

Uniqueness

What is uniqueness? Is it important for a good life? Should we strive to be different?

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The Unique Issue

perspectives

Science

We all share the same basic framework for our genetic code: DNA, chromosomes, and so on. But when you look at the individual, variation is observed. In fact, it's extremely important to human survival that there be genetic diversity: "genetic diversity has great value for species survival ... [it] is also indispensable for the development of a rich and interesting culture." (Davis 285).

Christian

Christianity is a religion of relation. In the Lord's prayer, Christians begin "our father" not "my father," recognizing they are a part of a larger community (Moss 58). In Christian teaching, the individual's purpose is to make up the whole. Where one is weak another is strong. The path to transcendence in the Christian experience is through relations (60).

Buddhist

Buddhism focuses on attaining individual self-enlightenment to eventually reach Nirvana. Buddhists are supposed to live an unattached life, detaching themselves from worldly goods, but not necessarily subscribing to self-denial. Non-attachment in Buddhists' eyes is to free themselves from self-attachment and thinking about the self (Ricard).

West

It is generally well known that western thought values the individual and self over the community, and the reverse for eastern thought. In western societies, people tend to "value personal success over group achievement, which in turn is also associated with the need for greater self-esteem and the pursuit of personal happiness" (Robson).

East

In Eastern societies, where collectivism is valued, people tend to focus more on relationships and context of the situations they are in (Robson). In the East, the individual values the community or collective, habits learned by the dominant philosophies based on geography. For example, Taoism and Confucius emphasize the power of unity and relationships (Robson).

The Purpose

Purpose. A question that humans and specifically my "Design Your Life" class seem to ask all the time, but can never find an answer to. And, maybe you're reading this expecting me to parse out some aspect of purpose in our lives as human beings on this Earth. Unfortunately, that's not what I'm doing, but I can outline the purpose of this newspaper and podcast.

I've always felt like I should be different and stand out in a crowd, sometimes that's what I most love: being different. Other times, no part of me wants to be quirky or different from what everyone else is doing, I want to fit in. Since coming to college and specifically since COVID-19, I've had to become ok with being one of many and not always being the center of attention. Maybe this is just a me problem, but I'm sure others can relate to feeling as if they've lost, or never had, a sense of being special in the world. This paper is looking at the uniqueness of humans. Trying to define what exactly is uniqueness and if it's beneficial for humans to be different or if it's more beneficial to be part of the group.

This is kind of a big topic, so I've tried to break it up. We'll look through a couple different lenses and invite different perspectives to a table discussion. For a more personal take, my podcast about this topic will be linked at the end of the paper.



Image Description: Pinpointed picture of the author, Emily Schmitt, question marks surrounding the Earth.

I photoshopped this image, and though I don't claim to be anywhere close to fully proficient in Photoshop, I think images can convey a lot of what I may not be able to as clearly express in words. This is a lot of what inspired me to choose this topic. I felt so small/feel so small. Coming to college, I felt alone and with my bubble expanding, I questioned why I would matter in such a big world.

With others around me who seemed so accomplished, was there anything about me that was significant anymore? Is it important for me to try to be different than those around me or should I conform to the group? Why should any of us be different if there are so many of us here - wouldn't we all get along better if we were all the same? Is uniqueness the goal or the enemy of community and fostering a true human experience?

Psychology

Narrowing down the wide subject that is psychology, I want to hone in on one study. The University of Bramberg produced a study on human uniqueness and its relation to satisfaction: "Feeling special, feeling happy: Authenticity mediates the relationship between sense of uniqueness and happiness." Noting early humanist thinkers that assert that human uniqueness is an essential part of being human, they hypothesized that "a personal sense of uniqueness would be positively related to authentic living and negatively related to self-alienation" (1591). But, a few definitions before we get too far in.

A personal sense of uniqueness: "a kind of unconditional self-regard with feelings of being special and unique simply from being the person one is" (1590). *Authentic living:* "congruence between one's emotional expressions, behaviors, and conscious awareness of physiological states, emotions, beliefs, and cognitions" (1590). *Self-Alienation:* "notes a gap between conscious awareness and actual experience," or "feeling out of touch with [your] core self" (1590).

Skipping a lot of scientific procedures and methodology, at the end of their study, their hypotheses were confirmed. Authenticity and uniqueness are fundamental components of healthy living, with people who have a strong

sense of personal uniqueness possessing "more freedom in their choices because they tend to act in accordance with their own emotions, beliefs, and cognitions" (1595). A sense of uniqueness was also negatively correlated with self-alienation, meaning when people were more dependent on themselves and their own actions, rather than depending on external forces, they had more freedom of choice and opportunities to appreciate their true self. The study even defines this personal sense of uniqueness as "feeling special without conforming and without opposing but simply by following one's own path" (1596).

So, in this study's point of view, uniqueness allows individuals to connect with their most authentic sense of self and become less dependent on external factors, allowing them more freedom in life. This, in turn, leads to a greater level of human happiness and less self-alienation. Of course limitations like small sample size and self-reporting must be taken into account, but do not fully discount the findings of this study.

