The Structure of Cultural Orientations to the Good Life and their Expression in

Personal Narratives

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Toronto

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2012

Abstract

Understanding the rational and ethical sense that people make of their actions and experiences requires understanding the lives they are trying to live. The narrative visions of a good life that are dominant in a society thus represent an important aspect of cultural orientation. To gain insight into the form and function of these visions, two studies were conducted. In Study 1, the various criteria by which people judge their lives as good or worthy were examined using multidimensional scaling of responses from four different cultural groups of students: Chinese, East Asian Canadian, South Asian Canadian, and Western European Canadian. The results revealed two underlying structural dimensions on which both criteria and cultural groups could

be differentiated. One reflected the *locus* of criterial goods and the other their *morality*. The clearest cultural contrast was between Chinese participants, who tended toward the prudential, materialistic, and hedonistic pole of the morality dimension, and South Asians, who tended more toward the spirituality and beneficence pole. In Study 2, the content of personal narratives produced by Chinese and South Asian students was analyzed to examine whether their contrasting orientations to the good life would be reflected in the kinds of life experiences they recounted. Some evidence of correspondence in this regard was found.

Acknowledgements

First, I should thank my wife Mairi who encouraged me and made it possible for me to attend graduate school, but has since been called away from this world. Mairi, you will always have my undying gratitude. Equally important has been my current wife Marygrace, who reappeared in my life at the perfect time. Marygrace, your presence has been an enormous source of strength and inspiration for me. You have improved my life more than you can ever know.

Romin Tafarodi, my academic supervisor, has been an enormous help in completing this project. I truly appreciate all the time, help, and honest advice that you have given me over the years. This has been a truly educational experience on many levels and I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with you. Thanks also to my other committee members, Charles Helwig and Geoff MacDonald, for your insights on previous drafts, and for being the fine human beings that you are.

Finally, thank you to my parents, John and Ruth. You gave me my life and I have always felt secure knowing that you are there for me. I am blessed to have such capable, kind, and supportive people in my life. I hope that I will continue to be able to live up to your example.

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Introduction

Most people at some point in their lives wrestle with the questions “What is life about?” and “What is the point of my existence?” Discussions of these and the closely related concerns, “What makes life worth living?” and “What does it mean to live a good life?” appear across history and culture, with the likes of Jesus, Aristotle, Einstein, and Confucius offering opinions on the subject. As such, the question of how people *ought* to live their lives has been thoroughly discussed. Potentially just as interesting and certainly more relevant to psychology, however, is the matter of how individuals actually manage to answer these questions for themselves. In other words, how do average people, as opposed to philosophers and academics, come to terms with such existential quandaries in their own lives? Setting aside formal ideologies and grand systems of thought, what does “the person on the street” believe is important? And what does she look to in deciding whether she is doing well in her life? By looking at how people define what is important in their lives, it may be possible to better understand how they make evaluative sense of themselves and their circumstances.

This dissertation, rather than attempting to provide a prescriptive answer to the question of what makes a life worthwhile, addresses how people from different cultural backgrounds judge their own lives or, more specifically, the criteria by which they decide whether their lives have been good or worthwhile. My objective, in other words, is to identify the ways that people from different cultures assess the quality of their own existence, and the degree to which similarities and differences exist between them. I will begin by discussing the rationale for a descriptive approach to this topic which stems from problems common to previous efforts. This will be followed by an explanation of cultural narratives and biographical templates; and how they reflect social norms and expectations in structuring individuals’ understanding of their own lives. The potential that a theoretical focus on narrative holds for providing insight into the

articulation of life's meaning in any given cultural context will be made clear. On a parallel note, I will critically discuss how existing research on this topic has itself been normatively framed. The next major section will speak to the possibility of universalism in this area. I will examine findings from personal values research that highlight the importance of structural constraints and historical context in the formation of beliefs. This will involve spelling out how economic, biological, and other material forces, together with culture, produce identifiable patterns in the organization of beliefs and ideas across different societies. The case will be made that basic or universal forces interact with cultural forms in shaping beliefs. After reviewing these ideas, I will describe a study I conducted with my supervisor and a number of international collaborators to begin examining cultural differences and similarities in how a good life is conceived. Finally, I will introduce the two dissertation studies I designed to advance beyond this initial project.

Beliefs in Context: The Historical Basis for Understanding

Beliefs are powerful guides to action, but they can also be quite labile. Beliefs form a shifting mental map that is continually reshaped by the demands of what I shall call social reality – the nexus of symbolic representations, institutions, and practices that structure the way people act and relate to each other in any society (Searle, 1995). Human beings are largely incapable of thriving in isolation from others. As such, we are biologically disposed to live in groups, and most of our mental energy and many of our unique evolutionary adaptations are given to fulfilling the requirements of living within the particular groups into which we are born (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1950). The human species has survived through the creation and maintenance of organized social structures that exploit the material resources available in the environment. This means that a primary requirement of individual success (in the evolutionary sense of surviving and reproducing) is the ability to efficiently learn and reproduce the meanings, rules, and cooperative activities necessary for life within any specific social structure (Cosmides & Tooby,

2005; Freud, 1929). Humans have evolved many natural tendencies that specifically promote the efficient and largely automatic acquisition of social skills and norms. Social adaptation, in other words, is largely implicit or unconscious. It is, in many ways, most effective when it occurs without deliberation or awareness (Quinn, 2003), when the second-order programming delivered by culture becomes wired as firmly as that defined by genetics (Ledoux, 2003), and in some cases even overrides genetic programming. Ways of being in the social world, the largely tacit rules of living with others, become internalized during the course of enculturation as ‘natural’ ways of seeing, acting, and reacting (Geertz, 1973). Eventually, such behavioural patterns and rules come to form a kind of social *reality* that, for practical purposes, seems as real to people living within it as the ground they walk on.

The scripts and schemas by which any individual interprets his surroundings are formed through dialogue with other members of the community. The social reality of each individual takes its shape from the sociocultural context in both the broad sense of national, regional, and ethnic traditions as well as in the more localized sense of peer group, family, workplace, school, and neighbourhood customs and beliefs. The way that these multiple layers of influence are organized, integrated, and internalized by every individual gives contingent shape and character to their way of understanding the surrounding world. The process of integrating these multiple layers into a coherent whole is a developmental process which in many ways parallels identity formation (e.g. Erikson, 1950; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001).

Individuals of a certain nationality, Americans for example, can be expected to have certain similarities in thought patterns based on shared culture in the broad sense. Factors such as language and the endorsement of abstract values such as personal liberty tend to diffuse through all levels of a culture. Social realities and their supporting attitudes and beliefs, however, will also vary within a complex society. Every individual becomes socialized into a different

environment related to their social class, education, location, family status, and other salient factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Erikson, 1950). For any group, large or small, to function effectively, its members must possess a great deal of understanding in common. Although complex societies contain many different mutually embedded groups with varying levels of shared meaning between them, the social reality of any individual consists of a dynamic configuration of multiple group commitments and corresponding identities.

In the next few sections, I will discuss in detail how the rules by which humans learn to make meaning and judge worth in their surroundings are grounded in cultural narrative frameworks (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Erikson, 1968). These narrative frameworks represent the ways that people learn to organize and interpret objects, experiences, and events in a meaningful way.

The Evolution of Cultural Forms

Every society, whether seal-hunting Inuit, medieval peasant farmers, or city dwellers of the 21st century, develops its own distinctive practices, norms, and traditions in regard to the production and distribution of resources and meeting of other basic human needs. Like species, societies evolve to meet the needs of vastly different environments. Accordingly, the beliefs and understandings that subserve and maintain these systems are as varied as the institutionalized forms of life to which they are tied (MacIntyre, 1999). Human beings are proficient at internalizing and reproducing the distinctive social order – or culture – into which they are born. Such flexibility requires the ability to readily acquire and integrate the types of background dispositions and beliefs which permit smooth functioning within groups. Playing different roles effectively requires people to automatically internalize and execute the social patterns of the surrounding group. Beliefs and attitudes that allow social functioning are in a true sense of the

term “second nature.” Humans are genetically coded to absorb the rules of a society and act as if they are “natural” beliefs.

