

# Life balance and harmony: Wellbeing's golden thread

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**Abstract:** The relevance of balance and harmony to wellbeing has been under-appreciated in psychology. Even though these concepts have received considerable attention across different contexts (e.g., work-life balance), this literature is fragmented and scattered. There have been few attempts to bring these disparate threads together, or to centre these concepts as foundational and important across all aspects of human functioning. This paper remedies this lacuna by offering a narrative review of these diverse works. Relevant literature is organised into four emergent categories: affect, cognition, behaviour, and self-other relations. Throughout these, balance and harmony can be appreciated as not merely relevant to wellbeing, but arguably a defining principle, a 'golden thread' running through its myriad dimensions (though this thread is itself multifaceted, comprising a cluster of interlinked concepts). Based on this analysis, an overarching definition of wellbeing is offered: the dynamic attainment of optimal balance and harmony in any – and ideally all – aspects of life. This paper provides a foundation and stimulus for further work on these important topics.

**Keywords:** balance, harmony, wellbeing, happiness, cross-cultural

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores and conceptualises the concept of 'life balance and harmony': processes of balance and harmony (B/H) across all areas of human functioning. The contention is that B/H are at the heart of wellbeing (with B/H and wellbeing both being 'compositional' phenomena: i.e., although B/H will often be referred to here as 'a principle,' it actually constitutes a cluster of conceptually-related dynamics; similarly, wellbeing encompasses all the ways one might hope to do or be well; Thin, 2020). However, B/H have been relatively underappreciated in psychology and academia more broadly. In certain locales – particularly Eastern cultures – B/H *have* attracted much attention and thought, reflecting the philosophical traditions in such places. Similarly, the concepts do appear in many areas of psychological literature (like 'work-life balance'). However, these strands of research and theory are largely disconnected, and the importance of B/H *as a whole* has not received the attention and prominence it merits – namely, as a golden thread running through all dimensions of wellbeing (i.e., a unifying principle that pertains to all its domains).

This lacuna may partly reflect the possibility that B/H have not figured as prominently in Western cultures as elsewhere. Thus, an important context for this analysis is the Western-centric nature of psychology, being mostly conducted by and on people from 'WEIRD' countries (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic), particularly the USA (Henrich et al., 2010). As a result, concepts, methods, and priorities associated with American psychology have come to dominate the international scene (Danziger, 2002). Relatedly, psychology tends to overlook perspectives developed in non-Western cultures (Delle-Fave & Bassi, 2009; Lomas,

2016). For instance, the West has developed a preference over time for ‘linear’ analytic modes of cognition, influenced by interpretations of Aristotelian logic promoting ‘either-or’ thinking (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). By contrast, Eastern cultures have cultivated more holistic, dialectical forms of reasoning, which accommodate seeming contradictions and opposing perspectives by seeking a ‘middle way’ (Wong, 2011). Consequently, such cultures have emphasised the importance of B/H to wellbeing and life more broadly (e.g., socially and environmentally). This emphasis is reflected in Taoism, for instance, whose *yīn yáng* motif illustrates the dynamic process of balance and harmonisation between co-dependent opposites (Fang, 2012). Similarly, Confucius saw harmony as the core of a good person, who “harmonizes but does not seek sameness” (Analects 13.23; cited in Li, 2006, p.586).

These cultural biases have influenced psychology, which – per its Western-centric orientation – has not focused on B/H to the extent they merit. However, such ideas have by no means been *disregarded* in the West or by psychology, historically or currently. Indeed, appraising interest in B/H through the lens of an ‘East vs. West’ polarity may be a contemporary incarnation of the Orientalist discourse identified by Said (1978), which juxtaposed the supposed rationalism of the West with the ‘non-rationality’ of the East (Hwang, 2020). Such homogenisation obscures the dynamic heterogeneity of these regions (Hamamura, 2012), and overlooks the fact that across Western academia many disparate references to B/H *can* be found. Moreover, B/H may be more universally valued than often realised. Analysing lay perceptions of happiness worldwide – including in Western countries – Delle Fave et al. (2011; 2016) found the most prominent category was Harmony/Balance (comprising, besides balance and harmony themselves, features such as inner peace and serenity). Likewise, research from New Zealand has found that when workers are asked about their conceptions of wellbeing, B/H rank near the top of its valued constituents (Hone et al., 2015; Jarden et al., 2018).

Thus, the issue here is not lack of research into B/H, but underappreciation of their *importance*. Despite B/H having been invoked in manifold ways in psychology and related fields, there are few overarching works – with valuable exceptions like Delle Fave et al., Wong (2012, 2020), Kjell et al. (2016), and (Gruman et al., 2018) – drawing these disparate threads together, or identifying B/H as a key principle of human functioning. However, as this paper demonstrates, B/H can be seen as a ‘golden thread’ running through all aspects of wellbeing, and deserve a central place in the field. Before delving into the literature, let’s briefly clarify what balance and harmony mean.

