present era as marked by a culture of fear and described how fear has insinuated itself into every corner of modern life (Furedi, 2006; Svendsen, 2008). Due to risk policies, the news media and popular culture, risk awareness, fear, and obsession with theoretical dangers to our health, welfare, freedom, and safety is spreading and causing trouble and anxiety in our everyday lives. **Part of the modern suffer-**ing is associated with an increased and constant awareness of all the physical, social, mental, and economical dangers, which the individual and the society might be affected by. Thus, according to Bauman the social complexity in the individualized societies of late modernity has not only created freedom and mobility but also "floating fear" manifested as a constant subjective experience of vulnerability and insecurity (Bauman, 2006: 3).

To some extent, people have always sought safe living where it was protected against threats. In an evolutionary perspective, human development is very much an expression of how it has adapted itself to be able to handle threats, dangers, disease, and social risks. As Porter has shown, culture both creates its own types of vulnerabilities and its own ways of understanding and dealing with these (Porter, 1997: ch. 1). The modern striving for security does not only contain a paradox by causing a constant fearful awareness of risks that might affect people. The society of security **leads to social structures and relationships, which otherwise re-**sults in an inner sense of uncertainty. Psychoanalyst John Bowlby described how the infant uses its attachment figures as a "secure base« from which to explore the world and become a healthy individual (Bowlby, 2005). In the individualistic modernity, these attachment figures tend to be fragmented and lack stability, which has a negative impact on the child's emotional and cognitive life. Modern culture is characterized by a disruption of the traditions and social structures that were intended to ensure the individual a basic ontological security. According to Giddens and existential analyst Ronald Laing, this inner security is necessary for the person to be able to encounter all the hazards of life from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity (Laing, 1990: 39; Giddens, 1991: ch. 2). Many people are not able to manage the individuality and lack of universal meaning with life, as well as the many choices, risks, and dangers that modernity implies because they do not have a basic sense of security and trust in the world and the ability to meet life with confidence. These trends are resulting in widespread insecurity and despair that might cause severe mental distress and suffering (Jørgensen, 2008: 170): In existential suffering, the person is somebody who is suffering from not being able to escape into the common illusions about a secure

and safe world controlled by man because he gets confronted with the basic existential truth that his future is fundamentally uncertain and not under his control (Holzhey-Kunz, 2002: 200).

Change and development

As economists Andrew Leigh and Justin Wolfers remark, the modern concept of happiness is closely related to the Western concept of human development (Leigh & Wolfers, 2006). Economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Des Gasper also think about happiness and development in relation to the main goals of ethics and politics (Sen, 1999: intr.; Des Gasper, 2004). From a different perspective, positive psychologist Alan Carr and psychologist Steve Pavlina relate the objective of happiness to concepts of "personal development", "personal growth", and "positive change" (Carr, 2004: 227; Pavlina, 2008). What these authors point to is the fact that the existential strategy of modern culture is involved in achieving an ideal of development that is found in the idea of personal development as well as in the ideas of development in education, economics, science, relationships, etc.

The word 'development' is originally a word borrowed from philosopher Friedrich Hegel meaning that citizens who had been confined within the social ranking system of feudal society could cross over the narrow framework of social and geographical ties to develop themselves and to grow through the expansion of the market (Hegel, 2008). This ideal of development suggests how existence in modern Western culture is characterized by a time consciousness that includes an orientation to the future. Otherwise we see ourselves founded in the Greco-Roman culture that perceived the future with fear and instead linked up with the idea of recovering the past. Our existential orientation to the future is rather a transformation of the existential framework in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that, according to philosopher Anthony O'Hear, involves a strong image:

> ...of hope and promises for the ideal being in the future with the coming of the Messiah, the Last Judgment and heaven itself (O'Hear, 1999: 7-8).

