

# Chapter 1

## What People Really Want in Life and Why It Matters: Contributions from Research on Folk Theories of the Good Life

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At the heart of social progress is the human capacity to notice a discrepancy between how things are and how they might be. Certainly, such progress requires more than simply this realization. It requires the belief that change is possible and right. It requires social cooperation and work by groups for the common good. But these activities would never occur without someone at some point noticing that things could be better: that profoundly difficult lives could be good and good lives could be better. Thus, the human capacity to imagine and envision a better or ideal life is linked to the emergence of social progress. Of course, this human capacity to imagine a future that is different from current circumstances can also be a force for social change in the opposite direction. When accompanied by greed, hatred for difference, or concern for power and dominance, we can see this capacity reflected in various historical and social atrocities and catastrophes.

In a sense, naïve notions of what constitutes the good life represent the ideals toward which individuals might aspire or actively strive. These naïve conceptions of optimal human functioning reveal the content of common human longings and can tell us against what standards current circumstances are judged.

Certainly, not-so-naïve conceptions of what makes a life good have had enormous impact on human intellectual thought, ethics, and the psychology of well-being. Since Aristotle (and certainly even before), philosophers, religious leaders, and humans more generally have puzzled over what it is that qualifies as a good life. Many thinkers have provided strong statements about how life ought to be lived and what aspects of life qualify it as a good one. Psychology, perhaps especially positive psychology, also provides guidelines in this regard, suggesting, for instance, ways to insure optimal happiness, thriving, or resilience or optimal psychological development, maturity, moral reasoning, etc. Knowledge of these prescriptions for the good life tells us about the values of psychologists, but may miss the ideals that lurk inside each person – the good life as defined by everyday people for themselves. The research we review here takes up just this question: What makes a life good for everyday people and what do these conceptions of the good life tell us about the

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values that everyday people wish to see realized in their own lives? Do everyday people think that money buys happiness? Do they privilege happiness over other values such as, the experience of meaning? Do they believe that career success is more important than relationships? In what ways does the naïve notion of the good life converge with psychological research and in what ways does it diverge? Notions of the good life are certainly contextualized in culture. How does culture influence naïve notion of the good life? Before describing the results of a number of studies on these provocative questions, we briefly discuss the value of studying folk theories of the good life.

## Why Study Folk Theories of the Good Life?

*The prudential argument.* There are at least three reasons to study folk theories of the good life. The first is prudential. As the title of this volume suggests, one of the goals of positive psychology is to improve lives. However, before we can begin to understand how people strive to achieve the good life or the resources that they draw upon in their pursuit of the good life, it is important to understand how people answer the question of “What makes a life good?” As positive psychology articulates its view of the good life, lay persons may well have a different, and possibly opposing, vision of the world (Kasser, 2004).

*Folk theories and scientific theories complement each other.* Fletcher (1995) has argued that scientific theories that take into account folk theories have the potential to produce insights beyond common sense. Moreover, the divergence of folk and scientific theories is more than an aha! opportunity to show that lay thinking is fallible. In fact, the divergence between folk and scientific theories is often where the action is. For example, part of the excitement about the early scientific finding that money and happiness are only weakly correlated was that, at the time, there was widespread belief that this finding ran counter to people’s intuitions. For example, Myers and Diener (1995) included the belief that wealthy people are happier as one of the myths of happiness (see also Myers, 2000). Our research was the first to show how folk theories of the good life were actually far closer to scientific theories than researchers realized, although newer research has begun to show money does matter more than we (both scientists and laypersons) think.

On a more practical level, an understanding of the convergence and divergence among folk and scientific theories may further the aims of subjective well-being research by highlighting what everyday people already know or don’t know. Even if a folk theory happens to be factually incorrect, it can serve as a good starting point for helping people to understand the scientific theory. Examining folk theories explicitly allows us to identify how and when psychologists have gotten human beings wrong. That is, folk theories are an excellent place to uncover the subtle misanthropic bias that sometimes creeps into psychological research (itself a central goal of positive psychology, Sheldon & King, 2001).

