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In Search of the Good Life: A Cultural Odyssey in the East and West

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ABSTRACT. In the first part of this article, the authors argue that any conception of well-being is culturally embedded and depends on how the notions of “well” and “being” are defined and practiced in different cultural communities. To support this argument, they conduct a comprehensive review of the empirical literature, which shows that members of individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in their emotional experience of well-being. This difference has been traced to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in those cultures. In the second part of the article, the authors debunk the myth of infinite cultural variability, while retaining the basic insight concerning the cultural constitution of well-being. They develop a theoretical model of well-being, in which agency and communion are universal dimensions of well-being, and people in different cultures require different combinations of agency and communion to experience well-being. Following this theoretical development, the authors examine cultural impediments to the good life in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The mutual incompatibility of agency and communion is ruled out as a possible cause of why it is so difficult to live the good life. Instead, the authors propose a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion as a way of dealing with this challenge of living the good life.

Key words: agency, collectivism, communion, culture, good life, happiness, individualism, well-being

FROM THE DAWN OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION, people have pondered these perennial questions: What is the good life? How should I live? Where can I find happiness? This existential project—unraveling the meaning of human



existence—has captured the attention of famous philosophers in the East and West (e.g., Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Laozi, Buddha). In this article, we join these venerated thinkers by embarking on our own search for the good life. Our search consists of two parts. In the first part, we review two theoretical approaches on well-being, which are both ancient and contemporary. At the end of this review, we offer a cultural critique of the research on well-being, culminating in the assertion that any notion of the good life is culturally embedded. To support this assertion, we make a comparison between members of individualistic and collectivistic cultures concerning their conception of selfhood and their experience of emotion. Individualistic and collectivistic members differed in their emotional experience of well-being. This difference has been traced to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. We close the first part of this article with a reflection and direction for future research.

We introduce the second part of this article by debunking the myth of infinite cultural variability, while retaining the previous insight that any notion of the good life is culturally embedded. Having debunked this myth, we strive to develop a theoretical model of well-being that is applicable to people in different cultures. *Agency* and *communion*—two fundamental modes of human existence—are proposed as universal dimensions of well-being. To support this proposal, we review empirical studies that associate agency and communion with positive health outcomes and lack of agency or communion with negative health outcomes. Additional literature suggests that the relationships among agency, communion, and well-being vary in a culturally meaningful way.

Having developed a theoretical model of well-being, we then examine the cultural impediments to the good life in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The mutual incompatibility of agency and communion is ruled out as a possible cause of why it is so difficult to be happy and live the good life. Instead, we propose a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion as a way of dealing with the challenge of living the good life. We reflect on what has been learned and give some directions for future research.

Cultural Issues in Research on Well-Being

Philosophical Roots of Research on Well-Being

Scholars who are intrigued enough to embark on the existential quest for the good life typically begin their investigation by inquiring into the nature of *well-being*, a term that refers to optimal functioning and experience in life. Despite its



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intuitive simplicity, well-being is a complex construct whose meaning is still contested by scholars working from different research paradigms. According to Ryan and Deci (2001), there are two principal approaches to defining well-being: *hedonic* and *eudaimonic*.

Equating well-being with hedonic pleasure or happiness has a long history. For example, the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) preached that pleasure is the supreme good and main goal of life. His early philosophical hedonism has been followed by many others, such as English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who argued that happiness lies in the successful pursuit of our appetites, as well as the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), who asserted that right actions are those that promote happiness, whereas wrong actions are those that promote unhappiness.

Many psychologists have adopted this hedonic tradition in conducting empirical research on well-being. The predominant view among these hedonic psychologists is that well-being consists of subjective happiness, and it concerns the experience of pleasure versus displeasure, broadly construed to include all judgments about the good and bad elements of life.

A representative piece of work in this tradition is *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*. The editors of this scholarly book announced the birth of a “new field of psychology”—namely, hedonic psychology—which is concerned with the study of “what makes experiences and life pleasant and unpleasant” (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999, p. ix). By defining well-being in terms of pleasure versus pain, hedonic psychology poses for itself a clear and unambiguous target of research and intervention: to maximize human happiness. Accordingly, *Well-being* is replete with evidence about how people calculate utilities, maximize rewards, and optimize inputs associated with pleasure versus displeasure.

To evaluate the pleasure–pain continuum in human experience, hedonic psychologists typically assess the *subjective well-being* of the individual (Diener, 1984). People are high in subjective well-being when they experience much positive affect (e.g., joy and elation) and little negative affect (e.g., sadness and agitation) in their lives, as well as when they appraise their lives in a positive manner (“I am happy and satisfied with my life”). Subjective well-being is measured in a variety of ways, ranging from sampling of moods and emotions over time to life satisfaction surveys that assess people’s satisfaction with various domains of life (e.g., marriage, work, family).

According to Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003), subjective well-being is one measure of the quality of life of the individual and society, along with other social and economic indicators. Diener et al. consider a high level of subjective well-being to be necessary for the good life and good society but not sufficient for it. As they observed, it is hard to imagine that people who experience a low level of subjective well-being live in an ideal society, no matter how desirable it is in other respects. On the other hand, even in a society in which people experi-

ence a high level of subjective well-being, important features that many consider to be essential to a high quality of life may be missing (e.g., fairness, justice).

Despite the appealing nature of hedonism—to be happy is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain—many thinkers in the East and the West have voiced their disagreement with this conception of the good life. For example, Jesus Christ posed the following question: What would it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? In a similar vein, Confucius regarded the control of human impulse by *li* (rules of propriety) as a basic requirement of good living. Instead of equating happiness with pleasure, these thinkers equate it with virtue. A famous proponent of this view was Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), the Greek thinker who asserted that happiness, which he termed *eudaimonia*, is experienced by the person who lives the virtuous life.

Many psychologists conduct empirical research on well-being based on this eudaimonic approach to the good life. For example, Ryff (1989) argued that certain aspects of optimal functioning, such as the realization of one's goals and purposes in life, require effort and discipline that may well be at odds with short-term happiness. Living well is not simply a matter of experiencing more pleasure than pain; instead, it involves a striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential.

Ryff (1989) made a distinction between subjective well-being, advocated by hedonist theorists, and *psychological well-being*, advocated by eudaimonic theorists. Whereas the former refers to people's personal evaluation of their own lives in a positive manner, the latter is a multidimensional construct that consists of six distinct facets: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relating. Ryff and Keyes (1995) presented empirical evidence that eudaimonic living, operationalized as psychological well-being, can influence specific physiological systems related to immunological functioning and health promotion.

In an engaging debate, Ryff and Singer (1998) argued that the hedonic conception of well-being is of limited scope in accounting for optimal functioning and that subjective well-being is a fallible indicator of healthy living that was not designed to define the basic structure of psychological well-being. In response, Diener, Sapyta, and Suh (1998) argued that how people feel and think about their own lives is essential to understanding well-being in any society that grants importance not just to the opinions of experts but to all people in society. In the hedonic approach to well-being, people can tell experts what makes their lives good by means of subjective well-being. By contrast, in the eudaimonic approach to well-being, it is the experts who tell people what makes their lives good rather than the other way around.

Evidence from a number of investigators indicates that well-being is probably best conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes aspects of both the hedonic and eudaimonic conceptions of well-being. For example, Compton, Smith, Cornish, and Qualls (1996) investigated the relationships

among 18 indicators of mental health. They identified 1 factor that reflected subjective well-being and another factor that reflected personal growth. These 2 factors were themselves moderately correlated. King and Napa (1998) asked lay people to rate features of the good life and found that both individual happiness and personal meaning were implicated. McGregor and Little (1998) analyzed a diverse set of wellness indicators and also found 2 factors—1 reflecting happiness and another reflecting meaningfulness. These findings indicate that the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to the good life are distinct but complementary. An understanding of well-being may be enhanced by measuring it in differentiated ways.

A Cultural Critique of Research on Well-Being

Although hedonic and eudaimonic psychologists have made important contributions to understanding the good life, there is an intrinsic shortcoming in their approaches to well-being. Specifically, these researchers' theories and measures are developed in the cultural context of the West. As a result, they have been substantively shaped by Western individualistic moral visions of the good or ideal person. Under these conditions, these researchers may simply be drawing on their common sense understanding of well-being. The knowledge that they derive is likely to be at odds with the experience of people from other cultures, given that common sense is itself a cultural system (Geertz, 1983).

To avoid an ethnocentric exposition on the good life, it is crucial to understand the cultural values and assumptions that underlie the two approaches to well-being that we reviewed in the preceding section. Christopher (1999) traced the cultural origin of these research paradigms to *individualism*, a specific moral vision that emerged in Western history beginning with Renaissance humanism. As a moral vision, individualism combines ontological claims about the nature of the self with normative prescriptions about the good or ideal person. Individualism relies on an atomistic understanding of the person as being metaphysically discrete and separate from other persons. Geertz (1983) has provided a succinct description of this position:

The Western conception of the person is a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background. (p. 59)

Individualism regards the person as the primary reality, relegating society to a derivative, second-order level of reality that is simply a collection of individuals. Individuals in society possess their own sets of objectives, needs, desires, interests, potentialities, and rights. They act on these inner attributes in a relatively autonomous and rational manner, which enables them to determine the best manner of pursuing self-chosen goals and interests. The self is seen as prior to these goals or interests, and "what matters above all, and what is most essential

to our personhood, are not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them” (Sandel, 1984, p. 86).

Christopher (1999) argued that individualism underlies and informs both the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being. Consider the hedonic paradigm of research, which uses subjective well-being as a measure of well-being. As this measure relies on the internal standards of respondents to determine what is satisfying about their lives, it appears to avoid the imposition of particular cultural values and norms on them. But on closer examination, it is clear that this measure, as well as the theory behind it, is directly linked to certain individualistic assumptions and values in the West.

The attempt to evaluate well-being in a subjective manner, without relying on the normative standards of experts, is consistent with the political liberalism and liberal individualism at the heart of Western societies (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Specifically, a liberal society adopts no particular substantive view about the ends of life. It remains neutral on the good life, and restricts itself to ensuring that, however they see things, citizens deal fairly with each other and the state deals equally with all (Taylor, 1989). In Christopher’s (1999) opinion, hedonic psychologists manifest this same outlook in their theories and measures by refraining from making strong claims about the good life and the good person, as well as by minimizing the role of the expert in identifying criteria for each.

In a similar vein, the eudaimonic paradigm of research has been substantively shaped by individualism. Consider the attempt by Ryff (1989) to develop her theoretical model of psychological well-being as distinct from subjective well-being. In the process, she synthesized ideas from a diverse spectrum of theorists, including Maslow, Jung, Rogers, Allport, Erikson, Buhler, Neugarten, and Jahoda. Although this is a laudable endeavor, Christopher (1999) noted a crucial weakness in her theoretical synthesis. By drawing on the work of Western psychologists only, Ryff inadvertently included the cultural values and assumptions that are implicit in their theories of personality. For example, in the theoretical model that Ryff developed, autonomy is an important component of psychological well-being. Ryff equated autonomy with attributes such as self-determination, independence, internal locus of control, individuation, and internal regulation of behavior. Underlying these attributes is the belief that one’s thoughts and actions are one’s own and should not be determined by agencies or causes outside of one’s control.

