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# Exploring Perceptions of Goodness Among the Malaysian and Chinese University Students: A Focus Group Study

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## Exploring Perceptions of Goodness Among the Malaysian and Chinese University Students: A Focus Group Study

### Abstract

The notion of goodness is implicitly central to the discourse relating to person perception. To date, no empirical research has focused solely upon understanding the notion of goodness and how it's perceived and discerned in others. Utilizing focus group interviews, this paper explores how people perceive and interpret goodness in collectivist cultures of Malaysia and China. Findings revealed that Malaysian and Chinese participants had somewhat similar notions about goodness. "Concern for others' welfare" was found to have the most resonance across the two nationalities as a key element in discerning goodness in others. Another category emerging from the findings was labelled as "Goodness a subjective notion" which encapsulated additional interpretations surrounding goodness. Directions for future research are discussed.

### Keywords

Goodness, Morality, Collectivist Culture, Person Perception, Focus Group Interview, China, Malaysia

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## Exploring Perceptions of Goodness Among Malaysian and Chinese University Students: A Focus Group Study

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*The notion of goodness is implicitly central to the discourse relating to person perception. To date, no empirical research has focused solely upon understanding the notion of goodness and how it's perceived and discerned in others. Utilizing focus group interviews, this paper explores how people perceive and interpret goodness in collectivist cultures of Malaysia and China. Findings revealed that Malaysian and Chinese participants had somewhat similar notions about goodness. "Concern for others' welfare" was found to have the most resonance across the two nationalities as a key element in discerning goodness in others. Another category emerging from the findings was labelled as "Goodness a subjective notion" which encapsulated additional interpretations surrounding goodness. Directions for future research are discussed. Keywords: Goodness, Morality, Collectivist Culture, Person Perception, Focus Group Interview, China, Malaysia*

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What is the most important thing which we value in others? Research in person perception (how we perceive others) indicates that when forming impressions of others, we tend to primarily place importance on morality related information (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). We are predisposed to make morality based judgments of others in order to avoid potential threats to our wellbeing since "a person of poor character will often turn out to be a fickle ally," whereas "the strength of a person's character determines how well they will follow through on their plans, goals, commitments, and values" (Goodwin et al., 2014, p. 148).

When we meet people we tend to evaluate them by primarily focusing on two aspects of character – their intentions (good or bad) towards us and their ability to potentially benefit or harm us on the basis of those intentions. These moral appraisals fall within the broad dimensions of morality in person perception studies (Sidelecki, Baron, & Todorov, 2013). Morality refers to characteristics related to ethics - a sense of right and wrong (Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). The universality and primacy of morality in social judgments across cultures, stimulus and perceivers is well established in literature (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Wojciszke, 1997).

However, existing literature on morality is too broad and vague – falling short in explicitly exploring as to how people understand, interpret and discern morality in others. In instances where researchers have attempted to study this ambiguous terrain, scholars have often either conflated traits such as warmth and sociability with moral character, or have chosen to define moral character in very broad terms (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998; Fisk, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Goodwin et al., 2014). Related literature in person perception has always assumed goodness to be a sub component of morality (Goodwin et al., 2014) – without every really delving into the notion of goodness per se. Empirical studies on the notion of goodness are scarce in literature, particularly in the context of person perception. A quantitative study by Smith et al. (2007) attempted to define a good person by asking participants from seven countries (including individualistic and collectivist) to list down prototypes/words that they can think of in relation to a good person. The dominant concepts associated with good

person were “benevolence,” “conformity,” and “traditionalism.” However the study failed to delve into the meanings associated with these broad concepts and provided little explanation into the participants’ frames of references in making these associations. Furthermore, the authors relied on works relating to morality and moral traits in order to making strong assertions concerning the study findings – implicitly conflating these concepts interchangeably.