*Folk theories as opportunity.* If folk theories are “instruments of culture” as Bruner (1990) noted, then they seem particularly suited for examining the good life,

both within and across cultures. After all, folk theories of the good life are probably more strongly shaped by culture than, say, folk theories about electricity and illness (although there are a wide range of beliefs on these topics as well). Rather than treat folk theories as error-ridden sources of information, we view them as a rich source of meaning – an intersection of individual values, local meaning systems, and shared cultural beliefs (Fletcher, 1995). As such, folk theories exert an enormous amount of influence on behavior and judgment (Bruner, 1990; Fletcher, 1995; Harkness & Super, 1996). For example, differences in the beliefs about the malleability of personality influence attributions for behavior, desire for revenge, views toward punishment (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Chui, Hong, & Dweck, 1997).

In terms of SWB research, a culture that defines the good life in terms of wealth has different priorities and therefore behaviors and judgments than a culture that defines the good life in terms of happiness. Thus, understanding how different cultures define the good life might lead us to clues as to why some societies are more conducive to happiness than others. Clearly, different societies have different values, so why shouldn't there be cultural differences in folk theories of the good life? At the same time, there may be some good which is so desirable that people around the world agree on the virtue of that good. Happiness may be one of these.

## Our Research Paradigm

In all of our studies of the good life, we asked participants to judge the desirability and moral goodness of another person's life based on circumscribed attributes which we manipulated. Specifically, participants viewed a "Career Survey" ostensibly completed by another individual rating aspects of his or her job. In King and Napa (1998), the target survey was manipulated to reflect a life of high or low happiness, high or low wealth, and high or low meaning. All other target information was held constant across experimental conditions. In subsequent studies, we altered the various attributes included in the target survey, but the basic design of the study remained the same. After viewing the survey, participants made judgments about the target's life.

*Independent variables.* At this point some consideration of our independent variables is warranted. As noted above, in our research, we have generally manipulated three key variables, happiness, meaning, and money. These characteristics were chosen because they reflected the interests of psychologists and assumptions that psychologists had made about people. Clearly, a great deal of research within positive psychology has focused on happiness and ways to make people happier. From a psychological perspective, it is difficult to argue against the importance of happiness. Who doesn't want to be happy? Yet, the empirical question remained to be addressed: Do everyday people view happiness as an important aspect of the good life?

Furthermore, crossing happiness with differing levels of the experience of meaning in life allowed us to examine what was then (and continues to be) a

burgeoning debate in the well-being literature, the contrast between hedonic and eudaimonic conceptions of well-being (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Hedonic well-being is essentially how an individual feels about his or her life; in a very general way this construct maps on to personal happiness. Following Aristotle's contrast between hedonistic happiness and eudaimonic happiness (for Aristotle, happiness that emerges out of living in accord with one's daimon), some psychologists had asserted that well-being ought to be understood not simply as hedonic feelings, but as the positive affect that emerges out of living in accord with one's authentic self (Waterman, 2008), actualizing one's potential (Ryff & Singer, 2008) or from the pursuit of organismic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2001). From the eudaimonic perspective, a life devoted to hedonic happiness runs the danger of a pleasant but meaningless existence. Would everyday people prefer a life of hedonic enjoyment, even if it were devoid of meaning?

Finally, we included income as an independent variable in the design. If there was a lesson in research on SWB prior to 1998 it was that money does not buy happiness. Research had shown that those who value extrinsic goods such as monetary success over more intrinsic values such as relatedness, autonomy, and competence were more likely to suffer both psychologically and physically (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Other researchers noted with some surprise the lack of strong relationship between income and happiness. Such results were often described as having important relevance for everyday people who might think that money buys happiness. Thus, it was of interest to explore the question "Do everyday people think money does buy happiness?" In sum, then, in response to the issues that were relatively hot at the time, we manipulated levels of these three variables in the lives of the targets to be judged. Rather impersonal target lives were then evaluated by participants in terms of their "goodness." We defined goodness in two ways, the desirability of a life and its moral character. These dependent measures themselves now warrant some discussion.