From the 17th century, this religious hope emerges in a secular vision of the scientific enlightenment and its associated political and ethical visions of progress. What was to be sought through science, technology, politics, and ethics was primarily the cultivation of pleasurable happiness and the elimination of suffering along with the "relief of man's estate" (Bacon, 2004). Scientists and philosophers like Denis Diderot, Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, Marquis

de Condorcet, Bentham and Mill stated that the fundamental springs of human activity were the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and the enlightenment ideology promised to free mankind from irrational and ignoble domination by extending rational control, instrumental reason, science, and technology into the sociopolitical, ethical-existential, and natural realms of our human being-in-the-world. Kant, Hegel, Karl Marx, and others even claimed that historical progress would lead us to a kind of Utopia on earth equivalent to the Christian notion of paradise in heaven (Kant, 1997b: A13; Hegel, 2008).

Today, the idea of a common Utopia has gone and we are pursuing an idea of progress and development as an end in itself. Development, effectiveness, functionality, and change are something we chase without reference to a great tale of liberation or reason. **The speed of life increases all the time for us and we are look**ing for change and development as separate goals, expressing a kind of salvation in this life (Sørensen, 2005: 34). On a private level, concepts like 'personal growth' and 'personal development are linked to the project of self-realization as claims to the individual as a requirement for a happy life. On a political level, education and scientific and economic development are seen as main objectives to be pursued and in the workplace concepts like 'human resource development' and 'adaptability' are emerging.

Change and development are considered to be positive components of a happy life. Nevertheless, as the priest Birgitte Hjort states, as a consequence life is becoming one long exam to modern man and that creates existential restlessness: The individual is constantly on the move towards a higher goal, a greater efficiency, and a better yield (Hjort, 2006). Sociologist Richard Sennett likewise describes how modern man constantly has to acquire new skills and knowledge, which may cause a lot of stress (Sennett, 2006: 3).

From a different perspective. psychologist Henrik Høgh-Olesen writes that all people have a limit to how much development and change they can cope, and in modernity more and more people are pushed towards crossing that limit resulting in stress, anxiety, and depression (Olesen, 2005: 66). Other researchers have suggested that we have not yet developed the necessary coping mechanisms to deal with the stresses of our modern technological era and that depression, anxiety, and stress should be seen as the results of the breakneck pace of 21st century life with constant changes and demands of choice and development (Blazer, 2005: 54). The ideals of change and development involve a paradox because not only do they bring life satisfaction and performance, but they also tend to involve mental distress and existential suffering: The sufferer is confronted with the illusion of

being involved in a constant attempt to make his future certain and under his control.

Challenge from the tradition of existentialism

The pursuit of happiness might represent the common understanding in modern Western culture which dominantly guides our lives. However, since the 19th century, this understanding has been challenged from the tradition of existentialism representing a more inclusive understanding of life's negative dimensions. According to Kierkegaard, most people deceive themselves to be happy, but deep underneath they are truly in despair (Kierkegaard, 1989: 199). Rather than flee from anxiety, man's task is to take it on himself and thus become a full human being. In a similar way, Heidegger stated that man should welcome anxiety as an indicator of his willingness to be braced by the whole of his final existence (1996).

Recently, Deurzen has challenged the quest for happiness from an existential perspective. According to Deurzen, our present preoccupation with happiness tells us something fundamental about contemporary culture, involving the belief that people can achieve fulfillment or happiness once and for all. She sees our whole civilization

> "…being centred on the idea that we should avoid effort and pain as much as possible" (Deurzen, 2008: 73).

Like Kierkegaard, she holds that this belief involves an existential attempt to escape the fundamental challenges of life (Deurzen, 2008: 28). Rather than being a potential state of happiness, life must be seen as an "endless struggle where moments of ease and happiness are the exception rather than the rule" (Deurzen, 1998: 132). Furthermore, as human beings we are constantly involved in irresolvable paradoxes, and there is no possibility of attaining a perfect life. The fundamental paradox of human living is that we tend to be constantly striving for perfection, but this is just a consequence of our core human experience of imperfection and insecurity (Deurzen, 1998: 15). This is reflected in the paradox of suffering in modern Western culture insofar that it represents an impossible attempt to control the complexity of existence in order to exclude all negative dimensions of existence and arrive at a constant state of happiness.