### **Rationale of the Study**

The most central question in the context of morality and social perception is - whether a certain person is good or not? (Kihlstrom, 2010). This fundamental question about goodness is intrinsically important and functionally pertinent for all human beings in order to survive and make sense of the world. Even though we tend to evaluate others and make inferences of goodness on a daily basis, this concept which is at the core of morality hasn’t received much attention in scholarly discourse. By exclusively delving into the notion of goodness, this study attempts to generate novel literature on goodness - providing rich interpretations that should result in a nuanced understanding of how goodness is perceived and discerned in others - making valuable contribution to person perception research. In addition to that, it is hoped that the narratives emerging from this study would contribute in developing a coherent definition of goodness – which is conspicuously lacking in the current literature.

Collectivist cultures greatly emphasize socio-moral dimensions (Schwartz, 1992). Collectivists subscribe to communal values, emphasizing interdependence and interconnectedness with others. Social obligation and concern for others are hallmark features of collectivist societies (Hofstede, 2001). According to Kokkoris, Kuhnen, and Yan (2013) in collectivist cultures “good action is one that takes the perspective of others into consideration and fulfills normative obligations or expectations” (p. 31). Conversely, Individualistic cultures place higher importance on the self – individual achievements and personal ambitions as opposed to communal responsibilities (Hofstede, 2001; Kokkoris et al., 2013). Social perception research has also found that individualistic societies place higher emphasis on competence (e.g., confidence, intelligence, skill, etc.) as opposed to morality in *self-perception*. However, when it comes to forming impressions of *others*, morality related information is given priority above all constructs (Wojciszke, 2005). Hence, in both individualistic and collectivist cultures impressions of *others* are primarily influenced by morality judgments.

The current study includes collectivist cultures of China and Malaysia. Chinese culture owing to its rich history is considered a bastion of collectivist values, characterized by strong communal affiliation and deep social relationships extending to family, friends, workplace and society. Similarly Malaysians are also strongly collectivist in their orientation and place great amount of value on humaneness and social relationships (Jogulu & Ferkins, 2012; Kennedy, 2002; Rhee et al., 1996). Participant narratives emerging from this study would help us gain clarity into perceived similarities or differences with regard to their conceptions surrounding the notion of goodness. The overarching research question guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is the meaning of goodness?

RQ2: How is goodness perceived and interpreted by the Malaysian and Chinese perceivers?

This paper is part of a larger study conducted by the first author for her doctoral thesis which explores goodness in the context of thin-sliced judgments.

## **Morality and Impression Formation**

Scholarly research on the role of morality in impression formation has reached widespread consensus on the predominance of moral judgments in person perception and global evaluations. Research conducted by Wojciszke et al. (1998) highlighted the paramount role of morality (assumed to be a subcomponent of warmth) in different stages of impression formation. Wojciszke and his colleagues conducted four studies to determine the prevalence of moral traits (defined as: sincere, helpful, fair, generous...) in global impression formation as opposed to competence related traits (defined as: clever, creative, efficient...). While comparing competence and morality related judgments, it was determined that personality inferences related to moral categories were more chronically accessible, and also more frequently referred to in forming global evaluations of well-known personalities and at the same time of fictitious strangers. The study concluded that moral information elicited a stronger response as opposed to competence related information in impression formation.

Prior research conducted on person perception has treated morality and sociability as a sub component of warmth (Wojciszke et al., 1998). Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, and Cherubini (2011) empirically challenged this overlap of constructs by investigating if morality (defined as: honest, righteous, trustworthy, sincere, respectful) and sociability (defined as: friendly, likable, warm, kind, helpful) could be treated as separate constructs in information gathering process – vital to impression formation. The study found that in the information gathering process, perceivers processed sociability and morality related information differently, regardless of the task goal. In addition, findings revealed that participants showed more interest in morality related information in forming global impressions of unknown others.

The study by Brambilla et al. (2012) extends the research on the central role of morality in global evaluations and information gathering by probing it further – at the group level. This study employs scenario setting as its experimentation design to determine the influence of morality, sociability and competence in group impression formation. Participants in the study were asked to read a hypothetical immigration scenario concerning an unfamiliar social group. Morality was found to play a key role in establishing intentions and influencing global evaluative judgments of the fictitious social group as compared to sociability or competence information.

