INTRODUCTION

We were exposed to the African way of thinking during our Master’s training course. Through numerous therapeutic encounters we realised that the African way of thinking differs vastly from the Western way of thinking in which we were raised. In expanding our boundaries in training as well as developing personally and professionally, we feel that learning about the African way of thinking will enhance our confidence when interacting with people that hold onto this perspective. In particular, the concept contentment, as viewed and experienced by Western and African cultures, captured our interest. We discovered that the African and Western perspectives have unique experiences and views contentment differently. We believe it can be of great therapeutic value to explore contentment as a construct from both the Western and African perspectives. The aim of this exploration is to cultivate a greater sensitivity and appreciation for diverse clients. Many people who enter the therapeutic process struggle with relationships or feel discontent. Through gaining an understanding of the client’s perspective the therapist will be able to create a therapeutic context where the client’s challenges as a result of discontentment can be freely explored. For the purpose of this essay the focus is limited to the Western and African perspectives while we acknowledge that there are many more perspectives and diverse views in the South African context.
CONTENTMENT: A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Since the beginning of time people have asked questions such as: “What is the purpose of being here?”, “What is the ultimate meaning of human existence?”, “What happens when we die?”, and “How can we live a meaningful and fulfilling life?” To seek meaning in life is assumed to be a primary motivation deeply rooted in human nature (Frankl, 1963). According to Wong (1998), philosophers and psychologists have wrestled with existential questions over time and this led to the development of different theories of meaning. In this essay, we explore the psychological construct contentment through focusing on the meaning that people attach to their lived experiences, which can either lead to feelings of contentment or discontentment. We further aim to gain an understanding of how contentment is defined and understood from the Western perspective and the African perspective.

Contentment is defined by Parse (1994), as “a satisfying calmness amid the arduous, as resolute liberty arises with benevolent engagements” (p. 330). According to this definition feelings of contentment can be described as experiencing general satisfaction or calmness and peacefulness. Contentment is thus a state of being in the present, rather than a destination. It can be obtained through religious practices, but then religion is not the end, it is only a method. In separating the means from the end for the sake of contentment, only conflict born of opposition can be the outcome. As long as contentment depends on relationship, there is only self-gratification (Van Zeyst, 2010).

Satisfaction is always the fulfilment of a desire, which is but a thought in anticipation of acquisition. It is in acquisition that the I can grow and become, and thus it is in satisfaction that there is a search for security and fulfilment of an ideal. But, contentment is in the present and has no dealing with satisfaction, with ideals, or with self; and thus it cannot be made or acquired, and is not subject to moods and methods. It is based on understanding and seeing things as they are (Van Zeyst, 2010). We are of the opinion that our Western upbringing conveyed the message that satisfaction then, brings contentment. We hold the belief now that this is not the case because if it were, there would be many more satisfied and “content” people in their own families, communities and society.

There is a contentment which is not the end of a search for satisfaction, but which is at the beginning of realisation. According to Van Zeyst (2010), this contentment is totally unconditional and free. It is not born from desire, as an image discovered in memory. To be totally unconditional, contentment cannot be brought about through possessions or through the renunciation thereof. It is not an acquisition through virtue or practice. Our upbringing contradicts Van Zeyst’s statement. We were raised to achieve our goals in order to bring contentment. The emphasis was on the destination, rather than the journey. Contentment is believed to be an external destination and through working towards and reaching the destination, the reward
is contentment. The challenge this view holds is that the feelings and experience of contentment are short lived. When the destination is reached and one imagines that it would bring fulfilment and satisfaction, it is soon realized that something is amiss and the journey towards the next destination begins, with new desires. The external destinations include the attainment of materialistic things that symbolise success, rather than feelings of contentment associated with personal evolvement and development.

In a study by Wong and Fry (1998), some of the main themes that were identified as leading to finding meaning in life and feelings of contentment are: Religious beliefs, developing self-growth, career aspirations and achievement, family, friends and spouse, belonging, and a sense of accomplishment. Another interesting finding was that personal meanings also depend on personal attributes, such as being creative, flexible, adaptive, inquisitive, intelligent, and responsible. The results support a conceptual analysis that meaning consists of three components, namely: Cognitive, motivational, and affective (Wong & Fry, 1998).

The cognitive component included items such as “Beliefs that there is an ultimate purpose for life”, “Beliefs in afterlife”, and “Beliefs in moral laws”. The motivational component encompassed both goal striving and goal attainment. It included items such as “Pursue worthwhile goals”, “Seek to actualize one’s potential”, and “Strives towards personal growth”. The affective component reflected feelings of contentment and fulfilment and included statements such as: “Feels fulfilled about what one has accomplished” and “Feels satisfied with life” (Wong & Fry, 1998). The study also revealed an additional two dimensions of personal meaning, namely personal and relational.