This belief is one of the main ideals and defining values of individualism that emerged during the Enlightenment, when philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that it is our capacity for autonomy that brings us our dignity as human beings. By constructing the individual as possessor of his or her own being, these Enlightenment philosophers wrested control of the self away from the church and king and, in doing so, undermined the existing sociopolitical and religious systems. Autonomy may be an important value that

emerged at a crucial point in Western history, but it is unclear how relevant or appropriate autonomy is for non-Western cultures, or even for women and ethnic minorities (Christopher, 1999). For instance, Shweder and Bourne (1984) empirically compared the concept of the person in India and in the United States and concluded that “the concept of an autonomous, bounded, abstract individual existing free of society yet living in society is uncharacteristic of Indian social thought” (p. 190).

Among Japanese persons, one is less than fully human when one is stripped from one’s social connections. This notion is encapsulated in the Japanese word *jibun*, which literally means “self-part”—a part of the larger whole that consists of groups and relationships. It implies that the self is not an essentiality apart from the social realm (Nakamura, 1964; Rosenberger, 1992). The Japanese individual is a “fraction” and only becomes complete when fitting into or occupying his or her proper place in a social unit (Lebra, 1976).

Christopher (1999) noted that, as a result of the valuation of autonomy in the West, many European Americans see conformity as a sign of moral weakness. But in many parts of the world that do not place such a high valuation on autonomy, conformity is a sign of maturity and strength. For example, a Japanese person “can be diverted from a belief or principle, but such diversion from principle is accepted favorably by others because it shows that he or she has warm empathy” (Azuma, 1984, p. 970). Gergen (1973) made a similar point when he remarked that “if our values were otherwise, social conformity would be viewed as pro-solidarity behavior” (p. 312).

In providing this cultural critique of the existing theory and research on well-being, Christopher’s (1999) intent is by no means to establish that the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches are wrong or lack merit. Instead, the main point emphasized is that understandings of well-being are clusters of cultural assumptions and values, and that they necessarily rely on moral visions that are culturally embedded and frequently culture specific. Failure to acknowledge this point may not only run the risk of casting non-Western people, ethnic minorities, and women as inherently less psychologically healthy, it also may prevent an appreciation of the indigenous virtues that other people cultivate and promote, from which something valuable and useful might be learned (e.g., conformity is a moral strength or a prosolidarity behavior).

The Cultural Specificity of the Good Life

One important point that can be gleaned from this cultural critique is that the very nature of what it means to be well or to experience well-being takes culture-specific forms (Shweder, 1998). Just as people cannot live in a general way but must of necessity live in some set of culture-specific ways, a person cannot just “be well” in a general way. Instead, well-being is very much a collaborative project, which requires one to participate in a *cultural complex* and to attune oneself

to the system of consensual understandings and shared practices in a certain cultural community (Kitayama & Markus, 2000).

Even seemingly individual attributes such as optimism, extroversion, efficacy, mastery, and self-esteem—which have been found to be positively associated with well-being in studies conducted in the United States (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999)—require a cultural complex that is organized in the form of the North American social world. This cultural complex provides the ground for well-being in the society and is often hidden because social relations are patterned in such a way that the reality of the bounded, “nonsocial” self is brought to the fore of individual conscious experience, whereas the reality of the social relations that give rise to this self is obscured (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To put it more succinctly, in the North American social world, the individualistic self is socially constructed to believe that it is not socially constructed.

More generally, the cultural practices and meanings that make up the cultural complex define the most natural and ordinary ways of acting in a variety of mundane everyday situations, such as saying hello and goodbye, having conversations, exchanging gossip, eating lunch and dinner, and playing sports (Cole, 1996; Goffman, 1959; Miller & Goodnow, 1995). This cultural complex, with its rich array of meanings, ideologies, images, lay theories, and common sense, is intricately woven like a spider’s web. Typically, it is invisible to those who are accustomed to it—to those whose modes of thinking, feeling, and acting are adapted to the requirements it invites, the opportunities it affords, and the constraints it imposes. By attuning oneself to this cultural complex, one is able to experience an enhanced sense of well-being, partly because one is able to affirm oneself as a meaningful, stable, and largely respectable cultural entity (Soloman, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), and also because one is able to engage in a reciprocal exchange of resources, which can be materialistic, psychological, and social (Fiske, 1991).

Our challenge in this cultural odyssey is to make explicit and visible what is implicit, “hidden,” and taken for granted and to use this knowledge to inform our analysis of the good life. This endeavor will throw into relief the culture-specific grounding of the natural and ordinary and demonstrate how what counts as well-being depends on the definition and practice of concepts of “well” and “being” in different cultural communities. As Kitayama and Markus (2000) remarked, “it is not just that different things make people happy in different cultural contexts—this is obviously the case. More significantly, it is the ways of ‘being well’ and the experience of well-being that are different” (p. 115).

One way to tackle this challenge is to draw a comparison between two divergent, broadly defined cultural groups. Such a fruitful comparison can be made between the European American and East Asian cultural groups for two reasons. First, there is an expanding literature on psychological differences between European American and East Asian populations that can be taken advantage of when making this comparison (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994a; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Triandis, 1995).

Second, the *indigenous psychology of selfhood* that guides the individual on how to live as a person in society differs widely in these two cultural groups. Specifically, in the European American cultural context, the indigenous psychology of selfhood emphasizes independence, that is, the person is seen as the primary reality; society is a collection of individuals. In contrast, the East Asian cultural context emphasizes interdependence, that is, society is seen as the primary reality; the individual is part of society. Confucius envisioned human existence as being in the social world, not withdrawn from it, even for the sage (Tu, 1985).

This distinction between independence and interdependence is a powerful heuristic for demonstrating the dependence of psyches on cultures. In making this comparison, we do not mean to minimize the differences within each cultural region, which are substantial. After all, the 2 billion people in East Asia participate in many diverse cultures and subcultures; the same is true of the hundreds of millions of people in Europe and America. In addition, it is important to clarify what independence and interdependence signify and what they do not.

According to Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, and Nisbett (1998), independence does not mean a lack of sociality, nor does it necessarily entail selfishness. Instead, *independence* is defined as a complex of relationships, institutions, and social practices that make people free, provide them with choices, and create opportunities for success and happiness, as stated in the American Declaration of Independence. Indeed, it is ironic that people living in independent modern societies, in which food, housing, and clothing must be bought on the market, are actually more dependent on one another and on the institutions of the market for survival, compared with self-sufficient subsistence farmers in agricultural communities. In this respect, independence is a form of interdependence in which social relationships are construed as voluntary and derivative.

In a similar vein, *interdependence* means an orientation to the paramount importance of social ties, groups, and normative obligations, but it does not mean that people lack concern about their own personal value. Indeed, interdependent people are extremely sensitive to shame and to how others evaluate their social adequacy or "face," as we shall explain later. Furthermore, interdependence means a focus on relationships but not all relationships equally. As Hsu (1971) pointed out, relationships (including group memberships) are always, to some degree, mutually inhibiting alternatives. People cannot commit themselves to every kind of relationship. Instead, the more intense the relationship, the fewer relationships possible. In general, collectivists are emotionally attached to a few ingroups and are very concerned about preserving them and doing what will promote them. Individualists have many ingroups but are less committed to any of them (Triandis, 1995).

Above all, independence and interdependence are cultural organizing principles (Hofstede, 1980). Cultures may emphasize one much more than the other, but every culture recognizes both and legitimates some aspects of both. Furthermore, cultures can balance and develop each of these alternatives in many dif-

ferent ways. For example, the horizontal individualism of Swedish society reduces the power distance between individuals, whereas the vertical collectivism of Singaporean society increases the power distance between them (Ng, 2001). In short, although the social practices based on these two cultural orientations differ dramatically, they are not always diametrical antitheses. Nor are their psychological consequences always simple opposites. East Asian socialities and psyches differ considerably from those of Europe and America, but these differences cannot usually be predicted by describing a feature in one system and then imagining its polar negation (Fiske et al., 1998).

Cultural Differences Pertaining to Self

Independent Conception of Selfhood in the West

In the European American cultural context, the person is believed to consist of a set of “internal” or “personal” attributes, such as abilities, talents, personality traits, preferences, subjective feeling states, beliefs, and attitudes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These attributes are thought to be internal and personal in the sense that they come from within and characterize the person regardless of the situation. Taken together, these attributes define each person as an independent, autonomous, unique, and freely choosing individual. This independent conception of the person is unevenly distributed within the society. Thus, cultural scripts of independence may be most available among middle-class, well-educated, and well-paid white males in Europe and America. But they are regularly embodied in the major prevailing practices, institutions, and public symbols of this cultural community (Markus & Kitayama, 1994a).

For example, the socialization style is almost synonymous with individualizing and decontextualizing the self, and the socialization process is one of progressively “personalizing” the child as a unique agent. In European American middle-class families, infants are given their own beds, sometimes their own rooms, to encourage and foster autonomy (Shweder, Balle-Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995). Similarly, children are encouraged to “stand on their own two feet.” Chao (1993) found that 64% of European American mothers, compared with 8% of Chinese mothers, stressed building children’s “sense of themselves” as an important goal of child-rearing.

Another important feature of an individualistic approach to personhood is the stress on the right and necessity to make one’s own choices in life (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Individualistic members perceive themselves as making these choices on a purposive, utilitarian basis according to personal preferences. These choices serve to articulate and reify the self as a distinct individual. Indeed, the central themes in many domains of American life revolve around the availability of a wide variety of sizes, styles, flavors, and colors that permit and require people to pick their favorite (e.g., large, medium, or small? plastic or paper bag?



cash, debit card, or charge? caf or decaf?). Commercials and advertisements promote soft drinks, cars, and shoes on this basis. Likewise, American hosts commonly tell their guests to "help yourself." With this suggestion, the host invites the guest to affirm the self by expressing some of the preferences that are thought to constitute the "real self."

Growing up and living within these European American meanings, practices, institutions, symbols, and ideas, most people tend to become independent and autonomous selves with clearly articulated attributes, preferences, and choices, unaware of the cultural framings of the thoughts they think and the acts in which they engage. Furthermore, this individualist model of sociality and the self is implicitly or explicitly used by many psychologists. Rooted in Western philosophical presuppositions about human nature and in layers upon layers of meanings, practices, and institutions, this model seems a characterization of objective reality. However, it is not based on objective empirical evidence about a representative sample of *homo sapiens* (Fiske et al., 1998).

Interdependent Conception of Selfhood in the East

A very different conception of the person prevails in the East Asian cultural context. This model promotes a view of the individual as inherently and fundamentally connected to others; it stresses empathy, reciprocity, belongingness, kinship, hierarchy, loyalty, respect, politeness, and social obligations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ng, 2001; Triandis, 1995). The focus of life is the self in relation to others, so that people experience themselves as mutually interdependent. One is expected to adjust one's self to meet the expectations of significant others and to work for the good of the dyad, the group, the organization, or the nation. Human fulfillment comes from harmonious participation in honorable social relations.

From this alternative perspective, an independent, autonomous, assertive, and self-centered person is immature and uncultivated. The emphasis is on sensitive perception of the other's perspective and on flexible adaptation to the social requirement of each particular situation. Relationships and social obligations take precedence because they are regarded as more natural and valuable than the rights, needs, and wishes of individuals. The "demands" of others are often experienced as a welcome engagement that invites participation rather than as an unwanted invasion of privacy. This interdependent conception of the person is unevenly distributed within society, and the cultural scripts of interdependence may be most available among older generations of East Asians who do not watch MTV or listen to BBC or CNN. Still, they are richly represented in many aspects of this cultural community.