Confronted with the paradoxes and imperfections of existence, human beings tend to experience a threat to their basic security that is followed by anxiety

(Deurzen, 2001: 35). Most people attempt to escape this anxiety by fleeing into the certainty and security of dominant cultural understandings of existence that are able to guide life in a common way. This understanding is expressed in the pursuit of happiness involving hopes and dreams of a perfect life without problems. However, as life is complex and involves irresolvable dilemmas and struggles, the escape might paradoxically result in existential misery and distress as the retreat from reality can only bring "doom and despair" (2001: 41).

Rather than pursuing happiness, Deurzen thinks that people should come to terms with the dilemmas and paradoxes of life and plunge themselves into the richness of life instead of escaping their problems. As an alternative to fleeing into common cultural understandings, human beings must face life's challenges and experience the whole spectrum of their Being. Happiness and suffering are equally important to human beings and they should find a way to grasp this polarity. To avoid the notion of happiness, Deurzen urges us to live in a constant search for meaning and live a meaningful life with purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth, that is, fundamentally a life with others (Deurzen, 2008: 152).

Conclusion

This article has tried to elucidate the paradox of existential suffering in Western modernity from the perspective of an existential analysis of culture. The main discussion of the article showed that modern mankind has become engaged in an existential strategy towards the achievement of happiness in this life. This notion involves a life with pleasure and self-satisfaction that is free of suffering and discomfort.

The article has described how this existential strategy is based on a common cultural understanding of existence involving the fundamental ideas: (1) That man is the center of reality and that he is able to explain and influence his own existence, his social world, and nature by the means of science and technology; (2) that man should control and improve his own existence in order to promote happiness and reduce suffering; (3) that this technological self-relation involves an attempt to create existential salvation from evil and negativity in this life; (4) and finally, that these negativities of existence are seen as existential dimensions that must be totally excluded from the individual and social life.

The point of the article has argued why this existential strategy involves a paradox insofar that the pursuance of happiness not only brings comfort and well-being to mankind, but also tends to bring rather than free mankind of suffering. The

second part of the article elucidated this paradox **through a study of four existential goals that are central to modern man's existential strategy of achieving happiness and avoiding suffering: (1) Individuality and individualism; (2) liberation, freedom of choice, and self-realization; (3) security; (4) and change and development** have been shown to be central values to the common cultural understanding of happiness, but also to be dimensions in the pursuance of which man is threatened in his own being and thereby risks existential suffering. **Man himself has become** the center of reality and believes himself to be equipped with the ability to control his life and to promote these goals through the use of technology, politics, and science. However, to a certain extent the subsequent adoption of these goals leads to the same suffering as they are supposed to release people from.

The human condition basically consists of dilemmas and paradoxes that make life a constant struggle and effort. The most fundamental paradox of human living is an essential polarity between the experience of imperfection and vulnerability on one hand and perception and invulnerability in the other hand that is related to the polarity between suffering and happiness. Thus, existential misery and suffering persist in spite of our attempts at getting rid of these dimensions of existence. As modern man is no longer able to find fundamental meaning in the experience of suffering, he escapes from the anxiety confronted with the basic paradoxes of existence. Instead of grasping the whole of life, he flees into the certainty of the cultural pursuit of happiness that promises him a life without discomfort and dilemmas. He illusionary believes that he is able to detach himself from his fundamental embedding in the world and to control existence and create a perfect life for himself with autonomy, realization of his potentials, security and safety, and constant improvement. However, this turning away from the challenges and complexity of life obtains him, and, paradoxically, it risks bringing doom and despair. The existential suffering of modern Western culture seems to occur in relation to a misguided ethics of life that does not only bring life satisfaction and well-being, but also brings some people down a path of disillusionment.

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