A number of studies have assumed morality to be a sub component of warmth (Brambilla et al., 2012; Fisk, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke et al., 1998). However, a recent study by Goodwin et al. (2014) has challenged this broad categorization and has identified moral character information as a separate construct than warmth. Goodwin et al. (2014) explain that “because ‘pure’ warmth traits are less relevant to morality than are many more clear-cut character traits, they should be less important in impression formation” (p. 150). On the basis of seven comprehensive studies conducted, Goodwin and his colleagues have found moral character information as the most important criterion in evaluative judgments -- providing a definitive answer with respect to the distinct and dominant role of moral character in global impression formation and person evaluation.

The primacy of moral character in impression formation is not just a western construct but has also been identified as an important criterion in collectivist context as well. A study by Cuddy et al. (2008) widened the scope of person perception research by making universal claims with regard to the predominance of morality in social judgments. Cuddy and her colleagues carried out research which included 17 nationalities from four different continents. The South East Asian sample included countries like Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan. Findings revealed that people tend to characterize others based on morality (warmth) and competence related cues regardless of cultural differences.

## Methods

In order to understand goodness we need to understand how it is constructed by individuals. This study is a generic qualitative research which is guided by an interpretivist approach - exploring how people define and interpret goodness drawing on their own unique ideas, perceptions and beliefs. The Interpretive epistemology is based on the interpretation and the social meaning that people assign to their interactions (Nielson, 1990, p. 7). Hence, “social meaning is created during interactions” in the sense that “different social actors may in fact understand social reality differently, producing different meanings and analyses” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 15). The interpretivist approach should lead to a nuanced understanding of individual and collective narratives, social norms, reasoning process, and so on (Mason, 2002).

### Participants and Procedures

All study participants were purposively selected and were enrolled in a public university in Malaysia. Study participants had to be reasonably proficient in English so that they could express their ideas with relative ease in a focus group setting. The primary researcher and colleagues are based in Malaysia and affiliated with the university. Hence it was relatively easy to recruit Malaysian students on campus. The Chinese students recruited for this study hailed from mainland China and were also studying in the same university. Chinese participants were included in the sample to examine if there were similarities across the two communitarian cultures in their interpretation of goodness.

Scholars contend that in order for the researcher to stand on a firmer ground with regard to making claims, two focus groups suffice since “this would suggest that the differences observed are not just a feature of a one off group, but are likely to be related to the different characteristics of participants reflected in selection” (Barbour, 2007, p. 59). The total number of participants for this study were 32. Six focus group sessions were conducted – three groups of Malaysian participants and three groups of Chinese participants, comprising 6 to 8 members each. Barbour (2007) is of the view that “focus groups are well placed to explore people’s perspectives on issues to which they have previously given little thought” (p. 87). Hence, “focus groups offer a practical way of eliciting such complex talk, and in analyzing the conversation we acknowledge the situatedness of opinion, and recover some of the richness and complexity with which people express, explore, and use opinions. (Myers & Macnaghten, 1999, p. 174).

Study participants were briefed about the nature of the study and a consent form was signed prior to the focus group session. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of all the study participants. All selected participants were monetarily compensated for their time and cooperation.

The focus group discussion was carried out in a semi-structured fashion. The questions during the discussions were posed in a conversational manner which put the participants at ease. The participants were asked the following questions: “What does goodness mean to you/ what do you associate goodness with?”; “Can you share examples of goodness/ people who you consider as good -- in your family, in media and in politics?”; What would be the opposite of goodness for you?” Probes and prompts were used judiciously to ensure fluid discussion which enabled them to elaborate on their ideas without any inhibitions.

Each focus group session lasted around one to one and a half hours. All four sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed immediately after the session was over. In addition to field notes, a separate memo was kept to record the researchers’ hunches, reflections and insights pertaining to the content and the process of the study (Krauss & Ismail, 2010).