For instance, child-rearing philosophy and practices aim to transform an asocial baby into a social being who is attuned to the psychological presence of others. Fernald and Morikawa (1993) found that Japanese mothers who engaged with their 2- and 3-year-old children in telling a story about a picture were much

less concerned than American mothers with how or why a particular situation came about. Instead, they focused on what the protagonists were feeling, asking the child, "What does the boy feel?" or "What is he saying?" Similarly, Lewis (1995) reported a common classroom exercise, in which children first find out about how much their mothers work and then set a particular goal for themselves to ease her work. This type of socialization produces a psyche that is highly attuned to collective emotions in the social group.

Although people are psychologically attuned to significant others, this intersubjectivity is not necessarily based on a direct or explicit articulation of what is inside the mind. Instead, indirect communication is *de rigueur* because to say something too obviously can send the signal that the listener is not competent enough to catch on quickly to the speaker's intent. As a consequence, speakers adjust themselves to their listeners by anticipating their needs in advance, and the listener is expected to understand what the speaker conveys without being explicitly told. Doi (1973) wrote about the culture shock he experienced at his first American cocktail party, where his host asked him to make myriad choices about his drink, rather than empathetically discerning his needs as hosts in Japan would do. If a "transmitter" orientation is fostered in the European American cultural context, in which people are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings confidently and assertively, in many East Asian cultural contexts, a "receiver" orientation is cultivated, in which listening and interpreting skills are called into play and silence is valued (Singelis & Brown, 1995).

Self-Enhancement and Self-Criticism in the East and West

Given the different conception of selfhood, one would expect to find many differences between members of these two cultural communities—in the way they think, feel, and act as a person in society. We will review only those studies that contribute to showing how different configurations of the cultural complex result in different forms and experiences of the good life. One pertinent area of research involves the tendency to enhance or criticize oneself. This tendency to self-enhance or to self-criticize is associated with subjective well-being, although the relationship is not as straightforward as it would appear to be.

A large number of studies with European American respondents reveal a pervasive and robust tendency to maintain and to enhance the self. For example, in research on causal attribution (e.g., Miller & Ross, 1975), individuals from this cultural group tend to explain their success in terms of internal and relatively stable attributes, such as ability or talent, while discounting their failure by attributing it to some external causes (e.g., blaming others) or internal but relatively unstable factors (e.g., lack of effort). Moreover, many European Americans display the *false uniqueness bias*, whereby individuals overestimate the uniqueness of their own positive attributes of the self. In one survey, Myers (1993) found that more than 50% of American undergraduates reported that they were in the top

10% with respect to “interpersonal sensitivity.” These effects are not limited to college undergraduates. Taylor and Brown (1988) found a bias in social comparison among adult populations that enables them to maintain a sense of self-worth. In many cases, these adult respondents engage in downward comparison, assessing their own state by referring to someone less fortunate.

The general tendency for self-enhancement can also be identified in biases dubbed as *optimism*. European Americans tend to overestimate the likelihood that desirable and fortunate events will happen to them and to underestimate the likelihood of comparable undesirable events. For example, Heine and Lehman (1995) found a significant optimism bias among Canadian students. Specifically, they estimated the chance of positive events occurring to themselves to be significantly greater than the chance of these events occurring to the average student in their university. Conversely, these students estimated the chance of negative events occurring to themselves to be significantly lower than the chance for them to occur to the average university student.

By contrast, East Asians engage in little self-enhancement. For example, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) found that Chinese students from Taiwan and Mainland China explained their success in terms of effort and their failure in terms of lack of effort. Markus and Kitayama (1994c) found that respondents from Japan, South Korea, and Thailand did not display the false uniqueness bias in a self-related judgment task. Japanese students were found to accept their failures more readily than their successes either in social comparison studies (Takata, 1987) or achievement situations (Stigler, Smith, & Mao, 1985). In the Heine and Lehman (1995) study on the occurrence of desirable versus undesirable events, the optimism bias that was evident among the Canadian respondents was significantly attenuated in a comparative sample of Japanese respondents; in some cases, it even reversed to show a significant pessimistic bias. Heine and Lehman noted that the findings from these Japanese respondents cannot be attributed to impression management, because even when responses are recorded in a manner that maintains the anonymity of these respondents, self-enhancement is still absent or reversed.

To account for this striking cross-cultural difference in the tendency toward self-enhancement, Kitayama, Markus, and Lieberman (1995) suggested that, depending on the culture in which individuals are socialized, they will be differentially tuned into either evaluatively positive or negative self-relevant information. The cultural imperative in an individualistic society is to be a unique person who is different from the rest of the crowd, as captured in the following American saying: “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Consequently, European American parents strive to identify positively valued internal attributes in their offspring that contribute to this unique self. In turn, the child may develop a habitual attentional bias toward positive self-relevant information. By contrast, the cultural imperative in a collectivistic society is to fit in and adjust oneself to the social group, as captured in the Japanese saying “the nail that stands out gets hammered

in.” Consequently, East Asian parents strive to identify negatively valued internal attributes in their offspring that need to be corrected to meet the expectations or norms in society. In turn, the child may develop a habitual attentional bias toward negative self-relevant information.

According to this analysis, in Europe and North America, self-esteem or experiencing good feelings about oneself is likely to be based primarily on the affirmation that positive features are present in one’s self. By contrast, the East Asian form of self-esteem is likely to be based primarily on the affirmation that negative features are absent from one’s self. Hence, whereas American ideals are often centered around distinguishing oneself and standing out from the crowd, Japanese ideals are often framed in terms of *hitonami* (average as a person). From the Japanese perspective, it is much more important not to fall behind the average than to go beyond the average.

In addition, Kitayama, Markus, and Lieberman (1995) suggested that the cultural imperatives of independence and interdependence are reinforced by correspondingly culture-specific ways in which typical acts and situations are organized in everyday life. One aspect of every human culture is the consensual definitions or meanings of social acts or social situations. These situational definitions are created, accumulated, and changed over time in the history of any given culture. For example, any typical act in social life—for example, buying a chair—can be construed in a variety of ways. Some definitions of the act (e.g., “I am buying this old-fashioned chair to brighten up my living room”) may be inherently more self-enhancing than some other (e.g., “I am buying this old chair because it is the only one I can afford”).

These definitions may be differentially distributed across two different cultural contexts, so that the first context may be characterized by more self-enhancing construals of social acts and social situations, compared with the second context. The tendency for self-esteem enhancement among European Americans may have resulted in part because the individualistic context carries a relatively greater number of definitions of social acts and situations that are conducive to self-esteem enhancement. Likewise, the apparent absence of this tendency among East Asians may have resulted in part because the collectivistic context does not provide as many social acts and situations whose construal is conducive to self-esteem enhancement.

To establish whether self-enhancement in America and self-criticism in Japan are psychological tendencies that are supported by the ways in which social acts and situations are collectively defined and subjectively experienced in particular cultural contexts, Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Norasakkunkit (1997) asked two comparable groups of undergraduates in America and Japan to list as many social situations as possible in which their self-esteem would either increase or decrease. From the entire pool of situations, 200 from each culture were randomly selected. These situations varied in their cultural origin (Japan vs. America) and content (success vs. failure). The 200 Japanese situations were

translated into English, and the 200 American situations were translated into Japanese. New groups of Japanese and American students were presented with each situation and asked whether and how much their own self-esteem would be increased, decreased, or uninfluenced in the situation. As predicted, the American respondents showed a highly reliable tendency for self-enhancement. The extent of their self-esteem increase in success situations was much larger than the extent of their self-esteem decrease in failure situations. By contrast, the Japanese respondents showed a strong self-depreciative tendency: The extent of their self-esteem increase in success situations was much smaller than the extent of their self-esteem decrease in failure situations. American-made situations were much more prone to self-enhancement and less prone to self-depreciation than Japanese-made situations. The American tendency for self-enhancement was most pronounced when the American participants responded to the American-made situations. Likewise, the Japanese tendency for self-depreciation was most pronounced when the Japanese participants responded to the Japanese-made situations. Kitayama et al. argued that this pattern is consistent with the thesis that situational definitions have been selected for their potential to promote the core cultural ideals, and psychological mechanisms of self-enhancement or self-criticism have been developed as a result of each individual's active pursuit for adaptation to the immediate cultural environment, which is composed of those situational definitions.

Cultural Differences Pertaining to Emotion

Different Ways of Feeling Good in the East and West

One important element of subjective well-being is to experience good feelings. To say that good feelings are the same for everyone in the world would seem self-evident and innocuous enough. However, given the individualistic European American cultural context and the collectivistic East Asian cultural context, we would suspect that good feelings, like selfhood, are not the same for everyone in the world. Instead, there may be a meaningful variation in how and when good feelings are experienced by people who live in different cultural communities. Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa (2000) have provided empirical evidence to substantiate this view. These researchers asked both American and Japanese college students to report the frequency with which they experience five types of emotions. The first type comprised positive emotions that typically result from affirmation of the self as independent, efficacious, and competent, such as pride and feelings of superiority. The second are those that typically result from an affirmation of the self as interdependent, connected to others, and relational, such as close feelings, friendly feelings, and feelings of respect. The third type of emotions typically results from a threat to the self's independence and competence, such as anger and disgust, which motivate the person to resist the threat. The fourth type

typically results from a threat to the self's interdependence and relationality, such as shame and guilt, which motivate the person to restore them. The final set of emotions is also positive but relatively general, such as elation, calmness, and happiness. These emotions are not contingent on any specific type of antecedent, and they provide the best proxy for subjective well-being.

Kitayama et al. (2000) theorized that there is a culturally meaningful pattern of associations among the five types of emotions. More specifically, in the East Asian cultural context, those who successfully practiced the cultural task of interdependence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally engaged positive emotions (e.g., friendly feeling), would be most likely to experience the general positive emotions (e.g., elated, calm). But those who successfully practiced the alternative task of independence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally disengaged positive emotions (e.g., pride), would not necessarily experience the general positive emotions. In the European American cultural context, those who successfully practiced the cultural task of independence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally disengaged positive emotions (e.g., pride), would be most likely to experience the general positive emotions (e.g., elated, calm). But those who successfully practiced the alternative task of interdependence, thereby frequently experiencing the interpersonally engaged positive emotions (e.g., friendly feeling), would not necessarily experience the general positive emotions.

The results of Kitayama et al. (2000) were consistent with this reasoning. For the Japanese respondents, there was a higher degree of association between the interpersonally engaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions than between the interpersonally disengaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions. By contrast, for the American respondents, there was a higher degree of association between the interpersonally disengaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions than between the interpersonally engaged positive emotions and the general positive emotions.

However, Kitayama et al. (2000) noted that there is an alternative, competing explanation for this pattern of findings. Specifically, the positive but disengaging emotions (e.g., pride) are more arousing than the positive but engaging emotions (e.g., close feelings). The cross-cultural difference in the findings observed by Kitayama et al. might be mediated by arousal, such that Americans are more likely than Japanese to experience general good feelings when they are stimulated and aroused. Schwartz (1992) has shown that the values of individualism and independence are closely associated with emotional stimulation. Follow-up studies by Kitayama et al. indicated that these associations held even when arousal (a potential mediating variable) was a controlled variable. In other words, it is unlikely that the observed finding was an artifact generated by Americans' supposedly strong preference for arousing experiences. Instead, the results are consistent with the thesis that the experience of good feelings varies in a culturally meaningful manner.