There is almost always some degree of shared understanding among people of different backgrounds. To the degree, however, that cultures differ from each other, either in the broader or more localized sense of the word culture, there is potential for misunderstanding and incompatibility. When investigating cultural differences in conceptions of a good life, it is therefore important to remain vigilant of how we, as researchers, may be hampered by our own cultural commitments in understanding the valuative orientations of others.

As mentioned earlier, there are most certainly aspects of experience that are shared across even the most culturally divergent societies. A common biological heritage brings with it a core set of universal needs and capacities. Accordingly, the possibility of underlying structure or order in diversity of criteria by which people define a good or worthwhile life across dissimilar social realities will be examined in the first study of this dissertation.

Cultural Orientations

Needs and wants are socially situated. Our commitments, articulated or not, about what is important in life (indeed, the very way that life itself is evaluated) are shaped by culturally shared narratives (Anscombe, 1958; MacIntyre, 1999). That is, the understanding of what makes a life good or worthwhile is inherently diachronic, relating to the temporal unfolding of a lifetime and involving goods that can only be realized along extended trajectories of intention and action. Important here is the notion of an action or event sequence, the building block of a purposive, unified life and identity. Clearly, such sequences can only be understood as extending across situations. This suggests that it is not enough to define the features of a good life statically, as abstract terms with no connection to the temporality of human existence. The concrete expression of such abstractions in cultural practices often reveals how much variation exists

across individuals and groups in how they are understood and pursued. A word such as “pleasure,” for example, may seem crystal-clear to the person speaking (and pursuing) it, but have quite different grounded meanings for others. Even within the same society, different subgroups are guided by distinct substantive visions of pleasure – some as getting drunk and watching professional sports, others as reading and contemplation, still others as sadomasochistic sex. These differences are not incidental to our understanding of cultural differences.

There are some, of course, who respond to this diversity by reducing pleasure to a common biological essence. Some might say, for example, “Pleasure is a matter of feelings. It reduces to endorphins and neurotransmitters. The surface features aren’t important.” When talking about the ways in which people live or intend to live, however, the “surface” is, in fact, rather important. A good analogy here is the research that has repeatedly shown that although there seems to be a limited number of basic or universal emotions (e.g. Ekman, 1973), there are also important differences across cultures in both how and how often specific emotions are displayed, as well as in their social and psychological consequences (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Triandis, 1994). Biological underpinnings account for basic levels of motivation and feeling, but the structuring of these motives and feelings into expressed, socially significant forms is clearly a culturally mediated affair. Similarly, in trying to understand the ideals that define a good life, biological imperatives are best seen as something akin to the engine that powers an automobile. The engine provides the propulsive force the car requires to run, but cannot account for its specific destination, routes taken, or manner of driving. Moreover, as long as the car works properly, the driver pays little attention to the existence and dynamics of the engine. In short, understanding conceptions of a good life, or any other symbolic cultural form for that matter, involves examining the particular ways in which brute needs and feelings give rise to socially meaningful forms of private and public life.

Ideas of the “good” are culturally framed. Proximity dictates that we spend most of our time with those who share our cultural background. In fact, we are more attracted to similar others and tend to selectively associate with people who share our attitudes and experiences (Byrne, Clore, & Worchel, 1966; Singh & Ho, 2000). Thus, people living together in groups normally possess similar frames of reference. They share a common horizon of understanding or frame of reference that underlies their specific thoughts and perceptions. Such shared frames allow groups to communicate and cooperate effectively. Day-to-day matters can be taken as given, for they are managed according to unspoken rules. The fact that people often take their worldviews as truth or knowledge (and are able to get away with it most of the time) becomes a challenge for understanding the actions of those who do not share them. This complicates efforts to naturalize or universalize concepts such as “good” in a culture-free way. Anscombe (1958) points this out convincingly in her description of the layers of social meaning underlying moral beliefs, the implications of which apply equally well to psychology as to philosophy.

Anscombe argues that the meanings of psychological constructs such as well-being, happiness, and pleasure are not as clear as we assume. Aristotle’s *arête* and *eudaimonia*, for example, have been translated into English as “virtue” and “living well,” and interpreted as instructions for living a “good” life, as in morally good or virtuous. Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, however, was not so much a matter of living a “good” life in the sense of gaining a passage to heaven in the afterlife (the Christian conception), but more akin to what we now refer to as “self-actualization.” The ancient Greeks and 19th-century Europeans had very different understandings of human nature. What Aristotle described as “living well” or living a life of virtue was more about living a balanced life, and becoming a wise man. Aristotle believed that virtue resided in cultivating man’s true and distinctive nature, not in avoiding sin to achieve salvation. In Anscombe’s view, the Judaeo-Christian ideology of sin and salvation produced a

distortion of Aristotle's ideas. Modern Europeans trained to understand "good" and "bad" as polar opposites could not comprehend Aristotle's ideas on virtue. Virtue as a way of living in harmony with nature was transformed into a fight against nature. Purifying the spirit became a denial of the body. Seemingly straightforward terms such as "virtue" and "livingwell" or "living a good life" – indeed, the very nature of good itself – thus took on very different meanings within different sociohistorical contexts and cultural lifeworlds.

Cultural orientations, thus, can account for very different ways of understanding basic evaluative notions. Terms such as pleasure, pain, contentedness, and loss may be understood and pursued/avoided quite differently across societies. Just as Greeks and Christians saw goodness or virtue in fundamentally divergent ways, those whose worldviews are coloured by monistic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism may conceive of pleasure and happiness quite differently than do those bound to dualistic traditions such as Christianity. Core assumptions about the nature of existence and the relationship of the individual to the divine passed along through the symbolic forms and practices of a culture shape an individual's conceptions of beauty and desire, and hence their actual experience of satisfaction and pleasure, in important ways. The traditions and cultural outlooks associated with Buddhism and Christianity, for example, arguably reflect different approaches to enlightenment or the sacred. Although both traditions are broad and variegated (sectarianism) into conflicting interpretations, on the whole, Buddhist traditions teaches that enlightenment is achieved through the elimination of external striving. Enlightenment, thus, relates to calmness and being present in the world. Most Christian traditions, on the other hand, emphasize the the necessity of accepting Christ, the human embodiment of a separate divinity, as one's saviour. The ultimate good, then, is something that exists outside oneself and must be striven for. It has been argued (e.g., Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan, & Nisbett, 2008; Shweder, 2000) that these "monistic" versus "dualistic" traditions shape the

manner in which people from these broad cultural traditions understand their relationship to, and the very nature of, reality. This gives rise to very different aesthetic and moral sensibilities. Some people, for example, may see happiness as something fleeting and external which needs to be constantly and vigorously pursued, whereas others may view happiness as something intrinsic which is realized only when certain types of stimuli and concerns are quieted or transcended.