*Dependent measures.* Faced with a very limited amount of information about a target life (see King & Napa, 1998 for a sample target form), participants were asked to rate the life on a variety of evaluative dimensions. First, they rated how "good" they thought the life was, how desirable it was, and how much they would like to live the life in question. Second, they rated the moral goodness of the life in two ways, by rating it on the descriptor "moral" and by rating the likelihood that the target *was to go to heaven*. This last evaluation provided a rather revealing glimpse of naïve notions of moral goodness. Individuals might balk at judging a life that was presented in so limited a way. They might feel especially uncomfortable casting moral judgments on an anonymous target. Yet, this question of whether the target was likely to go to heaven allowed us to sidestep some of these qualms, allowing participants to, in effect, note that although the participant might not find the life particularly objectionable, God wouldn't like it. Interestingly, the vast majority of participants answered this question. Across all of our studies and thousands of participants, only about 3% of respondents returned the survey without answering this question. The mean on the ratings, which ranged from 1 (likely to go to

hell) to 10 (likely to go to heaven), typically hovered around 6.50. In a sense, just as the Protestant work ethic considers earthly success as a mysterious sign of God's good graces, this rating allowed participants to render their own similarly mysterious evaluation.

*Putting the folk into folk theories: The participants.* Before sharing the results of these investigations, it makes sense to give a bit of information about the participants who have taken part in these studies. The goal of studying folk concepts of the good life is to uncover the ways that everyday people think of the optimal human life. Thus, one might wonder who the everyday people were who participated in these studies. First, of course, some of the participants were college students. Although the use of students in psychological research is often criticized, it is worth noting that, contrary to popular belief, college students are, in fact, people. Second, we recruited participants from a wide variety of venues – in the waiting rooms of jury duty selections in Dallas County, TX (King & Napa, 1998; Twenge & King, 2005), in the waiting areas of major US airports (Scollon & King, 2004), and around downtown areas, near public transportation stations, and around local neighborhoods (Scollon & Wirtz, 2010). Participation in these studies takes approximately 5 min, which provided participants time to look over the target life and judge it accordingly.

## **What We Know: A Review of Research on Folk Theories of the Good Life**

*What makes a life good?* In 1998, we noted that researchers often assumed, without empirical knowledge, that people think money is an important component of the good life. We set out to investigate how people weigh the characteristics of happiness, meaningfulness, and wealth in determining the overall value of a life. Using our Career Survey paradigm, we found that Americans overwhelmingly defined the good life in terms of happiness and meaning. Not only was happiness considered desirable, but happy people were judged as more likely to go to heaven in our studies. Further, the very best, most desirable, and morally good life was a life of happiness and meaning. Wealth, on the other hand, was relatively unimportant to people's notions of the good life.

Some intriguing generational differences also emerged in that older community adults gave more weight to wealth than college students, reflecting a less naïve and romantic world view. An interesting interaction also emerged among our independent variables of happiness, meaning, and wealth in judging the moral goodness, but not desirability, of a life. Respondents considered the happy, meaningful, and rich life, someone who “had it all,” as most likely bound for heaven. Meanwhile, the poor, unhappy, person whose life had little meaning was judged harshly. The results were consistent with a Protestant view of morality. According to Weber's (1930/1976) analysis of the Protestant work ethic, a happy life with earthly economic success was a sign that the person was looked upon favorably by God. Such findings highlight how shared cultural beliefs and local meanings converge in folk theories, and that these can be captured using our paradigm.

More generally, King and Napa (1998) showed some convergence among folk concepts of the good life and the scientific research on subjective well-being. Early SWB research found the correlation between income and happiness to be modest (typically about 0.17–0.21 according to Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006 meta-analysis). In addition, the very rich are somewhat happier than middle-class folks, but not hugely (Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985). Thus, it seemed that people, Americans at least, were not prioritizing wealth over happiness and meaning, as some early SWB researchers had feared. Furthermore, everyday folk were not hedonists who eschewed meaning for pleasure. Rather, for the everyday person in our study meaning and happiness were each robust predictors of lives being judged as good.