Another cross-cultural difference concerns the pattern of correlations between positive and negative emotions. In the case of the American respondents, the overall pattern was largely negative, whereas in the case of the Japanese respondents, it was largely positive. Although correlational results are inherently difficult to interpret, Kitayama et al. (2000) argued that this finding is culturally meaningful. Specifically, in the European American cultural context, individuals are often motivated to maximize the positive feelings while minimizing the negative ones. This can be gleaned in the research on self-enhancing biases, where people overestimate the uniqueness of their own positive self-attributes (false uniqueness bias) or the likelihood that desirable and fortunate events will happen to them (optimistic bias). To the extent that European Americans differ in the extent of their emphasis on positivity versus negativity, one would expect a pattern of correlation between positive and negative emotions like the one observed for the American respondents.

By contrast, the lay theories of *yin* and *yang* prevail in the East Asian cultural context instead of the individualistic picture of happiness as an unmitigated good for the self (Palmer, 1997). These lay theories promote the cultural ideal of balancing the competing forces of life in the universe. A corollary of this view is that both negative and positive emotions are perceived to be bad in their extreme. To attain well-being and to live a long life, one should not seek to maximize the positive feelings while minimizing the negative ones. Instead, one should detach oneself from the seemingly natural desire for good feelings and an aversion to bad feelings by keeping a good balance between them, so as to stay calm, undisturbed, unaroused, and healthy (Beinfeld & Korngold, 1991). Thus, Confucian-minded scholars exhort the individual to "choose the lighter happiness" in ancient China (Ng, 2001); a "habit of hesitation" toward happiness exists in traditional Japanese culture (Minami, 1971). This hesitant, almost reluctant way of embracing happiness originates from the Confucian idea that both happiness and unhappiness stem from a common "root" (Lee, 1992). That is, unhappiness is believed to arrive on the heel of happiness, and the individual can become "so happy that I am afraid." In conclusion, to the extent that East Asians strive for balance rather than differentiation in their emotional lives, one would expect a pattern of correlations between positive and negative emotions like the one observed for the Japanese respondents.

There is one final cross-cultural difference in emotional experience concerning the reported frequencies of experiencing different types of emotions. In the case of the American respondents, the reported frequency of emotional experience was much higher for positive emotions than for negative emotions. In the case of the Japanese respondents, the reported frequency was much higher for engaged emotions than for disengaged emotions. Kitayama et al. (2000) explained this finding as follows: With a cultural imperative of the self as independent, social motivations tend to be anchored around the culturally sanctioned concern for discovering and confirming desirable internal attributes of the self.

An important component of such internal attributes is positive subjective feelings, which serve the function of affirming the independence of the self. Both disengaging (e.g., pride) and engaging (e.g., friendly feeling) positive emotions are likely to contribute to this function. To the extent that this is the case, the American respondents may be expected to have a strong tendency to enhance and augment the experience of positive emotions, regardless of whether these emotions are interpersonally disengaged or engaged. Indeed, this is the case.

By contrast, with a cultural imperative of the self as interdependent, social motivations may tend to be anchored around the culturally authorized concern for fitting in and adjusting oneself to the interpersonal context. It may be social and interpersonal engagement that affirms the interdependence of the self; this function is served equally well by both positive (e.g., friendly feeling) and negative (e.g., guilt) engaging emotions. To the extent that this is the case, the Japanese respondents may be expected to have a strong tendency to enhance and augment the experience of engaging emotions, regardless of whether these emotions are positive or negative.

“Having” and “Sharing” Emotions in the East and West

The foregoing analysis by Kitayama and colleagues (2000) challenges the currently popular, mostly biological theories of emotion that postulate unitary, neuronal programs for the so-called basic emotions such as joy, anger, sadness, and disgust (e.g., Izard, 1993; Plutchik, 1980). Instead, the current findings support the social constructionist position on emotion, which stresses the constitutive role of cultural practices and of tacit cultural knowledge in the formation and experience of emotion (Averill, 1982; Levy, 1984). According to this view, emotion is a social product or cultural elaboration enabled by a set of biologically hard-wired component processes (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). Accordingly, culturally shared systems of meaning or cultural frames shape emotional experience, which in turn defines what is intensely meaningful in a given cultural system.

This culturally grounded, social constructionist position on emotion can account for a puzzling phenomenon in emotion research. In the West, researchers typically conceptualize emotion as a purely psychological, subjective experience. For example, good feelings are conceptualized as the properties of an individual, a subjective state that is contained in him or her and measured by such psychological scales as the Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). However, many researchers who do their fieldwork in the East have noted that emotions in this culture are construed to be much more social and communal, serving as an index of the nature of the attendant social relationship, as much as or even rather than revealing inner affective states (e.g., Lutz, 1988). Put more succinctly, in the West, people *have* emotions, which are located *in* the individual. In the East, people *share* emotions, which are located *between* individuals.

A vivid demonstration of this point can be found in an investigation of the facial feedback hypothesis, which assumes that evolution has endowed humans with facial expressions that provide different patterns of sensory feedback to the brain based on muscle tension levels, thereby evoking different emotions (Tourangeau & Ellsworth, 1979). Support for this hypothesis is provided by researchers who found that emotional experiences follow facial expressions rather than precede them, as sensory neurons convey information from facial muscles directly to the hypothalamus, which plays an important role in emotional arousal (Zajonc, 1985).

However, in a cross-cultural investigation of the facial feedback hypothesis in a Sumatran village in Indonesia, Levenson, Ekman, Heider, and Friesen (1992) did not find comparable changes in the subjective experience of emotional states, although they replicated the physiological changes that were contingent on posed facial expressions. The researchers suggested that, in the East, the interpersonal context serves as an important element of emotional experience, so much so that, without an appropriate interpersonal context provided, the inner sensations are not sufficient to produce any distinct emotional experience.

The culturally grounded, social constructionist view on emotion can account for this puzzling phenomenon in emotion research in the East and West. Specifically, in an individualistic culture, much of emotional life is focused on the individual, in keeping with the independent conception of the person. Because one sees oneself as a being with interiority and depth, one regards one's emotions as one's own property, arising from within oneself, a private experience that one "has." On the other hand, in a collectivistic culture, much of emotional life is focused on significant others (e.g., family members and close friends), in keeping with the interdependent conception of the person (Markus & Kitayama, 1994b; Mesquita, 2001). For example, personal happiness has not traditionally been considered as the highest good for the Chinese. Instead, one's worth as a human being is based on the extent to which one is a dutiful son or daughter and fulfills family obligations. This interpretation draws support from the finding that "how a collectivist feels about himself or herself is less relevant to his or her life satisfaction than is his or her view of whether he or she behaves properly in the organized social order" (Diener & Diener, 1995, p. 662). As a result, emotions are more communal and intersubjective in nature, and people are more likely to use external cues, such as the social setting, to interpret their emotional experience. Instead of "having" emotions in private, people "share" them with significant others.

In accordance with this line of thinking, researchers have found that Western emotion terms can be mapped along a two-dimensional scaling solution. The first dimension pits pleasant/good against unpleasant/bad, whereas the second dimension pits active/high energy against inactive/low energy (Russell, 1980). By contrast, collectivist cultures such as Japan exhibit a third dimension not found in individualistic cultures like America. This dimension pits self-centered or ego

emotions against other-centered or social emotions. Examples of these social emotions in Japan include *amae*, or the hopeful anticipation of another's indulgence (Doi, 1973), as well as *ittaikan*, or the feeling of oneness that arises when the person is in a closely knit group (Ng, 2001).

The identification of social emotions in non-Western cultures does not necessarily mean that Europeans or Americans do not experience these emotions. However, it indicates that, for individualistic members, such emotions are largely undifferentiated. This lack of differentiation implies that they may not be as important to European Americans—they have not been accorded enough value within this cultural community to be given a label (Christopher, 1999). The general neglect of these social emotions is consistent with the individualistic moral vision, in which the interpersonal dimensions of reality and of the self are downplayed in favor of the view of the self as an independent and autonomous entity.

Reflection and Direction for Future Research

Our review has shown that well-being is an amorphous, shifting concept and that people at different times and places have a contrasting understanding of the meaning of this term. What counts as happiness is culturally grounded, and good feelings are not the same for everyone in this world. Instead, different configurations of the cultural complex result in different forms and experiences of the good life. Specifically, in the European American cultural context, well-being is subjective, personal, and individual in form, and it is to be experienced via a direct pursuit of one's own happiness. This is because of the independent conception of selfhood in this culture, which motivates the individual to engage in self-enhancement and to stand out from the social group. By contrast, in the East Asian cultural context, well-being is intersubjective, communal, and collective in form, and it is to be experienced via an indirect pursuit of the happiness of those who are closest to one. This is because of the interdependent conception of selfhood in this culture, which motivates the individual to engage in self-criticism and to fit in with the social group.

The above argument is supported by research showing that people of these two cultural communities experience good feelings in culturally meaningful ways. In the European American cultural context, general good feelings tend to be associated with interpersonally disengaged positive emotions, positive emotions tend to be experienced more frequently than negative emotions, and emotions tend to be construed as a private and subjective phenomenon that the individual has. However, in the East Asian cultural context, general good feelings tend to be associated with interpersonally engaged positive emotions, engaged emotions tend to be experienced more frequently than disengaged emotions, and emotions tend to be construed as a social and intersubjective phenomenon that the individual shares with others.

Finally, our review raises a number of important methodological issues as-

sociated with contemporary research on well-being. As one example, many measures of subjective well-being contain items that gauge the degree of positivity/idealness experienced by the respondent (e.g., "The conditions of my life are excellent"). These items gel well with the Western picture of happiness as an unmitigated good for the individual but not with the "habit of hesitation" that the Asian mentality displays toward happiness. As another example, many measures of subjective well-being, such as PANAS, are asocial in nature, focusing on the experience of the self-centered emotions. But a large part of the emotional life of East Asians is focused on significant others, leading to the experience of the social emotions. It would be inappropriate to use asocial scales such as PANAS to evaluate the emotional life and well-being of these individuals. These two examples suggest that researchers should strive to develop measures of well-being that have a better ethnographic and cultural validity, as applied to cultural contexts other than the European American one.

Culture and Well-Being: A Theoretical Formulation

Debunking the Myth of Infinite Cultural Variability

Thus far, we have shown that the exact form and experience of well-being are subject to a rich array of cultural meanings and practices. That is, what counts as well-being depends on how the concepts of "well" and "being" are defined and practiced in different cultural communities. In drawing this conclusion, we do not mean to imply that well-being is a culturally relativistic construct, even though we agree with Christopher (1999) that any conception of the good life is necessarily based on moral visions that are culturally embedded. Still, we believe that an undue emphasis on this insight leads to the untenable view of self as being infinitely malleable by its social environment. Buss (1999) has termed this the *myth of infinite cultural variability*. In this myth, there is no essential human nature. Instead, the social environment stamps its imprint indelibly on individuals, leading to the diversity of human natures and cultures around the world. The myth of infinite cultural variability gained its popularity through the exotic discoveries of anthropologists working in "primitive" societies. The most influential was Mead (1949), who wrote about the sex life of Samoan islanders and depicted an island paradise inhabited by peaceful peoples who celebrated shared sexuality and free love and who did not compete, rape, fight, or murder.

Subsequent research by Freeman (1983) found that the Samoan islanders whom Mead had depicted in such utopian terms were intensely competitive, sexually jealous, and had murder and rape rates higher than those in modern societies. Although Freeman's work casts doubt on the veracity of Mead's research on the Samoan islanders, many still cling to the myth of infinite cultural variability. As Konner (1990) observed, Westerners have never quite outgrown the idea that there are island paradises out there, in which noble savages live in per-

fect harmony with nature and one another, free from the corrupting influences of modern civilization.