Cultures can be attuned to different biological states. Admittedly, the above contrast is sweeping and coarsely drawn. Its only purpose was to give some sense of the kinds of differences that might exist in how people understand happiness or pleasure. Interestingly, the material reality of such differences may be reflected in the brain. For example, psychological research has lent support to the idea that alternate ways of defining or conceiving of happiness-like emotions correspond to a neurophysiological separation of function. Specifically, there appear to be dissociable neural substrates responsible for feelings like excitement and engagement, defined by many Western psychologists (e.g. Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999) as key components of happiness, and those responsible for feelings of contentedness or inner peace, emotions which fit more with the Buddhist conception of happiness. Panskepp (1998), for example, has specifically identified separate brain structures and pathways that produce the feeling of excitement, on one hand, and contentedness, on the other. People, then, may attach their judgements of happiness or satisfaction to measurably different feelings, feelings that they consider to be more or less relevant based upon their own culture-bound visions of what satisfaction consists of. This suggests that measurably different physiological states (e.g., excitedness as opposed to contentedness) might be associated with evaluative terms such as “happy” or “desirable” for people of different backgrounds. This, in turn, could have important consequences for life goals and choices, including the active pursuit or avoidance of different types of experiences and events. Indeed, some cultural studies (e.g. Tsai, Knutson, &

Fung, 2006; Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007) have demonstrated that people from Asian versus European backgrounds differ in their preference for stimulating as opposed to calmness-inducing experiences and lifestyles. Taking such findings one step further, Vitterso, Oelmann, and Wang (2009) have recently shown that measures of life satisfaction tend to be biased towards a definition of pleasure involving arousing or stimulating experiences. In other words, those who score higher in life satisfaction tend to focus their attention on arousing stimuli. These findings may help explain the results of related studies (e.g. Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998; Oishi, 2002) showing cultural differences in reported levels of life satisfaction. Specifically, societies with a Buddhist-influenced cultural orientation may simply not understand satisfaction or happiness in the same way as North Americans do.

Cultural forms are largely transparent. Every society, in providing its members with an interpretive palette of symbols and forms, colours their outlook on the world in ways that are often invisible from the inside. Cultural assumptions are so ingrained and feel so natural that they are often taken as universal truths. Despite their fundamental role in shaping experience and understanding, they cannot usually be articulated. They ground our conscious thoughts, desires, and goals, and are generally taken for granted until they fail to support our actions or produce conflict with others. Even in cases where our beliefs and assumptions do fail, however, it is often easier to direct frustration outward rather than to identify and question our fundamental beliefs. In trying, then, to understand how people define for themselves what it means to lead a good life, it is important to recognize the cultural relativity of our own ideas, beliefs, and expectations. The very concepts we use to conceive of desirability and worth carry background assumptions and commitments of which we are only dimly aware, if at all. Thinking that others use the same standards to define worth, goodness, or merit as we do is a trap into which it is all too easy to fall.

Meaning and Culture

Cultural bias, it turns out, is evident in many psychological discussions of the good life. Ryff and Singer (1998) proposed a definition of well-being that includes self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that human thriving requires the experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Seligman (2002) proposes a view of a worthwhile life that includes pleasure, engagement, and meaning. All these views add depth to mainstream characterizations of well-being or life satisfaction as the simple weighting of positive as opposed to negative emotions (e.g. Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999), but they do not address the more difficult issues brought up by Anscombe. For example, how are terms as pleasure, meaning, purpose, competence, or relatedness understood from the inside? Do these terms bear the same meanings, for example, for a Chinese and an Englishman, or to a plumber and a politician? And if some do have much the same meaning, are they pursued and achieved in comparable ways? There may be important qualitative differences in how these constructs are elaborated on and associated with actions and events. Without exploring how a concept is “lived” – its application in the concrete details of life – one can unknowingly project one’s own understanding of a concept onto others.

Even in the case of presumably universal constructs, measurement or operationalization by its nature requires restrictive or exclusive definitions which can bias our understanding of what is addressed (e.g. Archer, 1992; Labov, 1972). Take, for example, positive relations with others, which many (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Erikson, 1950; Ryff & Singer, 1998) have proposed as a universal human need. Statements such as “Most people see me as loving and affectionate” and “People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others” are used by Ryff and Singer (1998) to represent and measure positive relations with others, one of their basic dimensions of psychological well-being. Both statements, however,

could be interpreted as reflecting North American cultural norms of what positive relations would look like, which may not hold equally in other cultural contexts. It is certainly possible to imagine situations, especially in rigidly hierarchical, stratified societies, where a well-adjusted person would not necessarily want to be seen as affectionate or giving by *most* other people.

Granted, generosity or helpfulness in some form is likely valued in all cultures at certain times, but every culture draws the boundaries of where and when generosity is appropriate or desirable in different ways. Some groups may see generosity with those that are not close relations as a sign of weakness or vulnerability (e.g. Harris, 1998; Kurzban & Neuberg, 2005). Depending on the economic means available for accumulating, storing, and transporting resources, norms can develop within groups that emphasize either sharing with a wide group of peers or protecting resources and sharing only with one's immediate dependents (Cummins, 2005; Erikson, 1950). Thus, the comparative measurement of a putatively universal human need for positive relations by means of statements such as "people would describe me as a giving person" could be misleading depending on the context. Likewise, someone who took the idea of "being loving and affectionate with most people" as a blanket prescription for positive relations with others might invite exploitation by others or end up acting inappropriately in certain social situations. Such consequences would scarcely promote well-being.

In a similar way, statements such as "There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to do things in my daily life" and "I feel pressured in life" are used by Deci and Ryan (2000) to measure fulfillment of an "organismic," universal need for autonomy. These statements probably do capture the feelings that modern actors have when their choices are not intrinsically motivated. Most 21st-century North Americans, for example, would agree that it is better to not "feel pressured" and that being able to "decide for myself how to do things" is important. It is certainly possible, however, to imagine situations and communities where it

would be seen as childish and self-important to strongly endorse such sentiments; fulfilling one's duty or obligations could easily take priority over such ideas in these cultural contexts (Cummins, 2005). Again, although it is likely that there is, as Ryan and Deci suggest, a universal need for some degree of autonomy and freedom from compulsion (e.g. Chirkov, 2010), there is also great diversity in the degrees and types of restrictions people of different backgrounds see as acceptable or appropriate. If broad claims such as "humans have a need for autonomy" are prescriptively applied irrespective of such cultural differences, misunderstanding is inevitable.

These arguments are not meant to reject particular ideas or theories. My intention with these examples was merely to bring to light the potential dangers involved in conceptualizing or formulating what a good life should be in a broad and universal sense.

Folk Conceptions of a Good life in Psychology

Moving away from attempts to offer universal definitions of happiness or psychological well-being (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998), others have focused on "folk concepts" of what constitutes a worthwhile life, or how people define for themselves what is desirable or preferable in life. King, for example, has in several studies found significant overlap between beliefs about what is desirable and what is morally good. She found that participants desired both enjoyment and contributing to the greater good through their jobs (King & Napa, 1998). Participants in these studies also expressed a desire not to overwork, while seeing those who put forth too little effort as blameworthy (Scollon & King, 2003). On the whole, interpersonal relationships trumped career concerns in estimations of both desirability and morality (Twenge & King, 2005). All of this may tell us something about expressed desires in relation to ideas about "goodness" in the moral sense. Generally, people want to be virtuous (or at least they say they do). The participants in these studies wanted to do what they believed was "right." We see here, however, a rather limited array of options from which participants were

allowed to choose. The choices given reflected a particular sociohistorical perspective on how a life might unfold. Participants chose between helping others and personal wealth, personal relationships and work, and being engaged versus being lazy. Such choices were framed by hypothetical situations representative of middle-class, North American life opportunities, the Christian moral tradition, and the distinctive concerns of university students poised to enter the workforce. Thus, it is dangerous to draw any broad conclusions regarding beliefs about right or wrong or specific types of goods from these studies. As Anscombe pointed out, concepts of good and desirability are strongly influenced by the current cultural climate. Even psychologists, whether due to practical constraints or conceptual commitments, are prone to limitations in how they frame such concepts.