Since then, the research on wealth and happiness has taken an interesting twist. Whereas early researchers interpreted correlations of 0.20 between income and well-being as small and inconsequential, more recently, the pendulum has swung back somewhat. For example, in 1995 Myers and Diener included in their “myths about happiness” the belief that money could buy happiness. By 2008 Lucas, Dyrenforth, and Diener’s myths of happiness included “small correlations between income and happiness [mean] that the rich are barely happier than the poor” (p. 2004). Researchers now recognize that the relation between wealth and well-being is, in fact, always positive and robust. Lucas and Schimmack (2009) have argued that the correlational methods for studying wealth and happiness underestimate the real effects of wealth. When comparing the difference in happiness among rich and poor groups, the effect size becomes quite large. Even if the absolute size of the effect is not disputed, Lucas and Dyrenforth (2005) noted that effects of similar size for marriage on happiness have been touted as important and large. Ironically, despite a newer take on income and happiness, researchers still rely on old assumptions about lay theories of the good life. Lucas and Schimmack (2009), for instance, concluded that “No psychologist or economist has proposed a value for the correlation between income and happiness that he or she believes would match people’s intuition. . . it is possible that it is not the layperson’s intuition that is flawed, but psychologists’ and economists’ interpretation of this effect” (p. 75). In our view, the typical correlations between income and wealth are just about on the mark for people’s intuition. In this case, scientists have gotten people’s intuitions wrong.

*Is the good life the easy life?* As a follow-up to our first set of studies, we examined the role of effort in relation to happiness, meaning, and wealth in folk theories of the good life (Scollon & King, 2004). After all, a number of scientific theories about optimal functioning include effort or hard work as a component (e.g., flow, striving). In these studies, the target life was manipulated to be high or low on happiness, meaning, and money, but also, in this case, hard work. Overall, once again, our respondents defined the good life primarily in terms of happiness and meaning and less so in terms of wealth. With regard to effort, however, many Americans tended to equate the good life with the easy life. Effort that leads to fulfillment was valued, but only if it did not compromise leisure time and was not energy depleting. Thus, in this series of studies, the folk concepts diverged from scientific theories such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), eudaimonia (Waterman, 2008), and competence and

mastery (White, 1959). In other words, lay persons and scientists alike may converge on the components of a life well-lived, but they diverge in their views of *how* to reach the good life. Lay persons, it seems, are willing to work hard and desire effortful engagement, but only if it is easy! Just as the lay notion of a good marriage may equate to a lifelong honeymoon, the lay notion of the good life may equate to a very long vacation.

Although these results seem to indicate that folk notions of the place of effort in the good life are inaccurate, it is worth noting that when hard work was portrayed as occurring in the context of happiness it was viewed as part of the good life. This notion, that positive effect is linked with the role of effort in optimal human states is certainly part and parcel of the psychological notion of states such as flow and intrinsic motivation. These states of high effort are, of course, effort paired with enjoyment.

*The good life is a relational life.* Although initial research using the Career Survey paradigm typically focused on life in general or the work domain, the good life might be understood as encompassing both work and, of course, social relationships. Freud famously noted that a healthy person should have the capacities for love and work, and many philosophical treatments of the good life include both active engagement in work and meaningful social relationships. Yet, modern people often complain of conflicts between these two realms of experience and often, it seems, work wins out over relationships. Popular culture exhorts us to spend more time with our families and we are reminded that no one wishes on his death bed that he had spent a little more time at work. Are these exhortations needed? Do everyday people view work as more important to evaluations of life than relationships? In a set of related studies, Twenge and King (2005) used a similar methodology to compare the relative importance of relationship versus work fulfillment in the good life. In these studies, targets were described as experiencing high or low fulfillment (defined as meaningful engagement) in either their work or their personal relationships. Targets were identified as either male or female. The dependent measures were, again, the desirability and moral goodness of those lives. The results of this work showed that, regardless of target (or participant) sex, fulfillment within the relationship realm was a robust predictor of both desirability and moral goodness. Fulfilling work, although desirable, was not seen as a strong necessity. Indeed, in college and community samples work fulfillment was largely irrelevant to ratings of the moral goodness of a life. In the absence of relationship fulfillment, a target who found enormous fulfillment in the work domain was rated as immoral and destined for hell. These results are especially notable given that the samples were drawn from Dallas, TX (certainly a hotbed of individualism) and Ann Arbor, MI. Even in US samples, meaningful relationships trumped work fulfillment as a determinant of the goodness of a life.