## 2. Balance and harmony

In the literature, B/H are qualified in myriad ways, from ‘mental balance’ to ‘work-life balance.’ But in general, what does it mean for something to be in balance or harmony? Although these are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g., Bourke & Geldens, 2007), balance is often positioned as a component of a broader notion of harmony. For example, in Kjell et al.’s (2016) Harmony in Life Scale, harmony is described as involving balance and flexibility (in harmonizing different aspects of life). This approach is also taken here, where essentially balance is used to describe the relationship quality between two dialectically related phenomena, and harmony to signify the dynamic co-ordination of multiple such ‘balancing acts.’ However, in themselves, these are complex, multifaceted concepts, as elucidated below. Moreover, they function in at least three different ways, as: (a) analytical principles (i.e., a means for people to understand and evaluate phenomena); (b) motivational principles (i.e., guides to choices and actions); and (c) axiological principles (i.e., valued life outcomes themselves). These distinctions create nuanced complexities; for instance, even if outcomes like good work-life balance can be understood *analytically* as good for wellbeing, people may yet not value these motivationally or axiomatically. With these points

in mind, let's briefly explore how balance and harmony in themselves tend to function or be used in the literature.

Balance usually signifies the relationship quality between two interlinked phenomena. Its etymology reflects this usage, deriving from the Latin *bilanx*, which denotes two (*bi*) scale pans (*lanx*). Such relationships can vary vis-à-vis: (a) basic nature, and (b) temporal dynamics. With (a), they may be spectral (poles of a spectrum, e.g., hot-cold), or categorical (dichotomous categories that are often linked, e.g., work-life). Then, with (b), balance can be synchronic (in the moment) or diachronic (over time). An example of synchronic balance might be homeostatic equilibrium regarding temperature (neither too cold nor hot). Diachronic balance could include someone deeming that overall they average good work-life balance (even if at times they are imbalanced). Moreover, many examples below involve a concern with 'optimal' balance. A principle often invoked is Aristotle's (1986) 'golden mean' (Telfer, 1989). In that, optimal balance does not involve crude calculations of averages, nor simply identifying the mid-point on a spectrum, but carefully finding the *ideal* point (which may be skewed towards one pole). Relatedly, the Swedish notion of *lagom* – sometimes known as the 'Goldilocks' principle – refers to something being just the *right* amount (Dunne, 2017).

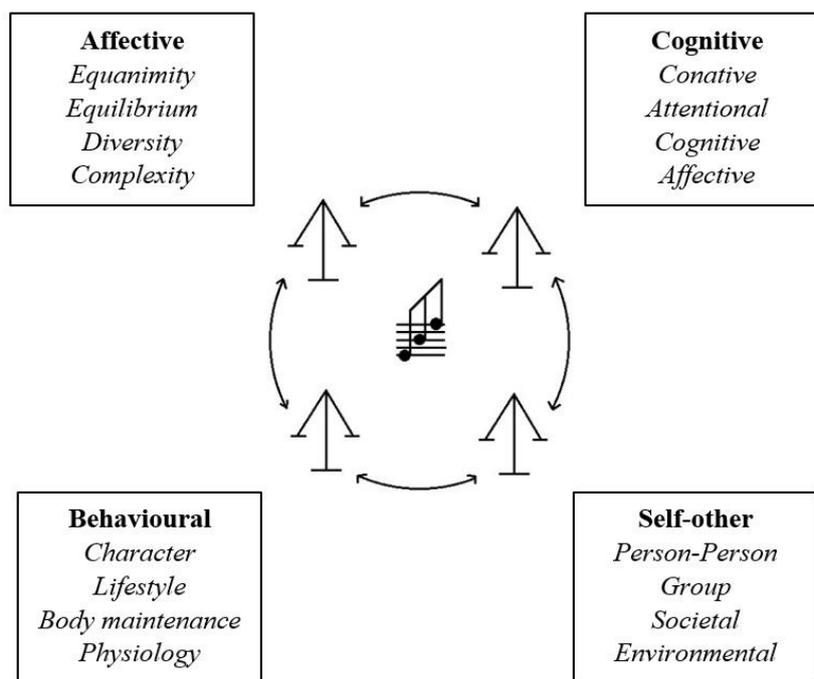
The concept of harmony is slightly more elusive, as is its etymology, which derives from the Latin *harmonia* (joining or concord). In that respect, one could use it interchangeably with balance, i.e., a relationship between two entities (Stuart et al., 2010). However, people frequently refer to balance *and* harmony, implying they have slightly different ideas about what these terms mean (otherwise one would suffice). It thus helps to consider arenas where harmony is often invoked, such as music, which indeed is how ideals of harmony were often elucidated in classical Chinese and Greek philosophy (Li, 2008). In music, harmony can denote a pleasing, ordered arrangement of multiple notes. In that respect, if balance describes the relationship quality between two interlinked phenomena, harmony could be conceptualised as the relationship quality between *multiple* such 'balancing acts.' A harmonious marriage, for instance, implies not merely balance with respect to one aspect of life (e.g., division of chores), but successfully managing numerous such balancing acts across many areas of life.

