

# WELL BEING ACCORDING TO CULTURAL EGO

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Well-being is a physical and mental condition that we all aspire to and seek to reach. Many factors are needed for the development and maintenance of wellbeing. These include subjective, somatic, hereditary, cultural and also economic and political factors.

Wellbeing gives the human subject the capacity to be a social being who “besides living in a society, like social animals, must also produce the society in order to live” (Godelier, 1999). Social changes are often produced by collective traumas and they are absorbed and transformed into diseases and symptoms. These diseases and symptoms are then considered and treated as individual problems and dealt with by means of technical solutions.

The Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, who studied the social and cultural changes of ancient and archaic societies says that the human subject must “be in the world” and must feel his own “presence” in order to participate in a coherent and fruitful way.

Humans must feel continuity and stability in order to be able to make culture evolve.

‘Flow’, by Csiksemahily, indicates a very particular and happy moment of well-being when man feels in good and lively harmony with himself and his own capacities and projects.

Devereux and De Martino were among the first to indicate that mental disorder can be the sign of the crisis of the culture in which humans live.

For Devereux ethnic mental disorders are made of the social and cultural ideals of the society in which they appear, they: “assume the caricatural shape of the total cultural model”.

Devereux suggests that ‘schizophrenia’ is the ethnical disease of the occidental society. Renée Girard (2006) defines ‘anorexia’ as the ethnical disease of occidental society.

Individualism, the quest for total freedom, total control of natural needs and rivalry, characterize both social and anorexic psychodynamics today.

Roheim, in 1943, gives this definition of culture and civilization: “psychic defence of the human being in his evolution”. If the subject is not able to produce culture and civilization, he/she becomes isolated and gets sick.

Kleinman, Freeman, Quaranta, argue that the diseases produced by social trauma are lived individually and society never tries to understand their cultural meaning or social aetiology.

Disease becomes, as Quaranta says, “embodied resistance” to the society, not finding other ways to express opposition or rebellion.

This is how we describe anorexia.

Vargas Llosa, in “The Storyteller”, tells the story of an interesting capacity to integrate the cultural ego.

He has a friend who:”Saul Zuratas had a birthmark dark violet, like wine vinegar, that covered all his right part of the face and some dark red hair, messy like the scrubber’s sticks. The birthmark covered the ear and lips and the nose, which was crisped and swelling. He was the ugliest boy in the world, but also very likeable and good. I had known anyone giving

since the beginning that impression of being open, honest and straight, very simple and good hearted in every situation.

He was called Mascarita: He was student of anthropology. He had known and loved the life of the Machiguenga people. This people was spreading around the forest in order to escape destruction.

Mascarita was: Peruvian, Jewish, handicapped.

After many years Vargas Llosa discovered that he had become a storyteller of the Machiguenga tribes.

He travelled to the different tribes to tell them the stories of their people.

Starting from a series of negative and positive cultural and subjective aspects of his life:

The handicap and the emargination,

His being a Jew, a wandering people with a mental tie to the community,

being Peruvian and tied to cultures somewhat primitive,

his capacity to identify,

his ability to communicate,

Mascarita had been able to create an original new figure by getting an important place inside the community, collaborating with that culture to keep and “build its own society” (Godelier)

Mascarita, differently from anorexic patients, achieved that integration between cultures which we now often try to reach in the globalized world.

Globalization acts in a violent way. Politics becomes dependent on the economy and loses its aim to work for the community. Populations live the “crisis of presence” because they “are acted”, they are not the protagonists of their own history.

Modern society should give space to the creation of projects which give different groups the chance to change themselves without being destroyed, becoming instead able to modify and enrich themselves.

Currently ethnic identity strengthens and reassures the group but does not make it suitable to participate in community civil life. (Remotti)

Advances in Neurobiology recently contributed to document the hypothesis that cultural, social and environmental factors have concrete influence on the human subject.

Kandel says that....”Social influences are biologically incorporated in the altered expression of specific genes...that direct the manufacture of specific proteins in every determined cell in response to the environment” (Kandel, 1998).