Each transcription was fully transcribed by the primary researcher. The transcription of digital data into written text itself initiates the analysis process, followed by coding of the data based on its relevance to the study dimensions. The process of coding was inductive which according to Patton (2002) entails “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453) based on the overarching research question posed by the study. Since a generic/descriptive qualitative study has the latitude to use a combination of various analytic techniques (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Merriam, 1998), the researchers made use of open and axial coding to make sense of the data. Open coding refers to that part of analysis that deals with the labelling and categorizing of phenomena as indicated by the data. Whereas open coding fractures the data into concepts and categories, axial coding puts those data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its sub-categories. Thus, axial coding refers to the process of developing main categories and their sub-categories (Pandit, 1996, p. 11). The codes in the transcripts were color coded to identify distinct categories and ideas. In addition to that, the written data recorded on Microsoft word was numbered continuously (every line of the transcript corresponded to a number) to further break down the data - facilitating data reduction and retrieval process. This process allowed the researcher to identify common themes and patterns that emerged from constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which calls for arranging data in a manner which facilitates systematic comparison across the data set (O’Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008). Excerpts from analysis section represent the themes and concepts that had the most resonance across all groups.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the study findings was established by participant validation and peer debriefing. Participants were asked to go over the focus group interview transcripts to validate if what has been recorded is in accordance with their stated views. They were further instructed to flag the researcher in case of any inconsistency in the verbal and written record. Out of the 32 students 29 participants responded and provided feedback. From the 29, 23 students verified in the affirmative and emailed their responses within the first week. Out of the remaining six participants, five of them flagged the researcher about certain typing errors, however no substantial modification was requested. And only one participant asked for clarification which was provided, after which he gave his approval. This whole process of participant validation/member checking has greatly helped to enhance the credibility of this study.

In order to further lend credibility to the study, peer debriefing/peer review was also used to verify the process of data analysis and interpretation. A peer debriefer “provides support, plays devil’s advocate, challenges the researchers’ assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). For this study, two PhD scholars from a Malaysian university -- one from the department of communication and the other an expert in the field of qualitative research examined and oversaw the data analysis process - providing constructive feedback on the codes, categories and themes derived from the focus group interview data. The feedback received from them helped to further fine-tune and refine the analysis – enhancing the rigor of the study.

### **Results**

The results presented are in response to the overarching research question, “how do people perceive and interpret goodness in others?” Two main themes emerged from the analysis: (a) Concern for others’ welfare (b) Goodness - a subjective notion. Data presented under these categories are further grouped by subcategories.

## Concern for Others' Welfare

A dominant theme that cut across both the Malaysian and Chinese groups was their unequivocal belief that “goodness” emanates from being considerate and helpful to others. Individual and collective narratives emerging from the focus group discussions demonstrated this recurring theme which was then labeled as “concern for others’ welfare.” When posed the question: “what is goodness to you?” most participants considered altruistic disposition and selflessness as central to the notion of goodness. Malaysian and Chinese participants explained goodness by citing examples of individual who: “do a lot of charity work,” “involved with public welfare,” “think about others,” “contribute to society,” and “care for others,” etc.

The sub categories corresponding to the notion of “concern for others” welfare’ have been labelled as being kind and helpful, contribution to society, involvement in charity initiatives, selfless disposition, and being caring and supportive of others.

### Being Kind and Helpful

For Malaysian and Chinese focus group participants, kindness and generosity towards others constituted goodness. Helen, a Malaysian graduate student who also happened to be the most articulate in her views, equated goodness with compassion and kindness:

A person that you don’t know can be caring towards you. For example, If let’s say you’re pregnant, standing in an LRT and another person gets up to give you his/her seat - you can say that that is an act of goodness. And also, you can also see and act of love and caring if it’s not just towards any human beings but towards animals. Let’s say you find a street cat, you can see that the cat is hungry, if the person gives food or water then you can assume that that person is such a good person just because they can act kindly towards another creature.