Twenge and King (2005) also probed the reasons why relationships might be privileged over work, incorporating the organismic needs drawn from Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001). They found that participants tended to see the relationship domain as the one in which needs for not only relatedness, but also autonomy and competence are most likely to be met. Thus, the results



suggest that, regardless of how they spend their time, everyday Americans view social relationships as the centerpiece of the good life.

In a way, these results converge with a general sentiment that relationships are the heart of human existence. However, they also suggest that people may underestimate the role of work in the good life. Specifically, in their study of the most happy individuals, Diener and Seligman (2002) found that every single very happy individual had strong social relationships. However, not every person with good social relationships was among the most happy. In other words, good social relationships were necessary but not sufficient for high well-being. Although the effect of social relationships on well-being is undeniable, the size of this effect has more recently been disputed and is now believed to be smaller than most people think it is (Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas & Schimmack, 2009).

Whereas Diener and Seligman did not examine work fulfillment in their study, Scollon and Diener (2006) examined both changes in work and relationship fulfillment over time and their correspondence to changes in personality traits. They found that increases in work fulfillment and relationship fulfillment both correlated with increases in emotional stability. Furthermore, research has shown that loss of employment can be particularly devastating to well-being (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). This influence of job loss on well-being has been used as an example against the notion of recovery from negative life events. One factor in this negative response may well be the surprise that individuals feel over their own loss, because after all “it was just a job.” The discrepancies among folk theories and SWB findings reveal that lay thinkers may not fully realize the high importance of work fulfillment in the good life.

*The good life across cultures.* In all of our studies of folk theories of the good life, we have always recognized that notions of the good life are inextricably bound by culture and time. Until recently, however, most of our samples were drawn from middle-class individuals in the United States. Scollon and Wirtz (2010) were the first to examine folk theories of the good life across cultures, comparing two societies similar in economic development, modernity, language, and exposure to Western media – Singapore and the United States. Using stimuli similar to that employed by King and Napa (1998) which examined the components of happiness, meaning, and wealth (with wealth information updated to reflect inflation), Scollon and Wirtz examined the role of culture in folk concepts of the good life.

East-West comparisons were particularly of interest because several studies in the SWB literature had shown that East Asians consistently reported lower life satisfaction and happiness than North Americans (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Rice & Steele, 2004; Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2004; Suh & Koo, 2008). Our paradigm shows how folk theories of the good life can illuminate some of the observed cross-national differences in SWB. One possibility was that personal happiness is a particularly western concern and that Singaporeans would not value happiness to the same extent. Another possibility was that the Singaporean conception of the good life included wealth as well as happiness, which may have consequences for SWB given that several studies have shown that materialism



can be toxic to high life satisfaction (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003).

In addition, the data for this investigation were collected in early 2009, providing an intriguing opportunity to see if American views toward wealth had changed after the global financial crisis that began in September 2008. After all, the late 1990s ushered in an era of extraordinary wealth for Americans, and like health which often recedes into the background of people's lives when it is good, the size of one's income may be less important in times of prosperity but more important when it is threatened. With news outlets constantly reporting the collapse of banks, foreclosures, and unemployment, financial concerns may have been looming large in American (and Singaporean) consciousness, and Scollon and Wirtz (2010) were interested to see if this would be reflected in folk theories of the good life.

Researchers interested in the good life across cultures should note that great care had to be taken to create stimuli of psychological equivalence across both samples. That is, it was not possible to take the incomes of our targets in the Career Survey and simply convert US dollar amounts to the Singaporean dollar. Through extensive research of labor statistics and pretesting of materials, Scollon and Wirtz were able to create similar stimuli across our groups (see Scollon & Wirtz for details). Even within the United States, income levels had changed in 10 years, such that the poor target would appear much poorer than intended had the income information remained the same as in 1998.

Scollon and Wirtz found both cultural similarities and differences in folk concepts of the good life. Both Singaporeans and Americans defined the good life in terms of happiness and meaning. However, whereas Americans largely discounted wealth when judging the good life, for Singaporeans, the good life included wealth. In samples of both college students and community adults, Singaporean respondents considered the wealthy life to be more desirable than the less wealthy one to the degree of half a standard deviation or more. Given that the effects of materialism on life satisfaction are negative and robust (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Nickerson et al., 2003), a society that includes wealth as part of the good life is bound to have lower life satisfaction than one that views the good life only in terms of happiness and meaning.