The weight of empirical evidence is gradually shifting from this myth to the existence of many invariants and universals in human functioning (Brown, 1991). For example, Daly and Wilson (1988) found that male sexual jealousy is the leading cause of spousal homicide in many societies, while Jankowiak (1995) found that thoughts, emotions, and actions of love are experienced in similar ways by people in many cultures. In unison, these findings debunk the myth of infinite cultural variability, with its view of people as merely having the capacity for culture but as not having any innate propensities or proclivities. It pushes us to take one more step in this cultural odyssey, in search of a theoretical model of well-being that is applicable to people in different cultures.

Two Fundamental Modes of Human Existence

Earlier in our review, we argued that the conception of selfhood differs in different cultural communities. Whereas East Asians tend to perceive themselves in relational terms, European Americans tend to perceive themselves in autonomous terms. This difference can be traced to the social philosophies of Confucianism and liberal individualism, respectively. In Confucianism, society is the primary reality, and the individual is part of society. In liberal individualism, the person is the primary reality, and society is a collection of individuals. Despite this basic difference between the two cultural worldviews, they are similar in being concerned with the relation between the individual and society. In the case of liberal individualism, more emphasis is placed on the individual vis-à-vis society, and the person strives to remain autonomous from the social group. In the case of Confucianism, more emphasis is placed on society vis-à-vis the individual, and the person strives to maintain connectedness with the social group.

These two basic ways of relating between the individual and society are characterized by Bakan (1966) as agency and communion. *Agency* is an autonomous mode of being whose focus is the self or individual; it is manifested in agentive behaviors such as self-protection, self-assertion, self-expansion, self-control, and self-direction. *Communion* is a relational mode of being whose focus is the other or society; it is manifested in communal behaviors such as group participation, group cooperation, group attachment, and group union. Bakan argued that both agency and communion are fundamental modes of human existence that can be found in people who live in different societies. To enjoy well-being, there should be a healthy balance between them. By contrast, too much emphasis on one mode of existence vis-à-vis the other mode will result in psychological dysfunction.

There are two key parts in this argument. First is the suggestion that human existence is characterized by both agency and communion. Many researchers agree with Bakan (1966) on this point. For example, Guisinger and Blatt (1994)

argued that natural selection in the human species has resulted in two separate developmental lines: self-definition (agency) and interpersonal relatedness (communion). The lines interact in a dialectical fashion, such that an increasingly mature sense of self is contingent on interpersonal relationships, and the continued development of increasingly mature interpersonal relationships is contingent on mature self-definition.

Other researchers have discovered the existence of conceptual universals in interpersonal languages based on the metaconcepts of agency and communion (e.g., Brown & Gilman, 1960; Shweder, 1972). According to White (1980), this general psycholinguistic phenomenon represents a universal conceptual scheme produced by the interaction of innate psycholinguistic structures and fundamental conditions of human social life. Specifically, humans have the potential for concord or discord in the goals and actions of multiple actors (solidarity/conflict or communion), as well as the potential for asymmetrical influence of one actor on another (dominance/submission or agency).

In a similar vein, many psychologists have argued that autonomy and relatedness are two important needs of human beings, other than the physiological needs for food or water. For example, Maslow (1962) theorized that there is a hierarchy of needs within the individual. The most basic needs are physiological in nature. However, after these basic needs have been met, psychological needs become important for the individual. These include belongingness and love needs (communion) as well as esteem and self-actualization needs (agency). In a similar vein, McAdams (1985) argued that the psychological needs for intimacy (communion) and power (agency) are two basic human tendencies, although, unlike Maslow, he did not place them in a hierarchical order (i.e., they are equally important for the individual).

Agency, Communion, and Well-Being

Bakan (1966) also argued that agency and communion are prerequisites for well-being. Although this is a more controversial proposition, it has been supported by the research of many scholars. In a comprehensive review of the empirical literature concerning the relation of agency and communion to well-being, Helgeson (1994) found that agency has positive implications for psychological well-being or mental health, and communion has positive implications for relationships. However, agency and communion are also associated with some adverse health outcomes and correlates. Agency has been linked to increased Type A behavior, poor health care, and behavioral problems; communion has been linked to increases in psychological distress. Helgeson suggested that the contradictory relations of agency and communion to well-being can be explained by distinguishing the agentic and communal orientations from their extremes.

Specifically, *unmitigated agency* reflects a focus on the self to the exclusion of others. It is a narrow aspect of agency that, by definition, excludes commu-

nion. The person who scores high on unmitigated agency is characterized by an excessive focus on the self and by a negative view of others; such a person can be described as arrogant, egoistical, cynical, and hostile. Unmitigated agency is distinct from agency and communion, that is, unmitigated agency cannot be reduced to some combination of the two. Conceptually, a person who scores high on agency and low on communion can be independent and self-confident but not helpful or emotional. This is not the same as someone who is cynical, hostile, and greedy (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999).

Unmitigated communion is a focus on others to the exclusion of self. It is a narrow aspect of communion that, by definition, excludes agency. The person who scores high on unmitigated communion is characterized by a preoccupation with others and a concern with others that leads to self-neglect. In other words, there are two aspects of unmitigated communion: over-involvement with others and self-neglect (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Unmitigated communion cannot be captured by high communion and low agency or some combination of the two. Conceptually, a high-communion and low-agency person would be kind and aware of others' feelings but passive and not competitive. This is not the same as someone who becomes overly involved with others to the exclusion of the self.

To provide a clearer picture, Helgeson and Fritz (1999) conducted a series of studies that examined the relations among the four constructs—agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion—and their differential implications for relationship and health outcomes. In the first of these studies, they examined the correlations among the four constructs across a series of diverse samples (college students, patients suffering from heart disease, children of women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer) to determine the extent to which these measures are empirically distinct.

Based on past research, Helgeson and Fritz (1999) made the following predictions. First, agency and communion would be uncorrelated; second, unmitigated agency and agency would reveal a small positive relation because they both reflect a focus on the self; third, unmitigated agency would be negatively correlated with communion because it reflects a focus on the self to the exclusion of others; fourth, unmitigated communion and communion would be positively correlated because both reflect a focus on others; fifth, unmitigated communion would be negatively correlated with agency because it reflects a focus on others to the exclusion of self; finally, unmitigated communion and unmitigated agency would be either uncorrelated or negatively correlated.

Helgeson and Fritz (1999) found support for the above predictions. Specifically, agency and communion were unrelated, unmitigated agency and agency were positively related, unmitigated agency and communion were negatively related, unmitigated communion and communion were positively related, and unmitigated communion and agency were negatively related. There was also a trend for unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion to be negatively related.

These relations held across the different types of respondents who participated in this research.

In the second study, Helgeson and Fritz (1999) aimed to show that unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion are not reducible to some combination of agency and communion. To accomplish this, they evaluated a set of variables related to well-being, for which they could make differential predictions with regard to agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion. They included measures on self-esteem, social relations (perceived availability of support, support provision, and negative social interactions), psychological distress (anxiety, depression, and hostility), an index of well-being, and finally, an index of health behavior.

Helgeson and Fritz (1999) found that agency is associated with high self-esteem and reduced psychological distress, whereas unmitigated agency is associated with negative interactions with other people, low self-esteem, psychological distress (especially hostility), and poor health behavior. Thus, agency appears to represent a healthy focus on the self, whereas unmitigated agency appears to represent an unhealthy focus on the self. Helgeson and Fritz also found that communion is related to providing support as well as perceiving support to be available, but it is largely unrelated to self-esteem or indicators of psychological well-being. By contrast, unmitigated communion is associated with providing support to others but not with perceiving it to be available. It is also associated with negative interactions with others, as well as with indicators of psychological distress and poor health behavior. Thus, communion appears to represent a healthy focus on others, whereas unmitigated communion appears to represent an unhealthy focus on others. Helgeson and Fritz concluded that it is important to distinguish unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion from agency and communion because only the first two constructs are associated with problematic social relationships and adverse health outcomes.

Unmitigated Agency, Unmitigated Communion, and Problem Behavior

To make an even finer discrimination between unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion, Helgeson and Fritz (1999) examined their relations to interpersonal domains in a final study. They found that unmitigated agency (paying no attention to others) and unmitigated communion (being absorbed in others) were linked to different sets of interpersonal difficulties. Specifically, unmitigated agency was associated with being domineering, vindictive, and cold—behaviors that reflect being self-oriented at the expense of others. Unmitigated communion was associated with being overly nurturing and intrusive—behaviors that reflect an overinvolvement with others. It was also associated with being nonassertive and exploitable, behaviors that reflect a lack of attention to oneself.

Helgeson and Fritz (2000) sought to provide a clearer picture of the causal

mechanisms that link unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion to these domains of problem behavior. They began by noting that these two constructs have been linked to an array of illnesses, including coronary heart disease, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and diabetes, whereas agency and communion have not been linked to these illnesses (Helgeson, 1993; Helgeson & Fritz, 1996). One reason why unmitigated-agency and unmitigated-communion individuals have difficulty adjusting to stressful life events, such as the onset of a chronic illness, is that these individuals do not have a supportive network to which they can turn. Even if there is a support network available, they may not use it. The reasons for the lack of support from others, as well as the reluctance to seek help from others even if it is available, differ for the unmitigated-agency individual and unmitigated-communion individual.

Helgeson and Fritz (2000) noted that unmitigated-agency individuals are more likely to attend to their own needs than to the needs of others. Thus, when the unmitigated-agency individual needs support, others may recall his or her lack of attention to relationships in the past and, therefore, would be unwilling to help. Even if others are available to support unmitigated-agency individuals, they may be unwilling to accept this support, because their extreme self-reliance and overconfidence in themselves lead them to believe that they do not need other people's help. In fact, the unmitigated-agency individual is likely to perceive asking for help as an admission of weakness or a sign of incompetence. Unmitigated-agency individuals' negative view of others is also likely to lead them to perceive others as incapable of helping. Moreover, unmitigated-agency individuals may not even benefit from the assistance persistent supporters provide. This is because one feature of unmitigated agency is cynicism, and research has shown that cynical people not only lack social support but are unable to benefit from it when it is provided (Lepore, 1995).

The relation of unmitigated communion to interpersonal behavior is more complicated. This is because unmitigated-communion individuals' focus is exclusively on others, and, at first glance, one might expect them to have very good relationships. However, the unmitigated-communion individual's attention to relationships may be perceived by others as overprotective and intrusive. To that extent, relationship difficulties and conflicts with others could result. Unmitigated-communion individuals are also likely to perceive any attempt by others to reciprocate their help as inadequate. Other people simply cannot meet the unmitigated-communion individual's high expectations for support.

Unmitigated communion is related to a hesitance to seek support from others for several reasons. First, unmitigated-communion individuals' concern for others may extend to the point that they do not want to burden others with their own problems. Research has shown that low self-esteem is associated with unmitigated communion, and this may lead the person to feel unworthy of others' time and attention (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Finally, unmitigated-communion individuals may not turn to others for support because they perceive that others

are really unavailable to help them. This feeling of others' unavailability or lack of desire to help them could also be a consequence of low self-regard. Finally, unmitigated communion is related to feeling uncomfortable receiving support. Helgeson and Fritz (2000) suggested that this could be due to the unmitigated-communion individual's desire to maintain one-sided relationships with others, so that he or she is perceived as important, even indispensable to others. Accepting help or seeking help would restore "balance" to the unmitigated-communion individual's relationship with other people, making him or her feel less important to them.