Chinese participants shared similar views with those of their Malaysian counterparts. When posed the question: “what is goodness to you?” Most of them considered kindness and concern for others as central to goodness. Lily remarked, “The first thing that I can think of is caring and kind hearted – not selfish...like you think about everyone.” Wendy also expressed her views by highlighting the importance of being helpful to describe goodness -- she commented: “Maybe you’re having some difficulty and someone helps that means he has goodness.” Terrence also acknowledged the importance of being kind and considerate towards others as fundamental to the notion of goodness:

I think people should be kindly, friendly, helpful, easy to connect with and available for people. I don’t like it when you’re with someone they continuously chat or use their phones and don’t pay attention to the people around them.

### Contribution to Society: Policy Initiatives

Most of the Malaysian participants interpreted goodness in the context of contribution to community and society at large. Contribution to community and society was defined by development and policy initiatives taken by country leaders. The leaders’ concern for the welfare of the society was manifested in their public policy directives to better serve the country. Mahathir Muhammad, the famous Malaysian politician was a ready example for most of the Malaysian participants when probed to give examples about goodness. There was a



unanimous agreement among most of the participants that Mahathir Mohammad contributed a great deal in terms of policy and planning to develop Malaysia. Helen, the most outspoken and communicative among the group spoke about the leader with unabashed admiration for his premiership:

Mahathir Mohammad. He's been my idol since childhood. So yea you may not conclusively that he's a good person, like Liya said you can't be sure with politicians but the way he led the country during his premiership, I think he's the only politician who seems to genuinely care about his citizens, his country...

In a similar vein, Mary also talked about Mahathir Muhammad's visionary leadership and commitment to work for the development of the country inspite of all odds:

Mahathir did a lot of good things for the country, even when people rejected his ideas but he still did it for the sake of the country and for the future -- Putra Jaya and KLCC -- he got a lot of opposition from the people but he still did it because he knew and now people realize that he did good.

Keith also acknowledged the politicians' sagacity to steer the country out of crisis:

Dr. Mahathir, he's the first person that comes to my mind. He's kind of good leader, intelligent and he knows how to solve the country's problem. I think it's very hard to solve and tackle a problem for a country -- financial, economic and social problems in a short time.

Another participant Whitney, like others also lauded Mahathir Muhammad's leadership with regard to his contribution to Malaysia. However, she also spoke about another leader who provided redress to the grievance of a female victim seeking justice:

Mahathir Mohammad is on my list too. But there's another political person, his name is Lim Guan Eng. A Malaysian girl was raped by a raja in one of our states who wielded a lot of power. There was no action against him. It's only when Lim Guan Eng intervened and demanded justice, was he finally prosecuted.

Chinese participants expressed similar ideas when it came to defining goodness. Wang shared her notion of goodness by citing an example of a Chinese politician who demonstrated compassion for his people by being there for them in their hour of adversity:

Wen Jia Bao, former prime minster of the republic of China... I remember once we had an earthquake, he was the first one who was there, he touched the people, comforted them and held the babies. He even visited the destroyed houses and he asked the rescuers to try their best to save people.

In the same vein, in response to a question about the definition of a good human being, Wendy, a Chinese participant in the other focus group shared a similar story about a politician whose concern for the his countrymen was evident through his actions, "Our leader Deng Xiaoping. If some place had a disaster he was always the first one to oversee things and was there to provide instructions."

### **Contribution to Society: Charity Initiatives**

Participants increasingly cited examples of scientists and celebrities who have tried to make a difference in their own private capacities by helping the underprivileged. This altruistic disposition was considered a crucial benchmark in defining goodness across the spectrum. Malaysian participant Lee spoke about a scientist who had made a difference through his work by helping humanity:

The scientist that I admire is called Dr. Myron Wenz because of his contribution through his work. His parents died in degenerative diseases. He has done a lot of charity work in Africa. His vision impressed me a lot. I prefer the work and the deeds of a person rather than only superficial things...

Examples of celebrities who are involved with social work were considered the ideal by many participants. Whitney spoke about an actor from Hong Kong who has been involved with charity initiatives but shies away from publicity:

Louis Koo from Hong Kong -- His friends betrayed him and he suffered a lot but he did not let that affect him. He has donated so much money to hospitals, schools and housing schemes but he never mentions this, never tries to sell that for publicity. Even when it was reported by a journalist that's he's involved with such charity work, he didn't openly acknowledge that and shied away from the subject...