Similar issues arise in recent studies of personal narratives and conceptions of a good life where ideas of worth and goodness has been redefined as self-reported well-being or life satisfaction. King (2001), for example, found that individuals with the highest levels of “well-being” (implying lives that were “best” in some sense) expressed both happiness and meaning in their stories. Similarly, Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda (2005) found that both happiness and growth memories related to well-being. Although these findings satisfy our educated intuitions – after all, few reasonable people would argue against a vision of the good life that includes both enjoyment and meaningfulness – they again fall into the trap described by Anscombe. In these studies, the measure of well-being used, the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Singer, 1998), was specifically designed with the Greek philosophical concept of *eudaimonia* in mind. It conceives of well-being as being composed of various elements, including relations with others, personal growth, and autonomy. In other words, a measure that includes personal growth as an essential ingredient of well-being is used to argue that personal growth is and should be central to our understanding of a good life. The latter, in turn, is indexed as the score on that same

measure of well-being. This is the very sort of tautology that Anscombe's arguments warn us against.

Once again, we press up against the importance and difficulty of studying people's beliefs in a way that is not framed or constrained by our own ideological blinders. Arguments framed in terms defined by a cultural and intellectual tradition can really only succeed at affirming those terms. This is not to say that formulating and testing theoretical frameworks is a pointless or useless endeavour. However, when applying perspectives developed in one society to understanding what is going on in another, care must be taken not to project or impose one's tacit assumptions in a manner that obscures or distorts the social reality being investigated.

Society and Narrative: Examining the Cultural Lens

So how might we study beliefs while limiting the degree to which we impose our own conceptions and commitments on the cultural other? One route would be to study the narratives of a group as historically-situated cultural forms. The narrative and biographical forms that are normative in a culture, and by which its members structure their experiences, play a central role in shaping beliefs and understandings about what is meaningful in life (McAdams, 2001; MacIntyre, 1981). The form and features of narratives reproduced within a culture let those who are repeatedly exposed to them know what to expect from their lives and how to interpret events, expected and unexpected, as they occur. The cultural form of the narrative, thus, can be thought of as a unifying template within which experiences and happenings are positioned as significant in one way or another for the overall life being lived. Understanding them may give us insight into the kinds of meaningful connections made by people within that culture.

This section describes how the stories that people tell about themselves and others serve to naturalize assumptions about human nature, society, and the purpose of life. These are the very assumptions that are shared within the community and form the common ground needed for

social coordination and mutual understanding. When we look at stories, we find that much of what is said consists of details that in and of themselves are non-essential and substitutable. Beyond these details, however, there is an underlying structure that provides them with coherence and order, and frames them within a set of meaningful relations (Labov, 1972). This structure, the ways that specific interchangeable details are organized in relation to each other, is the foundation upon which meaningful evaluations and judgments are made.

This is not to say that individuals simply adopt a preset system of values from their culture. Each individual has her own history as well as a distinctive set of capabilities, sensitivities, and affordances that guide and shape enculturation throughout the course of development. These combine to give each individual a unique perspective.

General ideas about good and bad and how, in a broad sense, life is expected to play out, however, diffuse through most levels of a culture (Habermas and Bluck, 2000, Hammack, 2008). These general ideas collectively represent a set of background expectations or a basic template that structures the internal organization and interpretation of life's details. Not everyone buys into or accepts all aspects of these master narratives, but because they penetrate into practically all areas of cultural life, their influence often goes unnoticed. They tend to insinuate themselves into people's general conceptions of what is good in ways that are not individually or collectively recognized. In fact, the unconscious acceptance of such ideas is essential to the effective functioning of a society, even when conscious allegiance to them is selective and varied across its members.

MacIntyre (1981), McAdams (1996), and others have pointed to the importance of cultural narratives as a means through which people come to understand and interpret their own existence. Stories told within any social group take on conventional forms and functions that reinforce the relationships and commitments that define the cultural life of that group. Common

temporal, causal, and thematic patterns within narratives dramatically realize the types of relationships and episodes that are meaningful and important (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Predictability and order within the group, and thus the security of its members, is maintained by specific narrative forms or storylines that serve as both models *of*, and models *for*, cultural life (Geertz, 1973). Names and places change across stories, but the underlying structures of meanings are maintained. Exceptions occur, of course, but it is their exceptionality that attracts attention and prompts discursive efforts at resolution or reconciliation.

Implicit in cultural narratives are the valuative distinctions and discriminations that define what is worthwhile in life. These often unarticulated understandings give shape to the stories told by marking out what is noteworthy in either a positive or negative sense. Understandings of virtue, excellence, and success are not formally *defined* in narratives; they are dramatically represented or embodied in characters, their actions, and emotional interpretations of actions and events. Narratives spell out the rules of the game, so to speak. Our stories implicitly promote certain shared visions of what is appropriate and desirable and what success and failure consist of (Hammack, 2008; Thorne & Nam, 2007). Cultural narratives and biographical templates give prescriptive order to life. They smooth over the rough edges of day-to-day existence with a sense of overall purpose and direction. Taken together, they provide an authoritative script which lays out the basics of why, where, and how life should play out. Reproduced narratives, whether in the form of entertainment, instruction, or social history, serve to maintain the rules of the social system that surrounds and supports the individual. These narratives play through the mind constantly, reinforcing and legitimating the relationships and shared assumptions upon which socially coordinated daily activities depend.

Narratives, then, can be thought of as cultural tools that allow the individual to tie together various personal experiences and intentions toward the future in a structurally

meaningful way (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). Isolated feelings, events, and memories are given an interpretive context in the forms provided by these narratives. Such context, or knowledge of how memories, feelings, and actions fit into a broader scheme, is essential to the creation of a coherent understanding of the self. In fact, a growing number of psychologists (e.g. Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2001) have in recent years begun to claim that the formation of personal *identity* – one’s sense of being an embodied subject who is continuous over time and distinct from others – is essentially a life narrative. As we look further into the narrative construction of identity, the interconnections between the makeup of a society, the stories told within that society, how individuals make sense of their own lives and actions, and what individuals believe is important in life will be made clear.

The Psychology of Life Stories

Beliefs about what is important in life must start with an understanding of the self and how the self relates to the world. In McAdams’s (1996, 2001) theory, meaningful psychological unity and direction is maintained through continually evolving internal narratives about the self. These narratives are equivalent to personal or ego identity (e.g. Erikson, 1950). Identity, as perceived internal and external stability and continuity of one’s personhood, is not only supported by and communicated through narratives, but it *is* in fact a historical narrative, one that projects into the future as much as it accounts for the past. A person integrates his self, experiences, and relationships within the context of a broader society by recounting various episodes internally and contextualizing them within a narrative structure. Such narrative structures do not simply materialize out of the blue. They take on the forms that represent the customs and beliefs of a society. When a person considers such questions as “Who am I?”, “How did I get here?”, “What do I want?”, “How do other people see me?”, and “How can I go about getting what I want within this society?”, she does so in relation to a life story. Such a story must

make sense to a listener, even if that listener is only oneself. A life story that makes sense, a *meaningful* story, cannot simply be a concatenation of self-standing events and actions. It must explain *how* and *why* those events and actions occurred in terms of sequential interrelations and human purposes or *reasons*, and their evaluative significance in the context of a unified life.

Stories have emotional tone and dramatic themes. They tell of failures and successes, of overcoming obstacles and achieving redemption, and of dreams, hopes, illusions, and disappointments. These themes, and the tone or colour they give to a story, bring meaning to events and their causes by relating them to broader cultural narratives about the way things should be, or *what is good*. It is practically impossible to sensibly explain one's life in terms of how and why specific events occurred without implicitly referring to what is desirable. The fact that problems and challenges can be resolved in positive or negative ways is what gives a story emotional weight and interest. Because one's audience normally shares the same basic background assumptions, however, what is desirable is normally left more or less unsaid. It is assumed that whomever one is speaking to understands the world in essentially the same way as oneself. Our audiences have, presumably, internalized the same master cultural narratives (Hammack, 2008; Minoura, 1996) as we have. Natural speech, by which we describe life on an everyday basis, consists of a kind of shorthand notation which leaves most common elements unstated. Audiences feel our pain or experience our joy because they want what we want, and understand the world in much the same way that we do.