According to this study's results, being authentic is directly connected to an individual's sense of uniqueness which positively correlates to human satisfaction. In this line of thinking, individual uniqueness could not be more essential to personal happiness and contentment.

East vs. West

Drawing a very wide and assumptive circle, the East is known to possess a more collectivist outlook, one that values the group over individual. The West is known for the opposite: having an individualistic outlook that values the individual over the group. Obviously these states of mind create very different places to live, but does that impact people's attitudes towards uniqueness?

Commonly associated with the Western world, individualism is a product of the Enlightenment, which emphasized the power of humans and individuals. Perhaps the most significant reason individualism has overtaken modern Western thought is the rise of capitalism. Known as "the Father of Economics" or "the Father of Capitalism," Adam Smith argued that self-interest and competition would lead to economic prosperity in his book, *The Wealth of Nations*. In this sense, it would seem that individual differences and quirks would, and should, be valued in this type of society; where an individual thrives on their own, being oneself is most important. Yet, David Robson points out that it is a tendency of individualist societies to "blame personal attributes," for a person's failures (Robson). So while individuality is basically enforced in the West, or else

you'll sink in the dog eat dog society, it sets up a pretty fatal system of self blame and personal accusation, which more often than not will lead to bad mental health surrounding mistakes and short comings, with no support system in sight.

On the other side of the world, we've got the Eastern collectivist mindset. Scholars like Jeremy Bentham, take what can be perceived as a more collectivist and philosophical outlook saying "that social policy should promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people" (Nederman). Religions like Taoism and Confucianism play huge roles in establishing unity and community in the East, by placing emphasis on familial relationships.

While the individual might not take precedence over the group, individuality is by no means stifled in Eastern countries. Maybe in communist countries or Maoist China you could find a stifling of the individual, but the collectivist outlook allows for a healthy support system for an individual. People make better choices because not only will it impact them, but they know it will impact those around them, including their family and loved ones. Uniqueness and individuality benefits not just the one, but the whole group.

The Scientific Outlook

The scientific outlook on human individuality is a tricky subject. Throughout history, science has been used to justify ill-intentioned practices based on genetic sciences, just look at eugenics or the Nazi party claiming superiority based on their genes. Needless to say, science doesn't really know where it stands in the terms of human differences and uniqueness. Let's take a look.

We are all made up of the same basic elements: carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, etc... We all share the same basic framework for our genetic code: DNA, RNA, chromosomes, genes, and so on. We all share a basic framework, but when you look at the individuals, variation is observed. We all have specific genes, inherited only by us from our parents. All of our DNA sequences have the slightest variations, making us all a little bit different.

Since the early 2000s, when the Human Genome Project, an international, collaborative initiative to map and understand the complete human genome, was wrapping up, our understanding of genetic diversity has changed. Researchers "now know that human genomes differ from one another by about 0.6 percent—as much as six times greater than estimates broadly agreed upon during the early 2000s," Bob Grant explains in his article "Does Our DNA Make Us All Unique or All the Same?"

In fact, it's extremely important to human survival that there be genetic diversity: "genetic diversity has great value for species survival ...

[it] is also indispensable for the development of a rich and interesting culture" (Davis 285). Genetic diversity goes back to Darwin's theory of evolution, aka survival of the fittest. We have been evolving throughout time and slowly improving our genes, so when one person has a gene that makes survival easier or reproduction more profitable, that gene is more likely to be passed down to the next generation. So, in a way, science's perspective on uniqueness and individuality in humans is pro-individuality. Genetic diversity is important and necessary for human survival.

However, there is such a thing as 'too unique' in the biology world. If cells go off the rails or if genes don't perform as intended, this leads to cellular malfunction and disease. When cells reproduce too quickly or cannot be impeded by other elements in the body, the body doesn't know what to do. Scientists believe this is the cause of cancer, but are still unsure up to this point. So, if cells don't do what they are prescribed to do and completely malfunction, they are too unique and too much of an individual.

So, it's kind of a toss up with science. You can be unique up until a certain point. You need to be unique up until a certain point. It benefits you and your offspring to be unique. But too much difference and uniqueness and you risk genetic malfunction and unfavorable evolutionary odds.

Religious Perspective

Christianity

Let's begin, like so many have before, with Christianity.

Christianity is a religion of relation. Creating a Christian brotherhood and "loving your neighbor as yourself," is expressed throughout the Bible and in Christian teachings today. Relational value is important in the foundation of Christianity as "it is a relationship with the son, Christ, that one approaches the Father" (Moss 57). In the Lord's prayer, Christians begin "our father" not "my father," recognizing they are a part of a larger community (58).

Another passage from the Bible emphasizes the idea of Christian unity: "Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each has a separate function, so all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to each other" (Romans 12:4).

So, in Christian teaching, the individual's purpose is to make up the whole. Where one is weak another is strong. The path to transcendence in the Christian experience is through relations (60).