From this review of the empirical literature, the following conclusions can be made. First, agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion are distinct constructs. Specifically, the constructs of agency and communion are broad dimensions of personality, whereas the constructs of unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion are more specific constellations of traits with an exclusionary focus on self and other, respectively. Second, it is important to distinguish unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion from agency and communion because only the first two constructs are associated with problematic social relationships and adverse health outcomes. By contrast, agency has positive implications for psychological well-being or mental health, and communion has positive implications for relationships. Finally, the causal mechanisms that link unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion to these domains of problem behavior differ from one another. Specifically, the links to problem behavior for unmitigated-agency individuals stem from their unwillingness to attend to relationships and their negative view of others. By contrast, the links to problem behavior for unmitigated-communion individuals stem from their tendency to subjugate their own needs to the needs of others and their dependence on others for self-esteem.

Culture, Agency, Communion, and Well-Being

The foregoing analysis has shown that agency and communion are fundamental modes of human existence that can be found in different cultures around the world. In addition, it also revealed that agency and communion are both prerequisites for well-being. That is, when both are present in the individual, he or she will experience well-being. Based on the insights that we developed earlier in this article, we suggest that people in different cultures require different combinations of agency and communion to experience well-being. Specifically, in individualistic cultures, in which people possess an independent conception of selfhood and enhance themselves to realize the cultural mandate of being a unique person, the individual experiences well-being via a combination of high agency and moderate communion. By contrast, in collectivistic cultures, in which people possess an interdependent conception of selfhood and criticize themselves to realize the cultural mandate of fitting into the social group, the in-

dividual experiences well-being via a combination of high communion and moderate agency.

This theoretical model of well-being has been suggested by other researchers. For example, Sato (2001) described two basic systems of self-organization. These two systems, labeled *autonomy* and *relatedness*, are essential to the well-being of the individual, regardless of the culture to which he or she belongs. However, the degree of autonomy and relatedness required to maintain the well-being of the individual in a specific society is affected by cultural mores. People in collectivistic cultures require high levels of relatedness and moderate levels of autonomy to maintain their well-being, whereas people in individualistic cultures require high levels of autonomy and moderate levels of relatedness to achieve the same goal.

The theoretical model of well-being that we have developed is supported by a number of cross-cultural studies. For example, Diener and Diener (1995) examined the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction in 31 nations. They found a positive correlation between these two variables in all the countries that they studied, but the size of this correlation differed in a culturally meaningful way. Specifically, self-esteem and life satisfaction correlated more highly in individualistic cultures (e.g., America) compared with collectivistic ones (e.g., India). In other words, the association between agency and well-being is stronger in individualistic cultures than collectivistic ones, as our theoretical model would predict.

In another study, Kwan, Bond, and Singelis (1997) hypothesized that maintaining a harmonious relationship with others is an important source of life satisfaction in collectivistic cultures. When the subjective well-being responses of American and Hong Kong college students were analyzed through structural equation models, Kwan et al. found that self-esteem and relationship harmony each had an additive effect on life satisfaction and were separable in both cultures. In addition, they also found that relationship harmony was a more significant predictor of life satisfaction for the Hong Kong respondents than for the American respondents. In other words, the association between communion and well-being is stronger in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic ones, as our theoretical model would predict.

Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998) investigated the relative importance of subjective emotions (agency) versus normative beliefs (communion) for life satisfaction judgments among individualist and collectivist nations. At the country level of analysis, subjective emotions and life satisfaction correlated more highly in individualistic nations than in collectivistic ones. At the individual level of analysis, subjective emotions were better than cultural norms in predicting life satisfaction in individualistic societies compared with collectivistic ones. In contrast, subjective emotions and cultural norms were equally good at predicting life satisfaction in collectivist societies. That is, in individualistic cultures, well-being is attained by doing what a person would like to do (agency); in collectivistic cul-

tures, it is also attained by doing what a person thinks he or she ought to do (communion). Once again, this is what our theoretical model would predict.

Challenges in Living the Good Life

In our search for the good life, we notice a curious discrepancy in the empirical literature. As a topic itself, well-being has received relatively little attention from researchers. This stands in stark contrast to the sheer quantity of published material devoted to psychopathology (Christopher, 1999). For example, there are numerous journals dedicated solely to increasing our understanding of psychopathology, such as the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* and the *Journal of Affective Disorder*. However, there are few journals devoted to increasing our understanding of well-being. The sheer attention devoted to psychopathology by researchers suggests that many people find it difficult to be happy and live the good life. Why is this so? Based on the theoretical model of well-being that we have developed, we suggest that it is due to the individual's failure to maintain a good balance between agency and communion. The individual fails to maintain this balance because he or she has the tendency to subscribe to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in society without critical reflection. To support our argument, we examine the cultural impediments to the good life in the East and West.

Affirming Agency at the Expense of Communion in the West

In the European American cultural context, the individual finds it difficult to be happy and live the good life because he or she has the tendency to affirm agency at the expense of communion. This tendency originates from the independent conception of selfhood that prevails in much of North America and Europe, which emphasizes certain features of the person as natural, necessary, desirable, healthy, and good (Fiske et al., 1998). For example, the individual is a bounded, coherent, stable, autonomous, "free" entity that possesses an "internal" set of preferences, motives, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities. The individual formulates a variety of goals based on these personal attributes and makes rational choices in the pursuit of these goals. He or she is personally responsible for the choices that are made, as well as the outcomes that are achieved.

It should be stressed that these liberal ideas of selfhood are not fully shared by every individual in society. But they are regularly embodied in a rich array of symbols, meanings, and practices within the society. In unison, they motivate the average individual to think, feel, and act in a certain way, for example, "I am free to do what I want with my life," "I can achieve my goals if I put in enough effort," "I should believe in myself instead of listening to other people." These culturally constructed beliefs are known colloquially as the American Dream, which inspires many individuals in this society to work hard and realize their chosen

goals in life. However, there is a fatal flaw in the American Dream: Not every one will succeed in attaining his or her chosen goals in life, for many reasons that may have nothing to do with his or her own individual effort. For example, in the Olympics, every runner desires to be the first to cross the 100-m finish line. However, only one runner can win the race.

More generally, Schwartz (2000) noted that the liberal society socializes its members to expect perfection in all things, as well as to produce this perfection by themselves. When they must inevitably fail, due to reasons beyond their control (e.g., there can be only one winner in an Olympic race), the culture of individualism provides them with a socially acceptable style of explanation that focuses on the individual (e.g., "I did not try hard enough. I must put in more effort"). Although this way of making sense of the unsuccessful outcome enables the individual to remain in control of the negative situation at first, continued exposure to failure may eventually result in depression (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). This disjunction between dream and reality led Schwartz to argue that the Western aspiration of self-determination is a mistake, both as an actual description of how people live and a normative ideal in life.

In support of this argument, it is observed that people in this society equate happiness with freedom. That is, to be happy is to be free to do as one wishes. If this cultural myth of happiness is true, then Westerners should be one of the happiest people on earth. This is because they can live exactly the kind of life they want, unconstrained by material, economic, and cultural limitations, compared with people in other societies. However, the number of happy people has not noticeably increased with the general expansion of individual freedom in the West. Instead, as Schwartz (2000) noted with much irony, "What we find is an explosive *growth* in the number of people with depression. Some estimates are that depression is ten times more likely to afflict someone now than at the turn of the century" (p. 85, *italics in original*).

Schwartz (2000) suggested several reasons for this paradoxical phenomenon, which he termed the *tyranny of freedom*. First, increases in experienced control over the years have been accompanied by increases in expectations about control. That is, the more one is allowed to be on top of the situation in one domain of life after another—via the advancement of technology, the loosening of cultural constraints, and the like—the more one expects to be in control of one's fate. However, this expectation does not stand up to scrutiny: There are many things in life that are simply not within one's control, from the morning rush hour and the unpredictable weather to the fluctuating moods of family and friends. The individual who expects to be in control is likely to be frustrated when things do not work out the way he or she has expected. Research on learned helplessness theory indicates that such individuals are prone to experience clinical depression (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

Second, the extreme emphasis on the individual undermines a crucial vaccine against psychological depression, namely, deep commitment and belonging

to social groups and institutions. That is, the more people focus on themselves—with respect both to goals and to the means of achieving those goals—the more their connections to others will be weakened. This gradual weakening in ties increases the vulnerability of the individual to psychological depression. By contrast, the individual who focuses on other people and maintains good ties with them is less likely to feel depressed. Egeland and Hostetter (1983) provided support for this hypothesis in a study of depression in the Amish community of Pennsylvania. The authors found that the Amish had an incidence of depression that was about half the national rate. They attributed this low rate of depression to the cohesive, tightly knit, and traditional community of the Amish.

Research on human decision making provides additional support for Schwartz's (2000) general thesis that the freedom to choose is not an unmixed blessing but, instead, comes with a cost to the individual. In a series of experimental studies, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) challenged the implicit assumption in much psychological theorizing that having more choices is necessarily more intrinsically motivating than having fewer. In the first study, they found that respondents were more likely to purchase exotic jams when they had 6 options from which to choose than when they had 24 options. In the second study, they found that college students were more likely to write an extra-credit essay and wrote better essays when they had 6 options from which to choose than when they had 30 options. In the final study, they found that participants who were presented with a wide range of chocolates (30 options) proved more dissatisfied, more regretful of the choices they had made, and more likely to choose money than chocolates as compensation for their participation, compared with those who were presented with a narrow range of chocolates (6 options).

In accounting for the above findings, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) remarked that "perhaps it is not that people are made unhappy by the decisions they make in the face of abundant options but that they are instead unsure—that they are burdened by the responsibility of distinguishing good from bad decisions" (p.1004). This phenomenon of choice overload may be further exacerbated in contexts in which the costs associated with making the "wrong" decision are much more prominent (e.g., in deciding which stock to purchase or medical treatment to seek). In such contexts, when people perceive the choice-making task to necessitate expert information, they may even refrain from exercising their right to choose and, instead, may surrender the choice to the expert (e.g., stock broker or medical specialist). Iyengar and Lepper observed with much irony that, in the modern world as the freedom of individuals expands, so too does their dependence on institutions and other people.

Rather than expanding one's freedom by increasing the range of choices, Schwartz (2000) argued that people in individualistic cultures must learn to de-emphasize individual freedom and to determine which cultural constraints are necessary for them to live meaningful and satisfying lives. He used a linguistic analogy to illustrate this point. The capacity to use language is the single most lib-

erating characteristic of *homo sapiens*. It frees humans in significant ways from the temporal and material limitations that afflict other organisms. For example, people can say anything about anything, at any time, and in any place. But they can do this only because language is heavily constrained by grammatical rules. It is linguistic constraints, in the form of grammatical rules, that make linguistic freedom possible. In a similar vein, it is self-determination within significant constraints that leads to the well-being of the individual and society. The challenge is to identify which constraints on self-determination are the crucial ones.