Culture, registered as implicit memory makes, together with somatic and social factors, constitutes the human capacity to evolve inside the social community.

We must take into consideration the fact that the therapeutic effect, working with cultures different from ours, is obtained through the mediation of the whole cultural environment.

The deep psychical conflicts can correct themselves if the therapy ensures that the patient, in his daily life, freely confronts his own cultural ego with the new world that he meets.

In a wonderful movie by Idrissa Ouedraogo, from Burkina Faso, ‘Le cri du coeur’ (The heart’s cry), we have an example of this meeting of two cultures.

A young boy 12-13 years old reaches his family in France and is very sad to leave his country. His grandfather tells him stories of the community.

The boy starts to have 'hallucinations', he sees a hyena which scares him and appears in different places.

In France hyenas don't exist.

He is treated by psychiatrists without success:

In the meantime he starts a friendship with a magician, a prestidigitator (sleight of hand expert), whom he talks to and develops a good relationship.

Later it comes out that this man had accidentally killed a boy running behind his ball, while he was driving on a town road.

One night the African boy invites him to follow him where he will show him the hyena.

He gathers lots of burning material and puts them in a circle with an opening like a door. He has with himself a tank of gas.

At a certain moment he sees the hyena entering the circle, he puts gas on the material and burns it. He sees the hyena leaving the place.

When he asks to the magician if he has seen the hyena, he answers that he was just sleeping in that moment but he adds, that from now on the hyena, being free, would protect the boy.

From then the boy stops having hallucinations and feels grown up. When the grandfather dies he can take care of his father.

The magician decides to have a child with his partner.

I like to think that the friendship between the boy and the magician gave place to a transitional space, which made possible to create together, in both of them, a therapeutic change.

The therapist has the aim to accept the cultural difference of the "patient".

He may not understand this different culture. But through a plain and empathic exchange the therapist can find his way to help the 'patient' and the patient' can gradually find an internal integration between his cultural ego and the new culture.

In this way the trauma of meeting the new culture can be overcome. The patient can modify his identity and find new creativity and originality.

Projects of solidarity and common life are now being produced in the world starting from community life and its daily life (Porto Alegre, Best Practices ONU)

They are thought to be a method to prevent social disease and ethnic conflicts and to reduce mental disorders due to social traumas.

The Foundation Terranova Cecchini has created different projects in recent years which have given new life and a sense of future to communities.

I will talk about 2 of these projects.

One of them took place in Barlassina, a small town near Milano.

A plan was made together with citizens and public institutions to reduce the city traffic so that children could walk to school.

The speed limit was reduced to 30 km per hour.

The school busses were eliminated.

The children's routes were supervised by volunteers, mainly grandparents, to keep the children safe.

This change and the participation of older people in the program have resulted in better relations between generations.

The community life has improved, old people have found new interest in life and young people have learnt to appreciate them.

Children have started to live better and to know their own town better, feeling more connected with it.

An unexpected result occurred: the obesity of children diminished and young people are demonstrating more participation in community life.

Another project of the Foundation started from "high culture". The aim was to promote interest and knowledge of the dialect in a small town in Abruzzo, an Italian region.

To do this, festivals and poetry competitions were organized.

In a few years this apparently abstract project produced:

interest and passion for poetry from inhabitants and outside people,  
inspired poetry writing,

has stimulated old people's participation in community life,

has improved their vitality and

has produced better relations in the community.

It has favoured the reconstruction of broken or lost relations and

has given the citizens the chance to reappropriate connections that they did not know they had,

Perhaps this means that the "unconscious memory" was reactivated.

Many traditions and histories of the past gave continuity to the life of the little town.

This was a way to keep the dignity and cultural continuity of the town high.

"Anthropopoiesis", as says Remotti, was elicited by this project.

We can say with Roheim that "culture is the middle point between narcissistic and objectual-erotic position that is a point of stability for the oscillation of libido", because this stability is fundamental in order to "go beyond the fear of the human being to be left alone in the dark" (Roheim, 1943)