With such conceptualizations in mind, I sought to draw together the disparate threads of research and theory relating to B/H in the psychological literature. In that respect, I endeavoured to 'cast the net' as widely as possible. For that reason, this is not a systematic or even a scoping review, both of which set clear parameters and boundaries, and methodically and exhaustively cover a given topic (Munn et al., 2018). Here, the relevant literature is too scattered and diffuse, and I did not know in advance where its boundaries would lie. Moreover, such an expansive approach meant an unwieldy amount of literature which would not be amenable to these more focused approaches. For instance, 'work-life balance' is but one instance of B/H among dozens considered here, but a Google Scholar search for this phrase alone returns around 187,000 results. As such, rather than conduct a tightly defined and limited review, I preferred an open-ended and even 'meandering' approach: exploring without a prescribed goal, and even – inspired by Taoism – wandering 'purposefully without aim' (Ingledew, 2016). In this spirit I hoped I would be led down unfamiliar pathways, and stumble upon unexpected ideas. This process is not as exhaustive or rigorous as a systematic review of course; as such, I cannot claim to have identified all relevant literature pertaining to B/H. However, this exploratory approach is better suited to my goal of drawing together scattered works across diverse contexts.

I began with an initial expansive sweep of the terrain using Google Scholar, first entering "balance" and "psychology," and then "harmony" and "psychology." For each query, I read the abstracts, and – in most cases the full manuscript – of the first 200 items (with some overlap

between the queries). Then followed a second stage in which I explored intriguing leads in these papers (i.e., relevant literature discussed within), which led me to a further 300 or so papers. Throughout all this, I approached the literature guided by the ethos of Grounded Theory, an approach to qualitative analysis in which data are explored for emergent themes, thereby iteratively generating theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). As I proceeded through the literature, I grouped together relevant ideas and research into thematic categories. In that respect, four overarching categories emerged: affect; cognition; behaviour; and self-other relations. These are illustrated in the figure below, together with key concepts that helped constitute the categories (as elucidated in the text below). The figure also conveys the overarching conceptualization of B/H deployed here, namely: balance constitutes the relationship quality between two interlinked phenomena (as signified by the various scales); and harmony reflects the dynamic co-ordination of multiple such balancing acts (as signified by the arrows linking the scales, and overall by the central harmonic musical notation).

**Figure 1. Dynamics of balance and harmony, featuring core categories and concepts**



It should be noted that the categories are not discrete or rigidly separated: some concepts fall within multiple categories, so situating them within a given one for the narrative below was a judgement call. Moreover, some concepts did not fall neatly into any of these four categories – such as in relation to gender (Lomas, 2013) or political affiliation (Lomas, 2017a) – so they do not account for all relevant B/H dynamics. However, rather than awkwardly shoehorn such additional concepts into these four, or create a fifth ‘miscellaneous’ category, these further forms are treated as targets for a future research agenda, as elucidated in the conclusion. Nevertheless, overall, this structure proved a useful way to organize the disparate literature.

The four categories are discussed in turn below, each featuring a wealth of relevant concepts. Indeed, given the broad remit of this review, it is not possible to cover each concept in depth. Emphasis is therefore placed where possible on meta-analyses and systematic reviews, since in themselves they offer summaries of the concepts at hand. In some respects, the review itself reflects the literature in being somewhat diffuse and scattered; B/H are complex ideas, and are

conceptualized in myriad ways across the various literature fields. Thus, even though B/H are identified here as a key principle of wellbeing, this principle is itself multifaceted, involving a cluster of interlinked concepts. Even so, an overarching theme emerged from the analysis, namely that B/H is a 'golden thread' running through all dimensions of wellbeing. One cannot say B/H are the *only* such thread; others may also be relevant and merit attention. For instance, axiological commitment to wellbeing *itself* may be another such thread. But certainly, it seems that across all potential dimensions of wellbeing, principles of B/H apply, as elucidated below.

### 3. Affective balance and harmony

The first category is a broad swathe of literature which invokes B/H in relation to emotions. This features numerous overlapping concepts (and near synonyms), including balance, equanimity, and equilibrium, as well as complexity, diversity, and granularity.

Let's begin with 'affect balance,' which conceptualizes wellbeing in terms of synchronous balance between positive and negative affect (PA/NA). Since Bradburn's (1969) pioneering work in this area, a wealth of research has emerged. For instance, although PA and NA are usually regarded conceptually and experientially as a continuum, their underlying neurophysiological dynamics may be more complex. Lindquist et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 397 studies (using fMRI and PET paradigms) to test three hypotheses, in which PA and NA are supported by systems that are: bipolar (increasing/decreasing monotonically along the valence dimension); bivalent (independent); or an 'affective workspace' (a flexible set of valence-general regions). Overall, they found support for the latter, with valence flexibly implemented by various valence-general limbic and paralimbic brain regions. Efforts have also been made to understand what type of balance constitutes wellbeing. In that respect, researchers have estimated high wellbeing to involve a ratio of PA to NA of around 2-3 to 1 – with Parks et al. (2012) putting it at 2.15:1, for instance, and Fredrickson and Losada (2005) at 2.9:1. However, such work has been critiqued, particularly the latter for issues including attempting to link such ratios to physical laws (Brown et al., 2013). As such, while the general principle may be broadly accepted – wellbeing involving PA outweighing NA – the precise dynamics of this ratio are still to be determined (Nickerson, 2018).