Liya mentioned a popular American TV personality – Oprah Winfrey who's involvement with charity initiatives signified goodness. Similarly, Mary mentioned a Malaysian celebrity who in her view is a good person because of her involvement with charity organizations: "Lisa Surihani always does charity activities involving kids. So looking at that I feel like she's a good person."

Keith brought up Jackie Chan's involvement with charitable causes as a benchmark in determining goodness. He remarked, "The first person that I think of is Jackie Chan. Of course he's quite famous in terms of movies, martial arts but he actually does a lot of CSR (corporate social responsibility)."

Chinese participants shared similar stories of celebrities involved with humanitarian efforts to help the disenfranchised. Lily gave veteran actress Audrey Hepburn's example to make her point about goodness. She commented, "She always has that kind of very pure feel about her. She was also part of the United Nations and used to help with humanitarian work relating to children." Renne talked about Angelina Jolie's charity work as a prime example of what being kind and good meant. She observed, "She helps homeless children - she has a kind heart." Travon brought sports and sportsmen into the discussion to convey his notions about goodness: "I think Michael Jordan is a good person. As you know he's considered the best basketball player in basketball history. He is very hard working and involved with public welfare."

### **Putting Others First: Selfless Disposition**

In order to fully understand the meanings that participants were associating with the notion of goodness, the moderator of the focus group sessions also asked participants to talk about the opposites of goodness in order to bring about more coherence and clarity on the subject of goodness. Many participants expressed their disdain for people who had no

consideration for others. Mary remarked, “Selflessness is the main thing, shouldn’t be selfish and full of yourself.” Most of the participants held a consensus view that being self-absorbed and apathetic towards others was synonymous to being a bad person – opposite of goodness. Chinese participants were also of the same opinion. Nazia pointed out that the opposite of goodness is when “people do something without caring about others’ feelings...they just don’t care about other people.” In addition, Lily also noted that “unconcerned people ignore others’ feelings, they just care for themselves...selfish.”

Mary, a Malaysian participant talked about the importance of putting others’ first, “Evil comes from when we don’t think about other people. We feel so selfish that we want to make ourselves first, our satisfaction first...so we don’t think about other people.”

Whitney shared an interesting story about her sensei which alludes to the idea that thinking about others’ wellbeing without expecting anything to gain in return defines a good human being:

My sensei (teacher) is from Japan. He once shared a story...there was a time when there were tensions between two countries. He went to one country and talked to the president and asked the president if he wanted to fight this other country...the president said no, I don’t want to...the other country seems to want to attack us so we just want to be prepared. So, the sensei went to the other country and asked the president of that country and posed the same question. The president of the country also assured him that he doesn’t want to attack...we just want to be prepared if the other country decides to initiate war. The sensei told both the presidents that the other country has no intention of waging war. He was able to avert war because of his role and influence with both the countries. He was selfless...he believed that we shouldn’t aspire to be leaders but help others to become leaders.

### **Caring and Supportive Orientation**

Many participants shared stories of caring and supportive family members to illustrate what goodness meant to them. Sasha, in particular found that role model in her mother:

My mom has always supported me no matter what. Like when I wanted to change my major she supported me even though my father would have objected...no matter what I do she’s always behind me. Then when I decided to model, my father didn’t approve at first, my mother on the other hand supported me and allowed me to pursue my dreams and eventually my father relented as well.

Helen also spoke about her mother who has been very supportive of her throughout her life and at the same time is known to a very kind and caring teacher to her students:

My mother was a teacher and she was liked by her students a lot. Some of the students even actually called her “mamma.” With me she’s always given me the freedom to do what I want to do, she passed on her belief system, her religious values onto me and I grew up to be somebody because of her. I think my mother has been good in her upbringing. She is a mother to all her pupils and is really a very good woman.

Natalie added that her grandmother was a good person in her view since she is always concerned about others' wellbeing:

My grandmother is very old but still cares about all her grandchildren. She calls us all very frequently just to ask us how we're doing...I would expect that from parents but not from a grandparent. For me she's a very good person.