Throughout the process of development and socialization, individuals progressively learn and rehearse culturally appropriate ways of communicating and organizing their stories. This occurs through cooperative processes such as co-narration or the co-construction of narratives in social contexts (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Thorne & Nam, 2007). Children do not independently begin to recount events in their lives. Their performance is scaffolded through

prompting, assistance, and feedback from caregivers. Children learn to structure their narratives and organize their experiences in ways that make sense within their cultural and social milieu. Evidence for this can be seen in the variable emphasis on personal agency, cooperative effort, and other themes found in cross-cultural comparisons (e.g. Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997), and the extent to which victimization, empowerment, justice, and related themes are differentially represented in narratives produced by men and women, and by different ethnic groups (McAdams, 2001).

It is not difficult to imagine how these differences point to various “cultural concepts of biography” (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In other words, cultures and subcultures provide for their members implicit norms about the order and types of events that should be included in life stories as well as how those events should be evaluated or interpreted. Such norms define whether an episode or event is noteworthy and its place within a coherent and conventionally sound story. Because concepts of biography vary across groups, differences in the life narratives that are typical of a group are an indicator of varying internal conceptions of how a life should unfold. Life stories are structured around beliefs or assumptions about what a “normal” or satisfactory life should involve. If descriptions of life events do not follow expected patterns, norms of coherence dictate that a storyteller account for the deviations. Even purely fictional stories tend to conform to the cultural norms of biography (Iser, 1975). If they deviate too much from the normative background assumptions or are causally or otherwise incoherent, they are not palatable or believable for the listener. They are not “good stories.”

Descriptions of life events thus reflect implicit beliefs about how life should unfold, what is desirable, and what is noteworthy in life. Consequently, by comparing stories, even hypothetical stories, told by people from different groups, we can identify differences in their expectations about life (Quinn, 2003). The typical manner in which people speak about their

lives, what they refer to and how they relate these references together to form larger sequential structures within the overall story, will follow consensually understood forms and patterns that reflect the norms and expectations of their social group (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996). Cultures create patterns by which lives are expected to unfold – biographical forms (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). These patterns help people learn what to expect from life. Successes and failures in any individual's life are judged against these expectations and the evaluative standards they give rise to. All this produces a socially circulating cultural vision of how a normal person from a certain background lives (and ought to live) – what they do, what they want, what makes them happy, what makes them successful, and what makes them a failure.

Idealized stories or master narratives thus become a standard by which people learn to assess their progression through life, a kind of yardstick against which people measure and interpret events in their own lives. The more an individual tries to conform to a particular normative storyline, the more her personal identity becomes entwined with that narrative, and the more it becomes a matter of self-protection to maintain its integrity (McAdams, 2001). Middle-class Torontonians, for example, learn that it is “normal” and desirable to earn a university degree, enter a “respectable” profession, have a family, buy a home, and barbeque when the weather is nice. A certain level of comfort and security is achieved when one's life matches up to such a standard story line; such stories are “normal” and “safe”. It is, in fact, when lives deviate from such expected norms that the difficult work of storytelling takes place: For example when someone from a middle- or upper-class background does not graduate from school or does not enter a socially recognized profession, it creates a tension that begs for resolution and explanation. The process of integrating such conflicts and discrepancies into a coherent individual life story constitutes the heavy lifting of identity formation (McAdams, 2001). Integrating standardized story lines and one's own personal history in a meaningful way is, in

many ways, what personal identity formation consists of (Bluck & Habermas, 2000). These story lines, of course, differ along lines of class, race, region, etc., within any complex stratified society. They are not monolithic.

The stories that people hear and see lived out around them represent different visions of what is meaningful in life and the types of actions, relationships, and commitments that are necessary for living well. It is through exposure to these different narrative models of how lives unfold and interpretation of one's own life experiences against such templates that individuals learn what to expect or desire out of life and develop personalized criteria for evaluating their circumstances. Surprisingly, little research to date has focused on such criteria or on how personal narratives reflect the standards by which people learn to evaluate their lives.

Values

Successful enculturation involves, among other things, the internalization and reproduction of a society's priorities (Quinn, 2003). In this way, social norms become entwined with the sense of the self (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007) and guide evaluations of goodness and badness in oneself, others, and the world. Prevailing assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs tend to become internalized as the natural and "correct" way of seeing things, including generalized beliefs about what is good.

Generalized beliefs about what is good have been extensively studied in psychology under the heading of "values" research, with values being defined as "abstract beliefs about what is desirable or good" (Schwartz, 1992) or "an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferred modes of conduct or end states" (Rokeach, 1973). Although research on values does, at least intuitively, converge with conceptions of a good or worthwhile life at some level, values and value systems represent generalized priorities rather than fleshed-out conceptions of what is desired in the drama of life. Accordingly, values, as most commonly studied in psychology, have

been conceived at a highly trans-situational, generalized, and abstract level. For this reason, they do not reveal the concrete, internally referential criteria by which people evaluate their lives. Nonetheless, values research has highlighted important differences in attitudes and beliefs across nations, ethnic and religious groups, and social classes and generations. Clarifying the distinction between abstract values as they have been most often studied and the criteria for a good or worthy life that we are concerned with here will require taking a closer look at values research. Also, in looking at values research, we can see how structural approaches to understanding the dynamic relations among values is relevant to identifying meaningful interrelations among the criteria that people use to assess the worth of their lives.

Values and Beliefs

Rokeach (1973) pioneered values theory in psychology. His extended program of research confirmed that abstract values are useful predictors of many sorts of more specific attitudes and beliefs such as, but not limited to, political views and religious commitments. He also found considerable evidence of change in values over time. For example, attitudes towards equality and freedom have changed significantly in the United States since the 1950s (Mayton, Ball-Rokeach, & Loges, 1994). Rokeach's research also revealed significant differences in values and related attitudes across groups differentiated by age, race, social class, and national region (Brathwaite & Law, 1985; Schwartz, 1992). Consistent with what I argued above, Rokeach claimed that values represent a high-level organization of priorities that reflect the individual's sociohistorical background. Such priorities, according to Rokeach, play a primary organizational role in the formation of specific attitudes and beliefs, which in turn guide behaviour in concrete situations.

Rokeach contended that values, especially terminal values (those related to the end states of existence), exist on a higher level of abstraction than simple attitudes or beliefs, which refer

more narrowly to a particular class of situations. A value thus transcends specific objects or contexts and serves as an overarching guide to how more specific things and ideas should be judged. For example, a strong valuing of individual freedom would be expected to exert influence over the wide range of issues and situations that imply freedom in one way or another. As evidence for this, Rokeach cites the finding that emotional reactions to the assassination of Martin Luther King, attitudes towards civil rights protesters, and support for political candidates are all strongly related to the value one places on both freedom and equality (Rokeach, 1973). The higher-level values of freedom and equality were not synonymous with any specific attitude, but served as a organizing factor in their varied realization. This conception of value as a mediating and organizing factor in the genesis of attitudes was a key contribution of Rokeach's research. Their psychological representation on a plane separate from, and more abstract than, desires or attitudes, suggests that values may be of limited utility for providing a high-resolution account of the defining features of a good life. Believing strongly in the value of "freedom," for example, says nothing about how that commitment is pursued in the activities and endeavours of an actual cultured life. For some, freedom might mean living "off the grid" or not working for "the man"; for others it might mean sexual liberation; and for still others political agency. Such differences are not incidental to the substance of a good life: they constitute it. Thus, belief in the abstract ideal of freedom could legitimately underwrite very different and even inconsistent visions of what a good life is. Arguably, cultural narratives and norms of biography can be expected to play a more important role in defining a good life. Narratives, after all, would be grounded in the specific concerns pertaining to life in a particular cultural setting and how they play out over time.