Still in this affective state-space, a second parameter of interest is arousal, where attention has focused particularly on *low* arousal emotions (which, as with B/H generally, are emphasised in Eastern conceptions of wellbeing; Leu et al., 2011). One could conceivably be in balance if experiencing high PA *and* NA simultaneously, as in highly-charged mixed emotions (Lomas, 2017c). More often though, 'emotional balance' (or 'equanimity') – is invoked for low arousal states (i.e., 'neutral' emotions involving minimal PA and NA). That said, many such states tilt towards positivity, conceptualised as 'low arousal positive affect,' as captured by Lee et al.'s (2013) Peace of Mind scale. Without such tilting, one is in the realm of constructs such as detachment, which is somewhat ambiguous vis-à-vis wellbeing. In psychospiritual traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, it is valorised as reflecting an ability to eschew attachments (seen as a root cause of suffering), as captured by the Quiet Ego Scale (Wayment et al., 2015) or the Ashtanga Yoga Hindi Scale (Raina & Singh, 2018). However, in other contexts, detachment can be problematic, as in the clinical conceptualisation of schizophrenia spectrum disorders and dissociative disorders (Renard et al., 2017). Moreover, even in psychospiritual contexts, intense detachment states can adversely affect people with mental health vulnerabilities (Lomas et al., 2015). Finally, whereas equanimity implies synchronous balance (neutrality at a given moment), emotional *equilibrium* can describe a diachronous process that averages out over time. Here scholars sometimes refer to emotional homeostasis (Hiew, 1998), which describes a complex

system's ability to self-regulate around a desired set-point. Thus, emotional equilibrium usually refers to people's capacity or tendency to swiftly return – from either NA or PA – to a neutral baseline (Golombek & Kutcher, 1990).

Then, in a different conceptual space are constructs of emotional complexity, diversity, and granularity. Complexity is defined as “having emotional experiences that are broad in range and well-differentiated” (Kang & Shaver, 2004, p.687), while diversity similarly means experiencing a “variety and relative abundance” of emotions (Quoidbach et al., 2014, p.2057). Both are premised on the value of having a range of emotions, synchronously and/or diachronously, and – more relevantly here – that these should ideally be in some form of harmony (rather than fragmentation or tension). For instance, a meta-analysis by O'Toole et al. (2019) linked emotional complexity to behavioural adaptation. Relatedly, emotional granularity (or differentiation) refers to “specificity of representations [and] experiences of emotion,” and an “ability to make fine-grained nuanced distinctions between similar emotions” (Smidt & Suvak, 2015, p.48). In that respect, granularity appears to help people better manage their emotional experiences, especially more diverse or complex ones (Ong et al., 2017). Intriguingly, in such models, it is helpful for negatively valenced emotions to be included, albeit not exclusively (Werner-Seidler et al., 2019). Thus, while people usually prefer pleasant emotions, at times negative emotions like sadness (Lomas, 2018), anger (Lomas, 2019a), or boredom (Lomas, 2017b) are not only natural but valuable. Consider that people sometimes actively seek such emotions – e.g., listening to sad music – for reasons including emotional catharsis, understanding experiences, and finding meaning amidst difficulties (Vuoskoski et al., 2012). Relatedly, some of the most cherished experiences, such as love, can involve a potent *mix* of emotions (Lomas, 2017c). From this perspective then, wellbeing includes the harmonisation of diverse emotions.

Moreover, this category is not limited to emotions, but covers all valenced qualia. Consider even pleasure and pain, where common sense – and philosophical traditions like utilitarianism (Donner, 1991) – might deem their respective presence and absence the ultimate arbiters of wellbeing. But even here some balance is important. People clinically incapable of feeling pain are liable to injury, since pain serves an important evolutionary function as a warning signal to avoid noxious stimuli and protect damaged tissue (Eregowda et al., 2016). Relatedly, a person continually stimulated by pleasure may lack motive force to address bodily needs; for instance, food intake is regulated by unpleasant hunger sensations (Führer et al., 2008). Thus, at least some sensitivity to discomfort is important, with wellbeing relying on an optimal balance between presence and absence of pain. For instance, Nelson et al. (2014) elucidate the role of emotional learning – including both pleasure and pain cues – during sensitive developmental periods. That said, as noted above vis-à-vis the golden mean and *lagom* principles, attaining balance regarding a given phenomenon involves carefully finding the right amount (which with pain is weighted towards its absence).