Chinese participants also construed goodness as an extension of being supportive and encouraging. Nazia spoke about her father's supportive attitude which helped her immensely, "My father is a very kind person, easy going for everyone. He supported me always even when so many others were opposing me. He understands me. I think he's a very good and understanding man."

### **Goodness – A Subjective Notion**

Across the spectrum, concern for others' welfare was equated with the notion of goodness. Aside from this dominant perspective, Malaysian and Chinese participants brought forth other ideas which were deemed relevant to the discussion surrounding goodness. The concepts emerging from this category were labelled and defined based on the varying degrees of emphasis placed on the subject matter by the study participants. These concepts were not nearly as unanimous as compared to the theme of "concern for others" welfare' but owing to the frequency of mention across the groups, these concepts warranted a mention – which were then encapsulated into the theme of "goodness – a subjective notion." The recurring concepts across the two groups were the narratives of effective communication, close family ties, and resilience of spirit as manifestations of goodness.

#### **Effective Communication and Goodness**

A recurring narrative especially among the Malaysian participants was their emphasis on effective communication. Good listening ability is considered an essential component of effective communication. It is noteworthy that participants increasingly cited good listening skills as central to the notion of goodness. Liya claimed, "The ability to listen itself shows concern -- concern for the world." Liya further elaborates on this desired characteristic by citing example of a well-known tv personality:

Oprah Winfrey - like the way she talks...she's a listener. The way she listens...it's like when you're participating in a conversation, there are people who are desperate to be superior, she is not like that. She's like you say what you wanna say and then I will follow your flow...so it's a very harmonious conversation. I mean it's kind of subjective but the way she portrays herself it shows that she's kind, she listens to you like you matter!

Others also identified communication as an important benchmark in interpreting goodness. Helen alluded to her mother's goodness and remarked, "My mother is a good listener, she tells me stories of hardship about others so that I can learn and understand. She is a mother to all her pupils and is really a very good woman."

Valerie spoke about her father's communicative competence to illustrate her point on the subject, "My father is someone who's easy to talk to. It's very hard to talk to your friend's parents, but they can talk to my dad like friends."

Keith further added to the discussion and talked about how his mother was someone who people enjoyed talking to and felt at ease with:

People like to talk to her, get recipes from her. So I think one of the good things about that is people automatically approach her, so it's one of the signs that you are quite good to people so they automatically come to you.

The Chinese respondents also considered effective communication as an integral feature of goodness. Nazia talked about Jackie Chan and how he communicates with others distinguishes him from the rest, "When he communicates with others (celebrities or journalists) he is always relaxed. Because there are some celebrities they don't like talking to others...they seem rude. But Jackie Chan is always so relaxed and friendly."

### **Strong Family Ties and Goodness**

Malaysian and Chinese participants both identified close family ties as an important determinant of goodness. Keith commended Mahathir Muhammad for striking the right balance between work and family and hailed him as a family man:

He's quite serious when he's dealing with political issues, but when he's with family, if you see the magazine features on him, he has the gentleness with the wife, family. That is another part of himself. He actually to me is the kind of man who says, "Work is work, family is family."

In the same vein, Yana, a Chinese student, echoed similar thoughts about the importance of being a caring spouse. She explicitly stated her views on the subject by sharing her thoughts about Chinese president Xi Jinping's closeness with his spouse:

I want to talk about the president Xi Jinping. As we are talking about goodness, how he deals with people. His career is not enough to show his goodness. I want to talk about him and his wife. As a public figure, I think the relationship between you and your family, especially you and your wife is very important. Like at airports, they hold hands (Xi Jinping) and the way they look at each other...it shows something. He's not like other presidents. I think he doesn't have affair with other women. I think this is enough to show that he's a good person

### **Resilience of Spirit and Goodness**

In their discussions about goodness, Malaysian and Chinese students gave examples of prominent individuals who had left a mark in history based on their ideological convictions and resilient spirit. Lily, a Chinese student spoke about Gandhi's perseverance in the face of strong opposition and related that example in the context of goodness:

Mohandas Gandhi fought against the British government, against imperial rule. He was in prison for 7 or 8 times but he continued his struggle and finally he won. So I think this kind of attitude is studiable – we need to study from him to be better, consistent people. Not like when you have difficulties and you give up but try and change things... I look at his picture and I think "Steady."