The Underlying Structure of Values

More recently, Schwartz (1992, 1995) has expanded upon values theory by proposing that all values are outgrowths of the ways in which people in different physical and social environments learn to satisfy universal requirements of the human condition, namely, biological needs, coordinated social interaction, and the maintenance of groups. The universality of these basic needs, according to Schwartz, should effectively limit the number of basic approaches or orientations directed at satisfying these needs. Not every approach is appropriate for every situation, so different approaches might be endorsed to varying degrees across sociohistorical contexts. But, in the abstract, there should be, according to Schwartz, only a small number of potential routes, or basic values, that have proven effective at satisfying his three essential needs across societies. Schwartz identified 10 basic values: stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, and hedonism. He claims these are interrelated according to an underlying structure (Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995).

Values in this scheme are positioned against a continuum of related motivations, some complementary and others antagonistic. These values do not exist in isolation from each other, but are conceived as fuzzy sets that overlap with compatible others and are distanced from those that are conceptually dissimilar. Thus, an individual or group could be described as having an orientation towards a value stratum, or region of values. Desiring security, for example, would incline one to want power and to distance oneself from sensory stimulation and self-direction. Such natural compatibilities and oppositions among basic values allow them, in Schwartz's model, to be mapped out in a two-dimensional circular formation. Within this circle, values that are compatible are found closer together and those in opposition or conflict more distant from one another. It is also possible in looking at this circular arrangement of values to identify higher-order axes or dimensions on which the 10 basic values can be positioned. This

organization reveals two fundamental value trade-offs, according to Schwartz: self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence and conservation vs. openness to change.

Schwartz's research in over 70 countries supports the universality of these basic values and their underlying structure. His work has proven quite useful for understanding cultural differences as well as how social context influences the satisfaction of fundamental human needs. Returning to how individuals imagine a worthy life, however, the problem with Rokeach's theory applies as much to Schwartz's system. What does claiming that a group desires security really tell us about how they picture a good life? A broad desire for security could lead to any number of specific attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours depending on the group's history, social structure, economy, political system, and more generally, the affordances and opportunities of their environment. Some might seek security in close relationships with family or friends, others in a stable, predictable job, and still others in healthy eating or even preemptive aggression toward others. Again, endorsement of any generalized, context-free value would be compatible with a wide range of dissimilar visions of how that value translates into life.

Nevertheless, Schwartz's approach does have relevance to our exploration, specifically his idea that natural pressures may cause human preferences and beliefs to pattern themselves in identifiable and predictable ways. In other words, although circumstances and social factors obviously have a strong influence on individual and group preferences, these influences do not operate independently. Underlying forces or naturally occurring dynamics also work to shape outcomes. Fundamental trade-offs, mutually exclusive choices, and other natural pressures combine to create patterns of constraint that limit the potential arrangements of beliefs and preferences. Patterns of belief may reveal an underlying order based on the imperatives of biological and social life. The notion of underlying structure will be revisited in the first study of this dissertation.

Historical Trends and Value Change

Another prominent approach to values is that of Inglehart (2006). His World Values Survey (WVS) has been administered in over 60 countries to measure values and beliefs in areas such as religion, politics, economics, and social life. Results have consistently revealed considerable variation across national groups. More important for our purposes, however, is that values have been shown to pattern themselves in two major ways. First, there is marked clustering along two major axes: traditional vs. secular-rational values, and survival vs. self-expression values. Second, orientations along these axes are changing significantly and predictably over time, in step with economic development. Seemingly, as cultures become more materially secure, individuals are able to shift their focus and attention towards more individualized concerns; thus freedom, autonomy, and personal expression become much more salient.

As with the work of Schwartz and Rokeach, Inglehart's (2006) research shows that values predict more specific attitudes and beliefs. For example, comparison of societies that value religion highly to those that do not (i.e., traditional vs. secular-rational) reveals an expected pattern of difference in regard to respect for authority, the importance placed on traditional family structure, and absolutist ideas of right and wrong. Also, individuals from traditional/religious societies are more nationalistic and more likely to oppose divorce, abortion, and suicide than are those from more secular societies. This does not confirm that religion is the "cause" of such beliefs, but only that beliefs and values are predictably associated.

Inglehart's second dimension comes into play in comparing nations high in gross national product to those that are low (i.e., wealthy vs. poor). His data show that as societies become wealthier, individual concerns shift from day-to-day survival needs to things like internal well-being, quality of life, and individual expression (i.e., from "survival" to "self-expression"). This

makes sense. Just as people from religious societies tend to endorse a certain cluster of beliefs, those from wealthy societies are likely to endorse a set of commitments related to their circumstances. Importantly, this observation can be interpreted as evidence for a universal progression of human needs or interests. This is consistent with Fredrickson's (2001) "broaden and build" theory, which claims that when threats are removed from an environment, attention shifts from a narrow range of potential actions to a more exploratory, experimental, and "open" type of mindset.

In regard to cultural differences in how the good life is understood, Inglehart's findings highlight my earlier claim about the central importance of sociohistorical context in shaping people's concerns. As material circumstances change, people pay attention to different things, their priorities change, and thus their vision of what it means to live a worthwhile life comes to include different things. Inglehart's studies show value priorities changing in two generalized ways over time (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). First, as the process of industrialization takes place, individuals become less dependent on the whims of nature and enjoy more control over their environment. Second, after industrialization is complete, people take the fulfillment of their material and physical needs for granted and focus attention instead on more abstract concerns such as self-expression, self-actualization, tolerance, and personal freedom. Such "postmaterialist" values (e.g. Inglehart, 2006) appear as motivational luxuries enjoyed by those who are able to take not only survival, but also relative comfort, for granted. Again, these findings point to the value of tracking these sorts of changes across groups and time periods for the purpose of understanding the universal tendencies that might account for them.

Thus, Inglehart provides an excellent example of how individual and group beliefs are influenced by the characteristics of societies. As my earlier discussions of Rokeach, Schwartz, and MacIntyre suggest, cultural periods and their defining economic, material, and social

features promote the emergence of belief systems that fit the needs and opportunities of life in that place and period. Also, similar to Schwartz, Inglehart shows that beliefs and priorities are associated along complementary and contradictory lines. That is, they tend to cluster in predictable ways.

I have shown that values research, despite its lack of resolution for our purposes, does offer some insights into how we might understand conceptions of a good life. Even so, we need to approach the understanding of what people believe is important in life with an eye to grounded detail rather than high-level theoretical abstraction. We need to find out more specifically what people think of when they consider how they want their life to unfold. Do they really think at the generalized level of overall security or freedom, as some might assume, or do they focus on having a certain type of occupation, attaining a desired lifestyle, or having loving children? Such substantive details are inherently narrativized elements (they are achieved over time in conventional ways) and can tell us much more about the life an individual is hoping to live. The narratives of a society mediate between abstract conceptions of what is desirable and the expression of those commitments in the choices and pursuits of actual life.

Summary: What Do We Know About Cultural Conceptions of the Good Life?