Finally, we can take an even broader existential perspective with respect to emotions. A key theorist in this respect is Wong (2011, 2012, 2016, 2020), who has advanced the notion of ‘mature happiness’ (Wong & Bowers, 2018). Drawing on Chinese philosophy, he positions B/H as the core of wellbeing, in its deepest, most fulfilling sense. This includes an optimal balance between the presence and absence of suffering. Most models of psychotherapy, for example, hold that development requires people becoming aware of and integrating negative aspects of themselves, a process which although uncomfortable is ultimately beneficial to wellbeing (Johnson, 1993). However, this type of flourishing does not necessarily come easily or quickly, but rather is attained through hard-won experience, hence ‘mature.’ In this respect, Wong has been inspired by Frankl (1985), who influentially advanced the idea that meaning and redemption can be found

even amidst life's difficulties. Overall, Wong has arguably done the most to highlight the importance of B/H in psychology, and this paper aligns with his work and makes a similar case.

#### 4. Cognitive balance and harmony

The second broad category is 'cognition' – an overarching term encompassing all forms of mental activity (excluding affective processes, which warrant a category unto themselves, as per above). A useful framework of relevant phenomena is provided by Wallace and Shapiro (2006). Drawing on Buddhist philosophy, they elucidate four forms of 'mental balance': conative; attentional; cognitive; and affective. We'll consider these in turn, excluding affect (as this was covered above). With the latter though, it is worth adding that Wallace and Shapiro emphasise its *self-regulation*: not merely experiencing balance, but actively facilitating it through emotional regulation skills. In that respect, they invoke the value of meditation – as they do with the three other types – in promoting such skills (Farb et al., 2012).

Conative balance refers to intentions and volitions, and the extent to which these are optimally balanced for wellbeing. An example is Block and Block's (2006) notions of ego control and ego resiliency. The former differentiates people on whether they characteristically express affect and impulse (under-control) versus inhibit such tendencies (over-control). Resiliency is then the ability to strike an optimal balance between under- and over-control (adapting according to the situational dynamics), which is linked to outcomes like creativity (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010) and goal attainment (Seaton & Beaumont, 2015). Likewise, Vallerand et al. (2003) differentiate passion that is harmonious (accommodating to other aspects of life) versus obsessive (all-consuming). A meta-analysis by Curran et al. (2015) linked the former to positive outcomes (e.g., PA, flow, and performance), and the latter to negative ones (e.g., NA, rumination). Consider, for instance, exercise, which we'll explore in the next section (on behavioural B/H). While insufficient exercise can be harmful, so too can be *excessive* exercise (Blond et al., 2019), from physical issues like injury (McKenzie, 1999), to psychosocial outcomes associated with addiction (Johnston et al., 2011). Thus, one would ideally find a middle way between too little and too much passion, both synchronically (in a session) and diachronically (over time). Another example is categorical balance between different behaviours. A person may enjoy both exercise and gastronomy, say, and research into harmonious passion suggests their overall wellbeing – not merely physical, but also psychosocial – would be served by diachronically balancing these seemingly competing desires (Curran et al., 2015).

Attentional balance is also crucial to wellbeing, particularly from a Buddhist perspective. A *quale* (e.g., sensation) may be unpleasant to varying degrees; however, its *effect* is powerfully influenced by one's attention (e.g., whether one fixates on it or focuses awareness elsewhere). Crucially, in Buddhism – and in the psychological literature (Rueda et al., 2005) – attention is not a passive capacity, but an active one capable of self-regulation. Moreover, it can be trained, which is a central purpose of meditation. In this sense, Wallace and Shapiro argue for balance between attentional deficit (inability to focus) and hyperactivity (the mind being excessively aroused or distracted). This may be cultivated through practices like mindfulness, which can be defined as sustained, voluntary attention on a familiar object, without forgetfulness [i.e., deficit] or distraction [i.e., hyperactivity] (Asanga, 2001). Note that such ideas around attentional deficits and hyperactivity do not align with their use in clinical contexts as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In relation to the latter, for instance, 'dual-processing theory' (Sonuga-Barke, 2002) explains ADHD in terms of dysfunction in either of two neuropsychological processes (behavioural inhibition or reward dysfunction). Here too though issues of balance may yet come into play. Rutledge et al. (2012) draw parallels between dual-processing theory and the dual

systems theory of self-control, where McClure et al. (2004) showed that self-control involves two brain systems (reward, and cognitive control). Rutledge et al. further suggest that ADHD may be addressed by training cognitive deficits via a 'process-specific approach' – such as programs to improve attention or working memory – which has some parallels with the kind of attention training encouraged by Wallace and Shapiro.

Finally, Wallace and Shapiro's notion of cognitive balance refers to mental engagement with reality (again invoking deficit and hyperactivity). Cognitive deficit means a relative lack of engagement (being absent-minded or inattentive), whereas hyperactivity means being overly engaged (caught up in one's assumptions; imposing biases and projections upon reality). In Buddhism, the ideal is again mindfulness – noticing clearly but non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Other examples of cognitive balance include striking an optimal line between Type I vs. Type II errors (false positive vs. negative conclusions) (Tversky & Marsh, 2000). When meeting strangers, for instance, one must be wary of both naivety and suspicion (Type I and II errors of assuming trustworthiness and untrustworthiness respectively). Another example might be balancing cognitive 'styles,' such as analytic and holistic modes of cognition (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Finally, this form of balance also relates to flow, a rewarding state of absorption which depends on parity between task demands and capacity to manage them (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). If demands outweigh capacities, this generates stress and anxiety, whereas the reverse can produce boredom and apathy (see Fong et al. (2015) for a meta-analysis of flow state dynamics).