Helen, a Malaysian student spoke passionately about a prominent religious scholar who signified that spirit:

What I have in mind is Ahmed Deedat, South African religious scholar. He is a great speaker. I believe that when you have a belief, and if that belief is contradicting with the majority's viewpoint and still manage to stand straight on the rostrum and say hey that's my opinion – that represents goodness and sincerity.

### **Discussion**

Literature relating to morality in person perception has always assumed goodness to be a sub component of morality – without ever really delving into the notion of goodness per se. This study endeavored to delineate goodness from morality in order to gain a holistic appreciation about the phenomenon. The study findings revealed that Malaysian and Chinese students define goodness in terms of their concern for others. Aside from this dominant theme, the discussion surrounding goodness also appeared to elicit varying interpretations which were encapsulated in the theme of “goodness - a subjective notion.” The most noteworthy finding resulting from this study is the near unanimous consensus among the Malaysian and Chinese participants regarding the interpretation of goodness which is “concern for others’ welfare.” Sueda, (2014) claims that “collectivists are motivated by their norms and duties to the collectives and give priority to the goals of the collectives over their own personal goals” (p. 21). Malaysian and Chinese participants both belonging to collectivist cultures subscribe to values where others are always given a preference over the self. It's fascinating to observe that these communitarian predilections are not limited to values alone, but have also come to define and encompass the notion of goodness.

Goodness was also interpreted in the context of effective communication, strong family ties and resilience of spirit. These ideas may not have been near unanimous, but nevertheless were echoed in varying capacities across the groups. This in turn demonstrates that these interpretations also have value and should be studied and explored further to understand the resonance and reach of these ideas across the two cultural groups. For instance, a lot of participants considered effective communication as an important benchmark of goodness. This alone was an unexpected and fascinating find - given that studies relating to communication have mostly defined communication as an effective tool to convey information and knowledge. But if effective communication is being equated with the notion of goodness at some level then this raises interesting questions for research scholars that ought to be studied further.

Prior studies primarily focused on the broad construct of morality in person perception and evaluation without acknowledging the fundamental core of morality judgments – goodness. The current study findings pertaining to how goodness is perceived and understood are novel and unique in their own since no previous research has exclusively probed this elusive and intriguing phenomenon, which has functional and adaptive significance. Furthermore, majority of the prior work related to the current research has been done by western scholars (Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2014; Wojciszke et al., 1998). This study has endeavored to start a new discourse on goodness -- bringing forth a collectivist understanding to the fore. Follow up studies in future should examine this notion from individualistic perspectives as well in order to attain a more fined tuned understanding about goodness. It would be interesting to find out if the perceptions surrounding goodness have universal resonance or whether this notion is perceived differently across the cultural divide.

A limitation of this study is that since Malaysian and Chinese participants were not native speakers of English language, some nuances might have been missed during the

discussions. In addition, the findings of this study ought to be interpreted with caution since broad claims of generalization cannot be made with a small sample size. That said, this study has ventured to generate new and novel literature on goodness – that in itself is a contribution to research concerning goodness, morality, and person perception. It would be worthwhile to explore how people make judgments of goodness of known and unknown others. Extensive research indicates that judgments of others are greatly influenced by nonverbal dynamics in communication (Ambady & Weisbuch, 2010; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987). Hence, a natural extension to this study would be to probe the nonverbal aspects in communication that signal goodness to others. For instance, what nonverbal cues do people rely on to make judgments of goodness? Could such nonverbal cues of goodness be discerned accurately? Studies such as these could help scholars and practitioners acquire a more nuanced understanding concerning goodness and enable us to make better judgments in terms of managing our relationships in the workplace, family and friends.

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