Buddhism

Next up, Buddhism. Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, focuses on attaining self-enlightenment to eventually reach Nirvana. Buddhists believe in re-incarnation, meaning that one's life does not end with death, and the chances of

attaining Nirvana are plentiful. Buddhists also believe in Karma, representing a belief that the soul and body are distinct and the soul "can even transcend corporeal death" (Nederman). Thus, Karma implies an individual responsibility for one's actions (Nederman).

Buddhists are supposed to live an unattached life, detaching themselves from worldly goods, but not necessarily subscribing to self-denial. This can make those who do not practice Buddhism perceive the religion as individualistic and indifferent to the sufferings of real life. Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard points out that Buddhism renunciation "is not turning away from what's truly good in life ... rather, it [is] the letting go of the on-going addiction we have to the causes of suffering, such as malice, arrogance, envy, jealousy, and other mental states that harm others and ourselves" (Ricard). In fact, non-attachment in Buddhists' eyes is to free themselves from self-attachment and thinking about the self (Ricard).

Continuing on this line, uniqueness works against what Buddhists strive for. Individualism and being special or different in the Buddhist community, is exactly what they work to erase in their practices.

So, both Christianity and Buddhism work to focus on the group rather than the individual, making two religions who seem to be different on so many fronts, similar in one big sense.

Wrapping It Up

So, you've read (or skimmed) through all the sections. We've gone over a good amount of different perspectives on uniqueness and individualism. Through the eyes of scientists, psychologists, Buddhists, Christians, Western culture, and Eastern culture, most of what I came across valued the individualist nature of humanity and recognized the need for humans to be different from one another.

In my opinion, I think Christianity and Eastern communities would probably disregard individualism the most out of all the perspectives. In the Christian point of view, being one of many or one of God's sheep, is supposed to be comforting. Your role is to be one part of a bigger body. In Eastern culture, the individual is not valued over the community, but rather the collectivist mindset allows the community to come first, valuing many over just the one. In both of these perspectives the individual may not shine, but I don't think either of them really stifle individual creativity. For example in Christianity you still have stand out figures like the Pope, top level priests, and other positions that allow for an individual to relate to God, in fact a big part of Christianity is the individual's relationship with God. And, in the East, it's impossible that the community goals completely outweigh the individual all the time, that would mean communism would be the guiding principle everywhere. Rather, the East is more likely to recognize the collective instead of focusing on the individual all the

time, like the West has a habit of doing.

It's the scientific outlook that most puzzles me. Science, very generally, says you can be special but only until a certain point, cross that line and it becomes dangerous for your health. In my mind, I can't help but relate this to restrictions society puts on uniqueness. It's great to be different, up until a certain point, then you just become weird and a social outcast. Where is that line? Why do we have that line? If most of these perspectives encourage uniqueness, why has our society put bounds on it? Is it when people can't pick up on social cues that their quirks become a little bit over the top? Should we really be discouraging people from expressing their own individualities?

All of this research really led me to one conclusion, which I expand upon in my podcast, but that is that there is a huge difference between toxic individuality and personal individuality. If your differences and ideas don't negatively impact those around you, embracing those differences is going to positively relate to your happiness in life. Conforming to those around you to fit some social norm is what is going to make you miserable, and while being different from others doesn't always make things easy, it makes things interesting. The uniqueness of every individual is what allows us to have relationships, experiences, and moments that make our lives essentially fun and in the end, better.

WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE?

We asked a couple of readers to answer some questions about uniqueness and what makes them unique. Here's what they said:

● Rachel Gronberg

1. *What makes you unique?*

"I'm unique because I crochet and most 19 year olds don't."

2. *Do you think having quirks or differences is a valuable trait in a person?*

"Yeah, I feel like when I was younger I hid behind quirkiness... and now I've grown into the things that make me unique, but it's not the cringey quirky anymore, it's more like everyone has things that make them unique and that's what makes us interesting. So people can own quirks, while also not negatively letting them define you."

● Jane Berick

1. *What makes you unique?*

"I think that I am unique, but I couldn't really give you a specific reason why, but I've never met anyone like myself, which is good."

2. *Do you think having quirks or differences is a valuable trait in a person?*

"I do value uniqueness in other people, because I think genuine uniqueness and interests are what make humans special and without that we would basically just be robots at this point, so having the ability to genuinely like something even if no one else likes it is pretty special, I think."

● Ben Sempowski

1. *What makes you unique?*

"I think my personality makes me unique."

2. *Do you think having quirks or differences is a valuable trait in a person?*

"Yes, I think it's often your unique traits that make you memorable and a better person. It's also those differences that allow you to bring something new to situations. I think being unique is super important and we as a society should lean into our uniqueness more often and encourage people to do so as well."

THE PERSONAL PODCAST

Not enough on uniqueness for you? Check out the Personal Podcast that deals with a more individualized look at uniqueness, by editor and author Emily Schmitt.

★ tinyurl.com/uniquepodcast

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