## 5. Behavioural balance and harmony

The third area in which B/H are prevalent might be termed behavioural, an expansive – indeed vast – overarching category encompassing all the ways people act and operate in the world. This covers a great swathe of phenomena, from character and lifestyle to 'body maintenance activities' and physiology.

The topic of character has made a recent resurgence, particularly with the notion of 'character strengths' (Peterson et al., 2007). A prominent approach is the Values in Action taxonomy, which classifies people according to their interests and capabilities, and encourages developing these as pathways to wellbeing (Niemiec, 2017). The concept of character has a long pedigree of course, traceable to the likes of Aristotle. Most relevant here is his aforementioned golden mean, where virtue treads the middle line between opposing vices of excess and deficiency. This is not simply moderation, nor splitting the difference between opposites (e.g., being moderately truthful). Rather, actions should be carefully calibrated based on context, and may fall anywhere upon a spectrum as appropriate (per the *lagom* principle). In that respect, Rashid (2015) and Niemiec (2017) have pioneered an approach to understanding mental illness – and distress generally – based on under- or over-use of strengths. From that perspective, strengths (such as perseverance) are not positive in themselves, but only insofar as one finds middle ground between under-use (e.g., laziness) and over-use (e.g., stubbornness) (Gruman et al., 2018). Such notions have been applied promisingly in relation to conditions including social anxiety (Freidlin et al., 2017) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2019). Then, in considering such balancing acts across myriad strengths, we might speak of characteristics being in harmony. In that respect, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) have argued that eudaimonia requires the skilful harnessing of many interdependent virtues, guided by 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*).

A second behavioural area – in itself exceedingly broad – might be termed lifestyle. Here Matuska and Christiansen (2008, p.9) articulate the notion of a balanced lifestyle as "a satisfying pattern of daily occupation that is healthful, meaningful, and sustainable to an individual within the context of his or her current life circumstances." In this arena, the most widely studied

interaction is work-life balance (i.e., time/energy devoted to work relative to other areas of life). This is a huge literature – the largest of any topic here – whose range is revealed by the many systematic reviews and meta-analyses that themselves summarise only aspects of it. For instance, in a medical occupational context, Dimou et al. (2016) found that poor work-life balance is the most commonly reported factor for burnout (of which 40% of surgeons met the criteria), while Pulcrano et al. (2016) observed that good work-life balance is associated with work satisfaction and quality of life. Such factors matter greatly for wellbeing: a meta-analysis of 485 studies found a robust link ( $r = 0.37$ ) between job satisfaction and health (Faragher et al., 2005). Other analyses have explored factors that hinder work-life balance; these include, at a personal level, negative characteristics such as NA and neuroticism (Allen et al., 2012), and more systemically, a collectivistic culture and higher economic gender gap (Allen et al., 2015). Then, in work itself, other forms of balance have also been well-studied. The effort-reward imbalance model identifies a key source of work-related stress as work demands outweighing its benefits (Siegrist, 2016). Such imbalance affects wellbeing, including increased risk of depressive disorder (Rugulies et al., 2017). Thus, ideally, efforts and rewards would be balanced, or even tilted towards the latter (more reward for less effort). That said, research on flow suggests it should not be tilted *too* far, as engagement is impeded if work is insufficiently challenging (Llorens et al., 2013).

The notion of lifestyle balance overlaps with literature on what one might call ‘body maintenance activities’ (keeping the body healthy and functioning well), or alternatively ‘energy balance-related behaviours’ (Kremers, 2010), encompassing processes like rest, activity, and diet. To begin with, optimal sleep involves balancing insufficient and excessive sleep, both of which can harm wellbeing (e.g., see Yang et al.’s (2015) meta-analysis of their impact on coronary heart disease). Relatedly, balance is needed between rest and activity, particularly finding the middle line between under- and over-exertion, as mentioned in the previous section vis-à-vis exercise. B/H is also important regarding *types* of activity. For instance, guidelines from the National Institutes of Health recommend a good mix of endurance, strength, flexibility, and balance activities (National Institute on Aging, 2018). Such multi-modal training can be very beneficial (see e.g., Lam et al.’s (2018) systematic review of clinical trials involving its health impact for people with cognitive impairment and dementia). Another focus in this area is diet. With any individual element, rarely can it be categorically deemed helpful or harmful; after all, even ‘water intoxication’ can be dangerous (Radojevic et al., 2012). Rather, it depends upon the *lagom* principle of the *right* amount. Then, an overall balanced diet is important (or ‘harmonious,’ per our usage here, as it involves multiple elements). There are perennial disagreements about what this involves (Laudan, 2000). Nevertheless, research is emerging on the value of intake patterns like the ‘Mediterranean’ diet (e.g., vegetables, fruits, legumes, cereals, and fish) (see Sofi et al.’s (2008) meta-analysis showing its impact on health).