Affirming Communion at the Expense of Agency in the East

Whereas affirming agency at the expense of communion lies at the root of impeding the good life in the West, affirming communion at the expense of agency lies at the root of impeding the good life in the East. Manifestation of this imbalance takes a variety of forms. We focus on one of them here, namely, the *obsession with face* in Chinese society. The Chinese term for face is *mianzi*, and it reflects one's reputation achieved and maintained through the scrutiny of others. To put it simply, *mianzi* is a measure of the recognition accorded by society to oneself (Chang & Holt, 1994). The richness and complexity of *mianzi* can be seen in its various expressions in the Chinese language. For example, a common expression is "so-and-so loves *mianzi* very much," which means that this person is rather concerned with how he or she appears to other people in public. Another common expression is "so-and-so has a lot of *mianzi*," which means that this person is looked on favorably by other members of society.

Mianzi occupies a central role in the life of the typical Chinese because he or she lives in a relation-based society (King & Bond, 1985). In such a society, the focus is not on the individual but, instead, on the relationship between individuals. As relational beings, individuals are sensitive to their relationships with other people, who are above, below, or on equal footing with themselves. This sensitivity to relationships can be seen in the careful cultivation of *guanxi* in Chinese society (Ng, 2001). Literally, *guanxi* is translated as "relations," but, specifically, it refers to the emotional bond that exists between two individuals. As relational partners who are connected by *guanxi*, one is expected to show emotional concern for one's partner. To show one's emotional concern is to respect and to acknowledge the other's *mianzi*. Through this process of "giving" and "claiming" *mianzi*, the relational partners reaffirm the *guanxi* (emotional bond) between them. *Guanxi* is the token that permits *mianzi* to work, while *mianzi* is the nutrient that sustains *guanxi*.

According to Chang and Holt (1994), *mianzi* and *guanxi* cannot be separated from each other, and it is this fact that holds two contradictory facets of Chinese social life together in uneasy tension. On the one hand, *mianzi* may become a barrier to interpersonal relating; on the other hand, it provides a facilitating mechanism to improve interpersonal effectiveness. A delicate balance must be

reached between de-emphasizing *mianzi* so as not to worsen an already difficult situation, and emphasizing it enough to maintain smooth social interactions. As Ho (1976) noted, the opportunities for misstep are extensive:

Since social expectations are reciprocal in nature, potential conflicts arise when there is a discrepancy between what a person expects or claims from others and what others extend to him. The possibility of losing face can arise not only from the individual's failure to meet his obligations, but also from the failure to act in accordance with his expectations of them—that is, not only from the individual's own actions, but also from how he is treated by others. (p. 873)

To the Chinese, failure to grant *mianzi* constitutes a denial of the emotional bond that exists between two relational partners, a refusal to acknowledge the *guanxi* between them. The partner who is not “given” *mianzi* will experience the negative feeling that “I have no *mianzi*.” Under the social norm of “mercy for mercy, and revenge for revenge,” he or she will “destroy” the *mianzi* of the other party when an opportunity presents itself in the future (Chang & Holt, 1994). Because damaging the *mianzi* of one's relational partner has grave consequences for all, it is incumbent on each interactant to protect the other's *mianzi* by all available means. Protecting each other's *mianzi* implies that interactants take their relational responsibilities seriously, and it is a measure of one's wisdom in dealing with the world (King, 1989).

This concern with *mianzi* can be overdone, however, and it may create interpersonal difficulties that prevent an immediate and expeditious solution of the problem. For example, when a dispute takes place between two or more individuals in public, each may insist that he or she is right in attempting to protect his or her own *mianzi*. But when each party sticks to its own interpretation of the matter, they end up sacrificing their relationship without dealing with the problem at hand. A Chinese female clerk interviewed by Chang and Holt (1994) described this excessive concern for *mianzi* in Chinese society as “taking things too seriously.” Referring to the Chinese folk saying “they won't cry without seeing the coffin,” she elaborated, “I think Chinese sometimes take things too seriously. . . . Not until they have destroyed the whole situation and the event becomes very serious will they realize they have done something wrong and regret what they have done. They have made the event too big and cannot find a way to remedy it” (p. 114).

Especially problematic is the situation in which one party assumes a higher status vis-à-vis the other party. For example, the elderly are a revered group in Chinese society. Younger people are expected to give *mianzi* to their seniors instead of claiming it from them. Conversely, elderly people expect to claim *mianzi* from the younger generation instead of giving it to them. Particularly in the relationship between father and son, the father can claim his *mianzi* as father from his son. However, this linkage between *mianzi* and status in Chinese society can lead to a situation that is “not reasonable.” A Taiwanese who was interviewed by Chang and Holt (1994) elaborated on this point:

Among Chinese, the father is the older generation. If today he has some conflict with his child, and there is a third party involved in the situation, even if the son is correct, the father would not apologize to his son. He will think, "I am the father, how could I apologize to you?" This is a common occurrence. . . . He loves his *mianzi* to death and thinks, "my status is higher than yours, how can I apologize?" It is his fault but he wants the other to "remedy the situation." This is much too common in Taiwan. This is not reasonable. (p. 114)

In the above example, the father "loves his *mianzi* to death" and refuses to apologize to his son even though he is in the wrong, because he has a higher status vis-à-vis his son. More generally, the Chinese are a face-loving people and care a lot about the status that they occupy in society. This love of face and concern with status is the result of the strong tendency of the Chinese to use considerations of rank and hierarchy in making socially evaluative judgments about an individual (Bond, Wan, Leung, & Giacalone, 1985). As a result, many Chinese strive for materialistic goods that will "inflate" *mianzi* and enhance their standing in the community. For example, Singaporeans chase after the "five Cs of life," namely, cash, car, condominium, credit card, and country-club membership (Ng, 2001).

In a face-conscious society, it is possible for the person to develop an obsession with face, like the Taiwanese father in the previous example. Such a person is said to be *ai mianzi*, which is a mildly derogatory term in the Chinese language. When one is obsessed with face (*ai mianzi*), one is not likely to experience well-being for the following reasons. First, one is likely to claim more face from others than they are willing to extend. This discrepancy between the *mianzi* that one claims from others and the *mianzi* that one receives from others constitutes a source of strain in one's interpersonal relations (Ho, 1994). Second, when other people do not acknowledge one's claim to *mianzi*, one's face is threatened, or even lost, leaving one with an unpleasant experience. Chu (1983) found that threats to one's face result in an admixture of dysphoric emotions, such as feeling oppressed, anxious, angry, ashamed, and guilty. Lau, Chiu, and Ho (1997) found that losing face is accompanied by embarrassment, flushing, wanting to hide, and feeling inhibited, inferior, self-conscious, or exposed.

Incidentally, the emotional cost of *ai mianzi* is experienced not only by those unsuccessful members of society who occupy the lower ranks of the hierarchical order, it is also experienced by those successful members who occupy its higher ranks. This point is illustrated in the following incident recounted in Ng (2001). A company manager in Singapore bought a brand new Mercedes Benz. At night, he parked it at the common lot next to his residence. The next morning, he found that a vandal had scratched his car. Indignant and frustrated, he decided to track down the culprit and spent about S\$15,000, on video-recording equipment. He and his wife took turns to stay up into the wee hours of the morning, hoping to catch the vandal red-handed on film. Their efforts paid off, but they got a nasty shock: The culprit turned out to be none other than their next-door neighbor, who was seething with rage and jealousy at the sight of their new Mercedes Benz!

On the Compatibility of Agency and Communion

The foregoing analysis shows that affirming agency at the expense of communion (tyranny of freedom) lies at the root of impeding the good life in the West, whereas affirming communion at the expense of agency (obsession with face) lies at the root of impeding the good life in the East. Can this failure to maintain a fine balance between agency and communion be due to the incompatibility between these two fundamental modes of human existence? After all, to be autonomous is to be separate from others, as many would believe. Conversely, to be close to others and depend on them is to lose one's individuality and identity. To validate this view, one needs only to turn to the classic work of experimental psychologists such as Asch (1955) on conformity and Milgram (1974) on obedience to authority. In unison, their research seems to show that the capacity of the individual to behave in an autonomous way is in conflict or threatened by the very presence of other people.

However, Kagitcibasi (1996) argued that autonomy (agency) is not incompatible with relatedness (communion). To explain why they are not mutually incompatible, she introduced two different but related dimensions, namely, *interpersonal distance* and *agency*. The first dimension is concerned with interpersonal separateness-relatedness, or the degree of distancing the self from others. The second dimension is concerned with agent-like (autonomous) versus pawn-like (heteronomous) functioning. According to Kagitcibasi, one's standing on the interpersonal distance dimension may or may not reflect one's standing on the agency dimension. For example, if self-other relations are close, the person may be more likely to be dependent on others, but this is not necessarily so. In other words, one of these dimensions does not have to imply the other; their relationship is empirical rather than logical. Nevertheless, in much theorizing on this topic, these two separate dimensions are often juxtaposed and used interchangeably (e.g., to be autonomous is to be separate from others). Kagitcibasi traced this to the individualistic ethos of the Western world, which pits the individual against the social group. Examples are Asch's research on conformity and Milgram's research on obedience to authority. However, if these two dimensions are separate and independent, then it is quite possible for the different poles of each to coexist.

Various researchers agree with Kagitcibasi (1996) that autonomy (agency) is not incompatible with relatedness (communion). For example, Ryan and Lynch (1989) found that optimal adjustment in developing a sense of autonomy for adolescents and young adults involved maintaining relatedness with family members rather than detachment from or weakening relational ties with them. Hodgins, Koestner, and Duncan (1996) argued that autonomy and relatedness are not opposite ends of a bipolar continuum but, rather, are two central human needs that coexist throughout life. They pointed out that in considering autonomy, it is necessary to make a distinction between freedom from governance of others, predicated on independence and nonreliance on others, and freedom to self-govern,

that is, to make informed choices based on an awareness of one's own personal needs and values. Koestner and Losier (1996) termed the former as reactive autonomy and the latter as reflective autonomy. *Reactive autonomy* refers to the psychological reaction against external influence on behavior, and hence it is anticomunal in character. *Reflective autonomy* refers to the reflective weighing of outside inputs along with consideration of one's own interests and feelings, and hence it is procommunal in character. In accordance with this characterization of the two constructs, Hodgins, Koestner, and Duncan provided empirical evidence indicating that, unlike reactive autonomy, reflective autonomy does not undermine but actually promotes connectedness and positive social experiences. From these findings, they concluded that autonomy and relatedness are complementary needs of the individual, and one is not required to choose between them. Instead, fulfilling one need heightens the probability of fulfilling the other need.

A Dialectical Synthesis of Agency and Communion

The preceding analysis reveals that the individual's failure to strike a balance between agency and communion is *not* due to the mutual incompatibility of these two fundamental modes of human existence. Instead, we suggest that it is due to the individual's tendency to subscribe to the indigenous psychology of selfhood without critical reflection. This tendency is a byproduct of the socialization process in which the developing child is attuned gradually to the system of consensual understanding and shared practices in society, which define the most natural and ordinary ways of behaving as a person in society. By attuning oneself to this cultural complex, one affirms oneself as a meaningful, stable, and largely respectable cultural entity in the eyes of other members in the community. However, what is "right," "proper," "desirable," and "correct" for the individual as a cultural entity may not be so for the individual as a psychological entity. This point is succinctly stated by Heelas and Lock (1981):

Our indigenous psychology works to maintain and fulfill what our social world defines as that which we should be. But perhaps this counts against what our basic psychological nature demands of us: in other words, that sociocultural views of the self do not necessarily fulfill the needs of the self as a natural psychological entity. (p. xvi)

One way to avoid being caught in the horns of this dilemma is to engage in a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion. From this perspective, agency and communion do not merely coexist. Instead, each relies on the other to thrive. Agency without communion is solitary individualism; the life it offers is like that of the polar bear, free to roam alone in the desolate cold. Communion without agency has no individual character; it offers a plain life of security and anchorage in the social group, like a swarm of bees in a hive. But in unison, both agency and communion offer a new vision of the good life in which freedom and security are included. Agency may be achieved through communion, when the indi-

vidual chooses to surrender a portion of personal freedom for the collective good and to become more selfless in relating and maintaining solidarity with others. Communion may be realized via agency in an open and tolerant society that encourages plurality and diversity rather than in a face-conscious society that imposes conformity and uniformity.