Of course, uncovering cultural differences in the good life, though intriguing, does not explain *why* the Singaporean version of the good life included wealth whereas the American one did not. To address this issue, Scollon and Wirtz turned to the Suh's (2007) theory of the overly context-sensitive self. According to Suh, individuals in collectivist societies have a profound need for belongingness and social harmony that leads to a chronic tendency to view the self from the perspective of the other. This third-person, outside-in viewpoint may increase the importance of objective, external criteria in the evaluation of the good life. Whereas a person's degree of happiness can be judged on internal standards (e.g., Sue is happy because she likes her job, but Jim is happy because he has a great family life), wealth cannot (e.g., \$100 will always be more than \$10 no matter how you put it). Based on the idea that

the third-person perspective leads to greater emphasis on objective standards, we might expect people in a third-person perspective to view wealth as more important to the good life than people in the first-person perspective.

To test this idea, Scollon and Wirtz (2010) temporarily manipulated the perspective-taking of Singaporeans either to be from the inside out or to be from the outside in by having people write either brief autobiographies (first person) or biographies (third person) of their lives. Following the perspective-taking manipulation, participants viewed the Career Survey, this time with only information about the target's happiness and wealth level (we dropped meaning as an independent variable to reduce the complexity of the design and because our other studies had shown that both cultures value meaning to nearly the same degree as happiness). As expected, viewing the self from the third person perspective heightens the role of money in conceptions of the good life. After writing about their lives from the third person perspective, respondents viewed the wealthy life as more desirable than the less wealthy one to the degree of 1 standard deviation (SD) in difference. By contrast, when individuals wrote about their lives in the first person, there was less difference in ratings of the poor versus wealthy target (only 1/3 of a SD in difference).

These studies extended past research on the good life in two important ways. First, they showed cultural differences in folk concepts of the good life that are consistent with cross-cultural differences in mean levels of SWB. Second, they demonstrated through a priming experiment how differences in at least one aspect of folk concepts of the good life emerge.

In summary, this program of research demonstrates how examining folk theories of the good life can not only illuminate the ways that everyday people view optimal functioning but also the ways that psychologists have missed the mark in their assumptions about everyday folk. Further, comparing the responses of everyday people to results in the literature demonstrates the realms of fulfillment that may be neglected in folk theories. Finally, they demonstrate how culture influences these naïve theories of optimal human functioning. While these studies are clearly provocative, they certainly do not exhaust the ways that folk theories of the good life may be studied. Next we briefly consider other strategies for exploring this important facet of experience.

## **Alternative Approaches to Folk Theories of the Good Life**

Clearly, one alternative would be to have respondents rate real people's lives. However, unlike manipulated experimental "lives," real lives vary in complex ways, and we sacrifice experimental precision for added complexity. (After all, there are many ways in which Oprah's life differs from Angelina Jolie's, even though many would argue that both women appear to be leading happy, meaningful, and wealthy lives.) Importantly, although our approach allowed us to examine a limited number of components of the good life at a time, this limitation also served as a strength by adding experimental control to our research. We were able to examine how

people weigh different characteristics of a life in judging its overall value without interference from other information such as occupation, race, or sex. All other things being equal, would a happy but poor life be considered as good as a rich one? In addition, by rating another person's life, our approach was indirect and helped minimize any defensiveness about the good life that answering questions about one's own life might introduce.

Some past studies have used qualitative approaches to understanding the good life, either through ethnography or open-ended research questions (e.g., "What is happiness?" Lu, 2001; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). While such approaches undoubtedly provide rich descriptions of local meanings, they provide limited means of assessing broad and truly shared concepts, and they do not facilitate comparisons across individuals or groups. Another approach to understanding how people define the good life is simply to ask participants directly what it is they value (e.g., Schwartz's value survey). Unfortunately, abstract ratings of values might inflate the value of desirable things. Most characteristics are important, and there is nothing to stop participants from circling the highest rating for everything (Cottrell, Neuberger, & Li, 2007; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002).