So how do people evaluate their lives? Where do they get their idea of what a worthwhile or good life consists of? I have argued that folk conceptions and expectations about how life should unfold are structured mainly by cultural narratives (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Quinn, 2003) which serve to internalize in the individual the rules and relationships that constitute society and the social alignments that are necessary for success within it. We have also seen that groups can have quite different ways of interpreting and structuring the many material, social, and economic relationships that make up their world (Erikson, 1950). The way that people tie together ideas and events, how they create mental order from the array of discrete experiences,

varies greatly across time and place. What makes sense or holds weight for any group is guided by the understanding its members share of how the world works. Much of this understanding comes through the narratives a society tells itself (Erikson, 1950; McAdams, 2001).

Understanding oneself, and one's actions and desires, is achieved through the personal adaptation of conventional stories heard consistently during a lifetime (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Quinn, 2003). Details of one's personal history are strung together through the use of narrative templates, cultural forms that serve as organizational planes on which events and experiences are tied together to make good cultural sense. The ways in which individuals come to talk about themselves and their lives (which are in fact the same in this view), and the creative redaction that makes this possible, reflects society's moral and aesthetic commitments and what others (and oneself) expect to hear. Such established patterns become comfortable and safe ways for storytellers to think about and understand the important activities of their lives (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996).

We have also seen that historical factors such as economic development play important roles in shaping beliefs (e.g. Inglehart, 2006), and that beliefs tend to cluster in predictable ways (Schwartz, 1992). Both of these conclusions point to the possibility of some underlying structure or natural form that guides the prioritization of beliefs. Universal conflicts, desires, and motivations that are fundamental to human activity might be important here. The force of such universal factors, however, will be channelled through a particular social structure and cultural way of life. The narrative forms that organize communication within a culture are, I have argued, one of the most important means by which individuals come to assign significance to their experiences.

Importantly, we have also seen how difficult it is for scholars to set aside their own biases and belief systems when considering these topics. Research assessing people's views on what

makes life worthwhile often reflects the cultural background of the researchers. As such, measures and their interpretation, however statistically valid, might overemphasize the importance of certain variables or underemphasize others due to their adherence to a certain theoretical perspective.

With the foregoing issues in mind, my supervisor and I began considering ways to approach the study of what makes for a good life. One of the first methodological goals we adopted was, as much as possible, to avoid *imposing* any moral perspective or theoretical standpoint that would restrict the ability of our research participants to present their own accounts. We reasoned that this would require giving participants the freedom to define criteria of worth in their own voice, with minimal prompting or direction. Rather than providing participants with a fixed set of items to choose from or judge, we wanted them to generate their own content. A second goal was to involve people from quite different cultural backgrounds to ensure a broad range of responses. These goals led to an exploratory study in which we asked participants from four countries to describe in their own words their criteria for defining a good life.

Defining a Good Life in Four Nations: An Exploratory Study

Our main objective in this study (Tafarodi, Bonn, Liang, Takai, Moriizumi, Belhekar, & Padhye, in press) was to compare descriptions from several culturally distinct societies of what a worthwhile life consists of. For a number of practical and theoretical reasons, we eventually settled on university samples from Canada, China, India, and Japan. This particular sampling of national groups allowed us to compare responses from two developed and two developing countries. It also offered heterogeneity of historical, religious, and political traditions. The exclusive focus on university students provided a levelling on many socio-demographic variables distinct from cultural orientation, thereby bringing the latter into clearer focus in relation to any

differences found. We felt this was a good starting point for examining similarities and differences in how a good life is understood across cultures. The basic assumption underlying this research was that the idealized narratives of each society structure what its members believe living a good life consists of.

Design. In piloting early versions of this particular study we learned the important lesson that most university students are halting, inarticulate, and somewhat confused when asked to describe what they think a good life is. Seemingly, they either do not fully grasp the demands of the task or are too distracted by their immediate desires and concerns to give comprehensive and coherent answers to the question. To overcome this obstacle, we redefined the task such that participants were instructed to first imagine themselves in the distant future, at the age of 85 and near the end of their lives (i.e., narratives). They were then asked to describe which aspects of their situation they would look to in deciding whether the life they had lived (their “story”) had been a worthy or good one. By asking participants to position themselves at the end of the narrative, we ensured that they would consider life as a completed course, an idealized biography, rather than focusing on the immediately pressing concerns that loom large in the minds of university students. Participants were asked to describe in a sentence the six most important criteria of worth they would refer to in deciding whether they had lived a good life. This allowed us to obtain a brief sketch of what a worthwhile life looked like to them.

Findings. Responses from each of the four samples were read by independent coders to generate a list of recurrent response categories. After several iterations and combining of overlapping criteria, we were left with 30 categories that captured at a practically adequate level of resolution the vast bulk (96%) of what participants has to say about the good life (see Table 1). The prevalence of each category was then statistically compared across samples.

On the whole, a considerable degree of similarity was observed across the four national samples in terms of the prevalence of specific categories. That only 30 derived categories were sufficient to capture the variety of open-ended responses across groups itself suggests a good deal of common ground. More importantly, seven of each group's ten most prevalent categories (see Table 2) were common to three of the four groups. All four groups shared four of their top ten. Regarding the content of the criteria reported, of the twelve categories reported by 25% or more of the combined or overall sample, five referred to positive social relations (close and enduring friendships, happy and healthy family, positive impact on others, loving marriage or romantic partnership, good relationships with family members), three were achievement-oriented or status-related (a lot of wealth or assets, successful career, achievement of great things), two related to emotional quality (well-being and contentment, fun and other pleasurable experiences), and two related to character (moral life, wisdom).

There were also clear cultural differences. The Chinese differed most from other groups. Compared to the others, the Chinese were more likely to define a good life as requiring a happy and healthy family, community involvement, successful children, and close and lasting friendships; and less likely to define it as involving the acquisition of wealth, impact on society or the world, and the pursuit of pleasure. Japanese were similar to the Chinese in their emphasis (compared to Indians and Canadians) on close and lasting friendships, but not as concerned as other groups with career and money. Japanese also considered hobbies and leisure activities to be more important than the other groups. Canadians were more likely than Japanese to mention travel as defining of a good life. They were also less concerned with social status than Japanese and Indians. Indians, on the other hand, were more invested in good family relations than were Japanese and Chinese. The pattern of differences suggests that beyond a high overall degree of similarity, each cultural vision of a good life was distinct.

Table 1

Indicator Categories in Order of Overall Prevalence

1. having had close and enduring friendships	40
2. having a happy and healthy family	39
3. having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	34
4. well-being and contentment	33
5. having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	32
6. a lot of wealth or assets	31
7. having had a successful career	29
8. having achieved great things	28
9. having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	28
10. having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	26
11. having gained wisdom	26
12. good relationships with family members	25
13. having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my personal potential	23
14. having travelled the world	15
15. having had a personally fulfilling career	13
16. having raised my children well	13
17. the respect and admiration of others	13
18. financial security and comfort	13
19. knowing that I'll be remembered after I'm gone for who I was or what I did	12
20. high social status or celebrity	12
21. being highly educated or possessing great professional skills/knowledge	10
22. having had a lot of involvement in my community	9
23. having overcome obstacles or successfully taken on challenges	8
24. having had children who are successful	8
25. having had many friends	6
26. having lived a free and independent life	5
27. having attained harmony with nature or God	5
28. having pursued hobbies or leisure activities that were personally fulfilling	4
29. power or influence over others	2
30. having lived in accordance with my religious faith	2

Note. Column values represent percentage of participants with one or more responses in the indicator category.