Some items of the relational component reflected the importance of maintaining a good relationship and being part of a community. These included: “To be sincere and honest with others”, “Has a number of good friends”, “Relates well to others”, “Contributing to the well-being of others”, and “Brings happiness to others”. From the Western perspective there is an emphasis on individualism which is strongly linked to feelings of contentment. In our opinion, the relational component is not emphasised enough. Our understanding was that individual success and achievement brings forth greater feelings of satisfaction and contentment, rather than having good relationships with others and belonging to a community. When we were introduced to the concept ubuntu, it challenged us to reflect on our way of thinking about ourselves and others. It was difficult for us to grasp that ubuntu is a way of be-ing, rather than a destination to reach.

The final category may be regarded as the personal component. It included items that describe personal qualities and personality attributes such as “Likes a challenge”, “Takes initiative”, “Has a healthy self-concept”, and “Accepts one’s limitations” (Wong & Fry, 1998). We are of the opinion that in order to move into states of contentedness, one should accept one’s self and accept one’s own limitations, yet
realize that every person has something unique to contribute in a community. Our understanding of contentment is therefore a state of being which is not regarded as a permanent state. We can therefore move in and out of the state of contentedness as circumstances and interactions with others lead to the evolvement of the person.

As therapists in training we realize that without knowledge and exposure to epistemologies and perspectives which differ from our own, we limit ourselves when it comes to practicing therapy in a dogmatic way. However, through gaining an understanding of how people from the African epistemology perceive their reality as well as what brings about feelings of contentment for them, we are opening new channels of communication and new ways of connecting with diverse clients in a meaningful way. This continuous process of exploration is moulding us in our journey in be-ing becoming. We now turn our attention to the African way of defining the construct contentment.

CONTENTMENT: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Okolo (1992) noted that even though Africans have a diversity of cultural beliefs and traditions, there still remains a sense of cultural unity. The aim of this essay is to focus on some of the cultural ideas and philosophies within this cultural unity that relates to the construct contentment. There seems to be a cultural thread that binds people from an African perspective together. As Maquet (1972) noted, there are cultural fundamentals that bind Africans together and assist them in speaking with a unanimous soul. These fundamental values appear to be ingrained in diverse African cultural beliefs and traditions.

Ubuntu is an important African concept which is compared by Ramose (2005) to a family atmosphere between Africans who share a special connection. In a family deep bonds are established between the individuals who are part of the family. Ramose (2005) goes on to say that “the affirmation or negation of ubu-nto (bo-tho) is a metaphor for ethical, social and legal judgment of human worth and human conduct” (p. 37). Ubuntu seems to reveal a great deal about a person’s character within the community. Ramose (2005) regards Ubuntu as “a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa” (p. 35). In order to gain a clearer understanding of Ubuntu from an African perspective, it is necessary to consider the meaning of philosophy, ontology, and epistemology from this perspective.

According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2009), philosophy is defined as a system of thought that is based on or involves an inquiry; it includes an investigation of the character, causes or principles of reality and knowledge where values is based on logical thinking instead of empirical methods. Gyekeye (1997) noted that a certain kind of philosophy will form the foundation which will determine how people think and behave; this will greatly impact their perspective on life. These
statements indicate that philosophy is important to enable one to understand cultural norms and ideas.

According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2009), ontology is defined as a philosophical investigation linked to the nature of being, reality and way of life that relates to the hierarchical structure of entities based on metaphysics, and according to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2009), epistemology links to the theory and nature of knowledge, specifically with regard to how knowledge is gained and how people discovered what they currently know. In order to gain a clearer understanding of contentment it is necessary to have an understanding of the African philosophy upon which it is based and this is gained through understanding African Ontology and Epistemology.

**History**

From an African perspective it appears that an individual’s past history will have a tremendous impact on their experience of contentment. Biko (1986) noted that it is necessary for a person to look to their past as this will assist black people in rewriting their history of oppression and to discover the crucial heroes in the African background. Therefore contentment is enhanced when a person understands the impact that their past has on them. A reflection upon one’s history will assist a person from an African Perspective in rewriting their future. Through our therapeutic interactions with people who view life from an African Perspective it became clear that history has an important impact on how they view themselves and others. According to Biko (1986) a person’s past will have an impact on their present way of being.

Names are important from an African perspective, as a person’s name will entail elements of an individual’s character and being. We realised during our interactions with people from an African perspective that African names often refer to the circumstances and conditions of particular individuals. Names often relate to the person’s family background and social status. The meanings of names seem to carry a great deal of significance with regard to the family history and future of people. For the majority of African people we have seen in therapy their names in relation to their sense of identity had profound meaning. Based on stories explored in a therapeutic context, many people who come from an African perspective had both an African and a Western name. People from this perspective explained to us that having a Western name was often necessary as Westerners were previously unable to pronounce African names in a work context.