## The Next Frontiers of Research on the Good Life

In many ways, research to date has merely scratched the surface of the fascinating realm of folk theories of the good life. Here we suggest a variety of potentially valuable areas for future research, including, expanding the consideration of culture, incorporating manipulations that uncover the sources of individual and national differences, further examining the role of wealth in lay theories of the good life, and expanding the net of independent variables considered. We address each of these in turn.

*More cross-cultural studies.* As the studies by Scollon and Wirtz (2010) demonstrate, there are cultural similarities and differences in notions of the good life. Uncovering cultural differences may help answer the question of why some societies are happier than others. In comparing two cultures, however, Scollon and Wirtz (2010) were only the first step. Folk concepts of the good life remain untapped in many more cultures which show intriguing patterns of well-being. For example, there is a great necessity for good life studies in South or Latin America because these countries typically have some of the highest levels of happiness despite levels of collectivism on par with Asian societies and economic development far below countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong. Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Suh (2000) found that individuals in South America rated the ideal person leading the ideal life to have extremely high levels of life satisfaction whereas ideal levels of life satisfaction were considerably lower in Asian cultures. For example, the mean ideal life satisfaction in Colombia was rated as 31.02 (on a 35-point scale) whereas the mean ideal life satisfaction in China was rated 19.80 on the same scale – a difference of over 5 SDs. Clearly, not all cultures value happiness to the same extent, and whether cultures value meaning and wealth to the same degree

remains an empirical question. In any case, our paradigm offers an adaptable and simple way to examine the good life across cultures.

*More studies examining the construction of lay theories.* At the descriptive level, studies of the good life are important in their own right, but future studies should also try to “unpack” folk concepts by examining how they are constructed. Scollon and Wirtz (2010) were the first to show how this can be done by combining context-sensitivity (Suh, 2007) with perceptions of the good life. These studies are also interesting in that they demonstrate both stability and malleability of folk theories. On the one hand, the American conception of the good life remained relatively unchanged over a decade. On the other hand, experimental manipulations can affect judgments of the goodness of a life. Future research will hopefully be able to establish the boundaries of stability and transient factors in constructions of the good life.

*A deeper understanding of the role of wealth in the good life.* Lay theories of the good life in North America are primarily defined in terms of happiness and meaning, not wealth. At the same time, newer research is beginning to show there may be a kernel of truth to the saying that money can buy happiness (Lucas & Schimmack, 2009). One possible explanation for why Americans may downplay the role of wealth in the good life is that the accumulation of wealth often requires hard work, and many people may be unwilling to sacrifice a life of leisure in exchange for more money. Consistent with this notion, Scollon and King (2004, Study 1) found an interaction among wealth and effort such that a wealthy life of hard work was valued just as much as a wealthy life of leisure. Thus, people are sensitive to the idea that greater income compensates for hard work. Effort, in turn, produces benefits beyond the monetary such as flow, mastery, or eudaimonia. Thus, if rich people are somewhat happier than the poor, the differences may be due to the psychological benefits confounded with a high-earning lifestyle. Future research would do well to examine interactions among wealth and effort more closely.

*Other components of the good life.* We might note what sorts of variables were not included in our studies, as these might be of interest in future research and would certainly provide interesting fodder for our continuing understanding of folk concepts of the good life. These variables include (but are not limited to) gender, religiosity, employment, race and ethnicity, age, living conditions, acts of service to others, etc. Again, our methodology can easily be adapted to examine these other aspects of the life well lived.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, our research has shown convergence and divergence among folk theories of the good life and the scientific literature on SWB. Newer research on cultural differences in the good life provides promising avenues for understanding cultural differences in mean levels of well-being. Findings from the good life studies can be used to inform future research questions in SWB (e.g., How does wealth enhance

happiness, but materialism detract from it?) as well as public policy (e.g., Should governments aim to increase the wealth or happiness of its citizens?).

In short, folk theories really are at the heart of cultural psychology, and questions about the good life are centrally important to positive psychology. Research on folk concepts of the good life remains an important part of a science that aims to bring about social change. As Aristotle noted in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is.” We would suggest that knowing what mark individuals are aiming at provides an important piece of information that is relevant to the question of social progress. Such data tell us about the content of the better lives and better worlds that individuals may aspire to, the sources of their discontent with present circumstances, and perhaps the inspiration for their actions toward those better lives and worlds.

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