Our call to engage in a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion is echoed by other scholars. Sampson (1988) argued for a communal form of agency to take root in the European American cultural context by making a distinction between self-contained individualism and ensembled individualism. *Self-contained individualism* is based on clearly defined and well-differentiated self–nonself boundaries and reflects a psychology of the person that excludes the other. In contrast, *ensembled individualism* is based on a fluid conception of the self–nonself boundaries and reflects a psychology of the person that includes the other. Sampson argued that core cultural values such as freedom, responsibility, and achievement are better realized via ensembled rather than self-contained individualism. To illustrate this point, he compared the motivation to engage in socially responsible behavior in these two conceptions of individualism.

In self-contained individualism, where the boundary between self and other is clearly differentiated, one engages in socially responsible behavior only if one experiences personal efficacy as a causal agent. In other words, if one believes that one's actions are under one's own control, then one feels motivated to behave in a socially responsible way. On the other hand, if one believes that one's actions are not under one's control, then one feels unmotivated to behave in a socially responsible way. By contrast, in ensembled individualism, where the boundary between self and other overlaps, one's identity is defined in and through one's relations with others; one is completed through these relations and does not exist apart from them. Therefore, one's work on behalf of others is simultaneously work on behalf of oneself. There is no conflict between doing the right thing and doing the self-interested thing in the case of ensembled individualism. By contrast, in the case of self-contained individualism, the individual is frequently torn between doing the right thing and doing the self-interested thing. Sampson (1988) observed that when socially responsible behavior appears as part of an indigenous psychology of ensembled individualism, people provide and receive assistance without defining this situation as an infringement on their personal freedoms. However, when socially responsible behavior appears as part of an indigenous psychology of self-contained individualism, it is likely that, over time, increasingly strong external rule will be required to contain the excesses that self-interested behavior produces.

In a similar vein, Ng (2001), in his provocative book *Why Asians Are Less Creative Than Westerners*, has called for an agentic form of communion to take root in the East Asian cultural context. He presented a variety of empirical evidence and anecdotal observations to support his controversial assertion that East Asians are less creative than European Americans. He argued that this lack of

creativity is not due to any genetic or biological limitations of East Asians. Instead, it is the result of living in a collective, tightly organized, and consensus-minded society in which individual conformity to social norms is encouraged and expected, and differences between individuals are minimized to avoid conflict. This emphasis on group living and social harmony has created a stable and conservative society of people who are not very creative or imaginative.

As an example, Ng (2001) cited the herd mentality of Singaporeans, which is manifested in the cultural syndrome of *kiasuism* (Chan, 1994). This term is literally translated as “afraid to lose” and refers to the hypercompetitive behavior of those Singaporeans who strive to be the first to lay their hands on much sought-after goods that everyone else wants. Examples of *kiasu* behavior range from the mad rush for food at a buffet lunch to the overnight queue for limited editions of Hello Kitty dolls offered by McDonald’s Singapore. According to Ng, the *kiasu* Singaporean reasons in the following stereotypical way: “If so many people are going after the same thing, then it must be good, or else why are they going after it? So better play it safe by getting it first, otherwise later there will be no more.”

Ng (2001) called for a fundamental change in Asian society that enables the individual to be different without feeling out of place and to pursue cherished dreams instead of imitating what other people do and say. He argued that the individual should be able to express his or her personal views in a constructive way, without any fear of recrimination from the social group. Although this call for openness, tolerance, and diversity may increase the potential for social friction between different individuals, Ng argued that its overall impact would be good for Asian society. He cited research that shows that an open environment where a diversity of views can flourish eventually leads to a more creative and intellectually vibrant society, which can make better decisions affecting the lives of its people.

For example, Nemeth (1995) reviewed a large body of studies and concluded that constructive dissent by a minority group can actively promote the quality of decision making and performance in the group as a whole. It does this by stimulating all group members to engage in divergent and flexible thought processes, to search for information in a relatively unbiased fashion, and to consider the matter from multiple perspectives. Simonton (1990) conducted a series of studies on creativity using historical data and found that the political environment of a society in one generation affects the amount of creativity observed in the next. Specifically, creative accomplishments across various domains such as literature, music, visual arts, and science tended to increase as the level of political diversity in the previous generation increased.

Compatibility With Received Wisdom in the East and West

The theoretical model of well-being that we have developed suggests that, to enjoy well-being, the individual should strike a balance between self and others.

This scientific pointer on how to live the good life is compatible with the received wisdom of venerated thinkers in the East and West. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ exhorted his audience to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Confucius said the same thing to his disciples, but in a different way: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” Buddha preached the middle path to enlightenment, which involves not causing hurt to oneself or others (broadly defined to include all living things, not just human beings).

Our account of the good life is similar to the received wisdom in another way; namely, many people find it difficult to live the good life. To live the good life requires the individual to maintain a balance between agency and communion. However, individualistic members tend to affirm agency at the expense of communion, resulting in the tyranny of freedom; collectivistic members tend to affirm communion at the expense of agency, resulting in the obsession with face. This is not to say that no one in these two cultural communities has succeeded in living the good life—there are collectivists in individualistic cultures, just as there are individualists in collectivistic cultures, as Bandura (2001) has observed.

Still, many members of these two cultural communities fail to strike a balance between agency and communion. This failure cannot be attributed to the mutual incompatibility of these two fundamental modes of human existence. Instead, it is due to the individual’s tendency to subscribe to the indigenous psychology of selfhood in his or her society without critical reflection. In other words, it is possible for the individual to live the good life by engaging in a dialectical synthesis of agency and communion. Individualistic members can do so via a communal form of agency, for example, by making personal sacrifices for the greater good of the collective. Collectivistic members can do so via an agentic form of communion, for example, by expressing personal convictions in a constructive way and without any fear of recrimination.

Admittedly, this guideline on how to be happy and live the good life is general and applicable to members from only two cultural communities. Many questions remain to be answered. First, to what extent is our theoretical model of well-being applicable in cultural contexts other than the European American and East Asian cultures? Second, are there universal dimensions of well-being besides agency and communion? If so, what are they? Do they vary in a culturally meaningful way like agency and communion? Third, there are collectivists in individualistic cultures and individualists in collectivistic cultures. This suggests that some members in these two cultural communities are able to strike a fine balance between self and others despite the indigenous psychology of selfhood operating within their respective societies. How do these members attune themselves to the dominant cultural complex so as to meet their psychological needs for agency and communion? Fourth, individualistic members tend to affirm agency at the expense of communion, whereas collectivistic members tend to affirm communion at the expense of agency. What can each cultural commu-

nity learn from the other to enable it to strike a good balance between agency and communion?

“Thinking Through the Other”

Regarding the last question, we are not making the simplistic suggestion that members in these two cultural communities should forsake their own culture and way of life in a wholesale imitation of the other. It makes no sense for the European American to worship dead relatives in ancestral tablets or for the East Asian to celebrate Thanksgiving Day by eating roast turkey. Instead, our suggestion here is that members in these two cultural communities should “think through the other” by using the well-articulated aspects of the other’s culture and way of life to heighten awareness of the less well-articulated aspects of their own culture and way of life (Shweder, 1990).

“Thinking through the other” assumes that the other is a specialist or expert on some aspect of human experience, whose reflective consciousness and system of representations and discourse can be used to reveal hidden dimensions of one’s own culture. This is because the more one conceives of another culture within its own terms, the more the doctrines, rituals, art forms, and other modes of representation within that culture come to seem like sophisticated expressions of repressed, dormant, and potentially creative and transformative aspects of one’s own culture.

For example, since the time of Confucius, East Asians have pondered long and hard on how one can live in peace and harmony with other people in society. In a similar vein, since the time of Socrates, European Americans have pondered long and hard on how one can know oneself and develop one’s creative potential to the fullest. By “thinking through the other” and understanding how the other engages in this existential project—unraveling the meaning of human existence—one ends up with an enlarged vision of how to live the good life. For instance, one realizes that there are (at least) two approaches to the good life, namely, by the direct pursuit of one’s happiness, as well as by the indirect pursuit of the happiness of those people around oneself.

“Thinking through the other” is a constructive way of engaging the other. By contrast, “thinking down the other” is an unconstructive way of engaging the other. It is manifested in one’s disparaging remarks about the other’s culture and way of life. For example, liberal critics in the West dismiss the Asian form of parliamentary democracy as an “elected dictatorship” or a “one-party state.” In turn, conservative critics in the East accuse the West of cultural chauvinism in attempting to impose incommensurable “Western values” on an Asian society (Ng, 2001). In a strife-torn world that has experienced the horror of September 11, 2001, we should strive to “think through the other” rather than to “think down the other.” Whereas the former holds a better prospect for peace, goodwill, and un-

derstanding to reign among members of different communities, the latter can only intensify the distrust and conflict between them.

In Search of the Good Life: An Eternal Journey

From the dawn of human civilization, ancient thinkers in different lands have pondered these perennial questions: What is the good life? How should I live? Where can I find happiness? Sharing the same concern, we embarked on a cultural odyssey of the East and West, in search of the good life. Our search has yielded the following answers. First, there are different ways of understanding happiness. In the West, people believe that happiness is an unmitigated good to which the individual is entitled. In the East, people adopt a more hesitant attitude toward happiness. Second, there are different ways of experiencing happiness. In the West, happiness is experienced as a private feeling that is located in the individual. In the East, happiness is experienced as a communal feeling that is located between individuals. Third, there are different ways of pursuing happiness. In the West, people engage in the direct pursuit of their own happiness; in the East, people engage in the indirect pursuit of the happiness of their loved ones.

Finally, to be happy and live the good life, one should maintain a good balance between self and other. This is similar to the received wisdom in the East and West, and it appears to be simple and sensible enough. Yet many people find it difficult to be happy and live the good life. This is not because it is impossible for people to live for themselves and for other people at the same time. Instead, it is because people tend to subscribe to the conception of selfhood in their society without critical reflection. For example, in the West, the cultural imperative is to be an independent self. So people strive to behave in an autonomous and self-determined manner. In the process, they neglect the people around them. In the East, the cultural imperative is to be an interdependent self. So people strive to be connected and identified with other people. In the process, they neglect themselves. In both situations, one does not enjoy well-being. To do so, one must learn to live for oneself and for other people at the same time.

Although we have developed a theoretical model of well-being that is applicable in different cultures, we are mindful that “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing.” We encourage readers to explore other perspectives on the good life, which we have not been able to deal with here. Examples are Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, which enable the individual to find peace and solace. Exploring these diverse worlds in search of the good life is an eternal journey, and every one of us should engage in it. For as members of a human species that speaks so many tongues, engages in so many social activities and practices, and holds on to so many diverse ideas, beliefs, and philosophies of life, sooner or later we will have to consult all that is human to arrive at a deeper and more complete understanding of what it means to be a person in this world. Laozi, the mystical Daoist sage, once remarked, “The journey of a thou-

sand miles begins with a single step.” Our article represents a small step in this eternal search of the good life.

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