**Community**

With regard to the African perspective, the community to which someone belongs plays an important role in a person’s experience of contentment. According to Biko
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(1986), the value of community is extremely important in an African culture, and people from a Western perspective can learn a great deal from people holding on to an African perspective in this regard. An individual seems to be defined by the community they are part of. Biko (1986) noted that African people are not forced by an authority figure to have a sense of connectedness, as community members communicate with ease. These connections appear to be an ingrained characteristic for people coming from an African perspective. Biko (1986) mentioned that people from an African perspective often regard people from a Western perspective as not knowing their neighbours, while Africans have a strong sense of belonging and connecting in their community. Contentment seems to be enhanced by forming close connections with other people in one’s immediate community.

Illness and Spirituality

Illness can have an influence on an individual’s level of contentment, as according to Ramose (2005, p. 69) “wholeness is, culturally, a way of life”. Ramose (2005) noted that treating an illness based on the traditional African perspective entails the institution of bongaka. Based on the therapeutic encounters that we have had with people from an African perspective, we have realised that this entailed that the person’s family will usually be the first to discover that one of its members is suffering from a mental illness. The victim is then reported to the ancestors. According to Ramose (2005) there must be “a correlation between the bodily illness and the disturbance of harmony and balance in the relations between the living and the living-dead (ancestors)” (p. 69). This indicates that healing will only occur once the ancestors are pleased.

Spirituality appears to be extremely important from an African perspective with regard to an individual’s mental health. Based on the stories told by people holding onto an African perspective, it became clear to us that many of them will regularly consult traditional healers or Sangomas in their communities when they suffer from a mental or physical illness. Biko (1986) noted that when people from an African perspective experience hopelessness they will call out onto their God and seek his will. This indicates that looking onto God for direction seems to be important for experiencing a sense of spiritual contentment. Based on our encounters with people from an African perspective, rituals seem to be a way in which community members form deeper spiritual connections and experiences a sense of contentment.

Wisdom

Contentment can be enhanced through gaining wisdom and revelation in understanding one’s world and community. According to Odera Oruka (1981) people often think that knowledge is captured only in books and formal learning institutions. Odera Oruka (1981) is of the opinion that some of the greatest wisdom has been acquired
and were contributed to the community by the illiterate traditional Kenyans who have never engaged in formal training. Odera Oruaka (1981) further notes that this kind of wisdom and thoughts are treated by their people as the embodiment of the wisdom of the people. Based on our encounters, it seems as though wisdom and sacred knowledge are often shared with other people in the community; in this way it becomes communal knowledge and not just individual knowledge or wisdom. Indigenous knowledge is often imparted from one generation to the next through a process of storytelling, and the elders are respected as they carry a great deal of the traditional wisdom with them.

Contentment from an African perspective seems to be a continuous process of becoming and not a fixed destination to arrive at. Ramose (2005, p. 39) compared “Be-ing becoming” to “the incessant flow of motion [which] is perceived as chaos since is considered to neither provide certainty nor equilibrium”. Ramose (2005) further highlighted that not attaining a sense of equilibrium could be problematic for humans as they strive to find personal comfort in a state of equilibrium. This state of equilibrium may be regarded by some as reaching a level of contentment and fulfilment.

CONCLUSION

As therapists in training, we have realised that there is a significant difference between the Western and African perspectives on contentment. It is our aim to further explore the perspectives of other diverse cultures in South Africa that have not been described in the present essay. The differences between the African and Western perspectives are evident when emphasis is placed on concepts such as community, belonging, spirituality, wisdom, and history. We are aware that these are only some of the important factors that influence people’s experiences and views of contentment. These differences have an impact on cross-cultural therapeutic interventions and therefore these explorations and encounters are regarded as being meaningful for our journey of becoming therapists. Through gaining more wisdom in the different perspectives we will be able to show greater sensitivity to people who are descendents from epistemologies that differ from our own. We hope to continue building on this foundation to become therapists who exercise empathy and compassion for diverse clients. As we continue to grow as therapists it will be important for us to incorporate the following in our repertoire:

Confirming means . . . accepting the whole potentiality of the other . . . I can recognize in him, know in him, the person he has been . . . CREATED to become . . . I confirm him in myself, and then in him, in relation to this potentiality that . . . can now be developed, can evolve. (Buber, 1923)
If we as therapists accept the other person as something fixed, already diagnosed and classified, already shaped by his past, we will confirm this limited hypothesis. If, however, we accept him or her as a process of becoming, then we are doing what we can to confirm or make real his or her potentialities.

Poem

So when I might not look like you or think as you do
Is there still room for difference?
Some of the things I believe and adhere to might puzzle you
Is there still room for difference?
If I carry deep wounds and a different heritage
Can I freely speak of this?
I am waiting for a time where difference will be appreciated in our land
A time when we as a nation will step up in unity to move forward instead of backwards?
I will hold onto hope in the future
For if we have made it so far, surely we can walk another mile alongside each other.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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REFERENCES