Finally, B/H also pertains to physiological dynamics. These overlap with body maintenance activities, except are more (but not totally) outside voluntary control. These include homeostatic processes like temperature, which is ideally self-regulated by the hypothalamus to stay within a healthy range (around 37°C) (Osilla & Sharma, 2019). People also assist this self-regulation via behaviours – e.g., adjusting clothes and the environment – that may be understood as forms of embodied cognition (Lee et al., 2014). Even with illness, although generally always counter to wellbeing, its mechanics can often be considered in terms of B/H. For instance, with many bodily processes – such as the immune or cardiovascular system – it is important that these are neither under- (hypo-...) nor over-active (hyper-...), but calibrated to an optimal level (Al-Jameil et al., 2015). Here again, humans may have a role in maintaining this balance, e.g., self-administering

insulin in diabetes to avoid hypo-/hyperglycaemia (Sircar et al., 2016). Thus, even with health and illness, B/H are at their core.

## 6. Self-other balance and harmony

The fourth category goes beyond the individual to include their wider environmental contexts. This encompasses numerous relationship forms: of the person to other people; in society more broadly; and between people and their ecological context. First, it is worth contextualising this section by elucidating a key point about human existence. Bakan (1966) argued that humans have *two* fundamental modes of being: agency (as autonomous self-contained entities), and communion (as also inextricably part of networks of other people and processes). Cultures differently emphasise these modes: following distinctions articulated by Hofstede (1980) and Triandis (1988), decades of research suggests the West tilts towards the former (individualism), and the East towards the latter (collectivism) (see Taras et al. (2012) for a meta-analysis). That said, critics such as Hwang (2020) have critiqued this kind of dualistic binary, as noted above. In any case, caveats aside, it seems neither mode can be totally negated without severe harm: erosion of communion can lead to individual isolation and societal disrepair (Bellah et al., 1996), whereas denial of agency can degenerate into totalitarian dehumanisation (Danoff, 2000). So, people and cultures must balance agentic *and* communal existence (e.g., meeting the needs of individuals and the group).

Navigating such dynamics applies to social relationships of all kinds, from dyads such as marriage (Rothbaum et al., 2000), to larger groupings like friendship networks (Levpušček, 2006), to society more broadly (Ip, 2014). With marriage, for instance, most scholars and therapists agree successful partnerships involve a dynamic balancing act of give-and-take (Pillemer, Hatfield, & Sprecher, 2008). At some points and vis-à-vis certain goals, couples may be in synchrony. But in other instances, these may be in tension, meaning one person must give way. But diachronically, balance can be maintained if the other acquiesces at another time (and people may realize that doing so, while ostensibly a sacrifice, ultimately serves their wellbeing by facilitating a stronger partnership, involving future reciprocation). For instance, reviewing bonds among older adults, Fyrand (2010) suggests reciprocity is a key predictor of mental health and relationship strength. Conversely, its lack, or worse, 'negative reciprocity' – tit-for-tat destructive acts – is linked to poor relationship outcomes (e.g., marital distress) (Salazar, 2015). The importance of reciprocity partly involves people wanting fair treatment, as elucidated by game theory (Debove et al., 2016). However, people also tend to value treating *other people* fairly and not 'over-benefiting' from the relationship at their expense (McPherson et al., 2010). That said, such dynamics are not universal, with psychopathy for example – which may be a trait continuum – characterised by lack of reciprocity (Gervais et al., 2013).

Considering the myriad balancing acts that constitute a successful partnership, it makes sense – aligning with the terminology of this paper – that there is an ideal of a 'harmonious' marriage' (Tsouvala, 2014). The metaphor of harmony is then even more applicable when additional people are brought into play – from expanding the dyad into a family (Guanchen & Shijie, 2013), to society as a whole (Ip, 2014). In these cases, harmony might best be seen as attaining that crucial balance between agency and communion across numerous people (at varying levels of scale). There are of course debates within societies about where that balance lies (or ought to). As noted, Western cultures generally tilt towards individualism, and Eastern cultures towards collectivism (although the picture is complex, with the modernization theory of cultural change, for instance, indicating some universal movement in the direction of individualism; Hamamura, 2012). In both cases, one justification given by their proponents is that their particular emphasis is more

conducive to social harmony (Chan, 2010). This goal may be more commonly explicitly invoked in Eastern rather than Western societies, given the former's emphasis on collectivism (Uchida et al., 2004). But even if 'harmony' is less often used in Western contexts, nevertheless the ideal frequently expressed may be construed as a form of harmony, where people co-exist and interact productively (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016).

Finally, we can expand our frame still further and put society in the context of the ecosystem. Here concern moves beyond society being in harmony with itself, to the necessity of it being in harmony with the natural world upon which it depends materially and existentially (Kjell, 2011). In this respect, cultures differ in the extent to which such harmony is valorised, or even seen as relevant at all (Lomas, 2019b). Less industrialised cultures – particularly indigenous ones – are generally seen as having more successfully developed and/or maintained philosophies of such harmony, which means balancing humans' needs with those of the natural world (Izquierdo, 2005). By contrast, more industrialised countries – particularly in the West – are dominated by disconnected, predatory, instrumentalist modes of relationship which view nature more as a resource to be exploited (Emel, 1990). Notions of harmony with nature have previously tended to be niche concerns in such societies. But growing recognition of the climate crisis has brought environmentalism to the fore worldwide (Pihkala, 2018), including realising that aspirations for progress must be balanced against the earth's capacity to sustain it (Schumacher, 2011).

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has proposed that B/H are not merely relevant to wellbeing, but may be a definition feature – a 'golden thread' running through all its dimensions. This case was made by exploring the great wealth of references to B/H scattered throughout psychological (and related) literature. However, despite this extensive work, the concepts have hitherto been underappreciated in the field as a whole. The research and theorizing above has been fragmented and disconnected, with few attempts to weave it together, and to place B/H at the heart of wellbeing. This lacuna may be due to concepts of B/H having been less influential in the West – relative to Eastern cultures (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) – and relatedly to the Western-centricity of psychology (Danziger, 2002). Yet research by the likes of Delle Fave et al. (2011, 2016) suggest B/H may be far more widely valued than is often realized.

The paper began by differentiating forms of balance according to their basic nature (spectral vs. categorical) and temporal dynamics (synchronic vs. diachronic). It then suggested that if balance denotes the relationship quality between two dialectically related phenomena, harmony is the relationship quality between multiple 'balancing acts.' After an open-ended and expansive search of the literature, guided by the aims and processes of Grounded Theory, relevant works were assembled imperfectly into four overarching categories: affect; cognition; behaviour; and self-other relations. 'Imperfect' because some ideas either, (a) pertained to multiple categories (but were placed in one for the sake of the presentation here), or (b) did not align with any of the categories (as elucidated below). Affective B/H included: emotional equanimity and equilibrium (mainly synchronous); emotional diversity, complexity, and granularity (mainly diachronic); the pleasure-pain calculus; and the existential notion of 'mature happiness.' Cognitive B/H included: conative; attentional; and cognitive forms. Behavioural B/H included: character; lifestyle; body maintenance activities; and physiology. Finally, self-other B/H included: relations of the person to others; within society more broadly; and between people and their ecological context.

Throughout the categories, B/H were seen as not merely integral to wellbeing, but arguably its *sine qua non*. Take almost anything relevant to wellbeing – with the sole but important

exception of illness – and one usually cannot say categorically whether its presence or absence is conducive to wellbeing, except in terms of B/H. Indeed, even with illness – in some sense the opposite of wellbeing (or wellness) – principles of B/H still apply. That is not to say all forms of B/H are the same; in fact, these are complex concepts, with considerable variation in their nature, dynamics, and expression. Nevertheless, these do appear to be fundamental principles that run as a golden thread through all aspects of wellbeing. This includes functioning as: (a) analytical principles (i.e., a means to understand and evaluate phenomena); (b) motivational principles (i.e., guides to choices and actions); and (c) axiological principles (i.e., valued life outcomes in themselves). In these respects, an overarching definition of wellbeing is offered here: the dynamic attainment of optimal balance and harmony in any – and ideally all – aspects of life.

The centrality of B/H to wellbeing has already been elucidated by the likes of Kjell (2011), Wong (2012), Delle Fave et al. (2011, 2016), and (Gruman et al., 2018). Moreover, they have shown that B/H may be more widely appreciated than is frequently realised. Indeed, emerging work is beginning to give B/H their due prominence. For instance, I am part of a new Global Wellbeing Initiative, a partnership between Gallup and Wellbeing for Planet Earth (a Japan-based research foundation). This is focused on developing new items for the Gallup World Poll that reflect more non-Western perspectives on wellbeing (to augment current wellbeing-related items, which can be deemed as Western-centric, such as life satisfaction and high arousal positive affect) (Lambert et al., 2020). These include an item relating to B/H – “In general, how often do you feel the various aspects of your life are in balance” – which has so far been included in the 2020 and 2021 waves of the poll. It will be instructive to assess how such items complement existing ones in creating a more comprehensive framework of wellbeing, and to explore regional variation in responses.

As such, this paper adds to a burgeoning discourse around the importance of B/H, even the review here is non-exhaustive and incomplete. On that latter point, the analysis can of course be improved through subsequent work. For instance, some forms of B/H identified in the literature did not fit neatly into the categories, like individuals balancing qualities deemed stereotypically masculine and feminine (Lomas, 2013), or society balancing left- and right-wing political agendas (Lomas, 2017a). These merit further research, as does the question of whether there are aspects of life where B/H are *not* relevant, or times when these are not sought by people. In any case, this paper provides a foundation for asking these vital questions, allowing us to better understand these dynamics at the heart of wellbeing.

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