Table 2
Ten Most Prevalent Indicator Categories By Nationality

Canadian	
1. having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	46
2. having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	36
3. having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	34
4. a lot of wealth or assets	32
5. having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	31
6. having had close and enduring friendships	31
7. having a happy and healthy family	30
8. having achieved great things	28
9. having gained wisdom	28
10. good relationships with family members	28
Chinese	
1. having a happy and healthy family	70
2. having had close and enduring friendships	49
3. having had a successful career	49
4. having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	40
5. well-being and contentment	39
6. having had a lot of involvement in my community	31
7. having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	24
8. having achieved great things	24
9. having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my personal potential	23
10. a lot of wealth or assets	17
Indian	
1. having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	48
2. good relationships with family members	42
3. well-being and contentment	40
4. having had a successful career	35
5. having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	33
6. having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	30
7. having achieved great things	30
8. a lot of wealth or assets	29
9. having had close and enduring friendships	25
10. having travelled the world	20
Japanese	
1. having had close and enduring friendships	54
2. a lot of wealth or assets	48
3. having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	43
4. having gained wisdom	39
5. having a happy and healthy family	35
6. having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my personal potential	33
7. having achieved great things	29
8. having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	29
9. well-being and contentment	28
10. having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	24

Note. Values represent percentage of national sample with one or more responses in the category.

Conclusions. This initial descriptive study cast an informative light on what four specific cultural groups believe a good life consists of. More generally, it provided us with an empirically-derived scheme for categorizing statements made by individuals across a range of cultures about the criteria they would use to decide whether their nearly completed lives had been good. It also highlighted some important ways in which these cultural groups vary. A good number of important issues, however, were left unaddressed by this study. One issue pertains to the possibility of underlying structure. How do these 30 criteria relate to each other? Does their pattern of association reveal anything telling about how we might understand, however speculatively, their determination and deeper organization? A second issue pertains to the functional importance of conceptions of a good life. Do the narrative visions people have of the lives they wish to lead structure how they reflect on their everyday experiences? More specifically, can we see these visions reflected in the prominence given to certain types of events, interpretations, and summarizations in the accounts that people of different cultural backgrounds give of their recent past?

Dissertation Research

These two issues are the focus of this dissertation research. The first study used multidimensional scaling to examine the underlying structure that accounts for the pattern of associations among the 30 criteria of worth identified in our initial study. In the second study, I examined how international students from two different countries narrated the events and experiences of their recent past. The expectation was that the differential importance assigned to specific criteria of worth (or, more importantly, position on the dimensions that underlie these criteria) by the two cultural groups would be reflected in corresponding differences in how they recounted their past. Such a correspondence would suggest that cultural conceptions of a good

life are important for organizing and structuring everyday experience – that they matter for the sense people make of their lives.

Study 1: Examining the Structure of a Good Life

Rationale

Earlier, I discussed the important role that ecological and historical factors such as economic development and availability of resources play in shaping beliefs (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Erikson, 1950; Inglehart, 2006). These factors interact with universal human needs and capacities to produce predictable clusters of beliefs (Schwartz, 1992). That is, the mind is not a blank slate upon which culture can write just any set of beliefs. Rather, there seems to be a constraining order or underlying structure that patterns systems of belief. Evidence points to fundamental conflicts, desires, and motives (e.g. Buss, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2005) that may give shape and direction to what members of any society believe is good in life. Such fundamentals, of course, will be modulated and given practical content by the demands of life within a particular ecological and cultural setting. I argued further that narrative is one the most important means by which individuals learn to give sense to their actions and experience. The narrative forms that culture provides are crucial for perpetuating the systems of meaning that are shared within a society.

The initial study we conducted to examine visions of a good life across several nations (Tafarodi et al., in press) identified a number of criteria or goods that individuals of different cultural backgrounds use in defining how the narrative of a good life should play out. These criteria essentially represent the desirable ends or “telos” of an idealized narrative that the person hopes to live. The present study was designed to better understand the criteria themselves by looking at how they relate to each other. The overall structure of these relations would shed light on the underlying dimensions around which the criteria might be organized. Beyond the specific

patterns of goods that each society holds up as ideal in defining a good life, there may be a universal structure that points to a deeper generative order of meaning. This order may help us understand how different cultures are able to approach the problem of living well.

In the initial study, participants from China, India, Canada, and Japan were asked to give their account of a good or worthwhile life. These varied descriptions were then distilled into 30 criteria categories that comprehensively captured the range of goods reported. To examine how these may reveal a more fundamental structure, I looked in the present study at how these categories were associated in the minds of participants. Are there fundamental trade-offs or conflicts between some criteria? Does aligning one's self with certain criteria naturally lead to valuing certain others? Are there underlying dimensions that can be interpreted as accounting for these relations? And is this structure related in an intelligible way to cultural background?

Unfolding Preferences: Visualizing the Structure of Goods

To approach the question of structure, I used a visual analysis, multidimensional unfolding, to examine how the good life criteria are positioned in relation to each other – literally, how closely they relate to one another. Complementary criteria or criteria that are held in high regard by the same individuals will appear close together. Opposing or dissociated criteria, those that are not preferred by the same people, will appear at a greater distance from one another. Individuals, participants in this case, will also hold positions in this dimensional space, according to proximity to their preferred criteria. That is, they would appear closer to those clusters of criteria that they see as most important. In a landscape defined by how individual preferences tend to group together, each individual would be represented by an “ideal point,” a position close to the criteria that they value and far from the criteria that they care less about. Individuals, in turn, would cluster together based upon the similarity or differences in their preferences for the various criteria and their positioning in the multidimensional space.

These relationships, the way that various preferences and people hang together on a derived conceptual grid, might provide insight into the question of underlying structure and its importance for accounting for the content of a good life within and across cultures.

The Technique of Multidimensional Scaling

For this study, I chose a statistical method referred to as *unfolding* (Borg & Groenen, 1997; Busing, 2005). Unfolding is a specialized form of multidimensional scaling (MDS; Kruskal & Wish, 1977). MDS refers to a class of techniques designed to analyse proximity data, or degrees of closeness among objects, and translate these proximities into a geometric configuration or “map.” Such maps provide a useful way to visualize relationships among multiple objects and thus uncover “hidden structures” or patterns that exist in proximity data. MDS starts with a matrix representing the perceived distances or dissimilarities amongst all objects of interest and uses a complex process of mathematical trial-and-error to produce a representation of those distances as an arrangement of points in an n -dimensional space. If the relative distances between each pair of objects were completely random, a perfect representation of these distances for x objects would require $x-1$ dimensions. People typically have the capacity to effectively comprehend only two- or three-dimensional representations. Accordingly, interpretability requires a representation that is limited to very few dimensions.

The usefulness of MDS procedures is predicated on a lack of randomness, or consistencies in the perceived relationships that the distances represent. To the degree that pattern, consistency, or structure exist within the data, it is possible to reduce the dimensionality while maintaining an acceptable level of fidelity to the data. Thus, by reducing large numbers of complex relationships into a comprehensibly small number of dimensions, MDS can be a powerful tool for identifying the order or structure – the lack of randomness – that lies behind the surface of complex relationships.

Unfolding (Borg & Groenen, 1997; Busing, Groenen, & Heiser, 2005), the technique used here, is a specialized form of MDS designed to analyze preferences. It first creates a representation or map of how all objects of preference, good life criteria in this case, relate to each other according to the importance rankings assigned to them by participants. It then places an ideal point or location for each participant on the map based on their specific pattern of preferences. The result of unfolding, thus, is a map of items (criteria) arranged in space according to how similar or complementary they are to each other, and a representation of each participant's set of responses as a specific preference or ideal point for that person. The map shows which criteria are preferred in common and where each participant's preferences fall in relation to those objects. The ideal point for each person is the location where she is closest to the objects that she prefers most. Measuring out from that point in any direction, closer points are more preferred and farther points are less preferred. Likewise, ideal points that are close together represent individuals that have similar preferences or orientations to the objects analyzed.

Unfolding is a special case of MDS because it specifically deals with preferences, or the proximities between participants and objects of choice, rather than just similarities between a particular class of objects. Participants and the objects of preference are mapped onto the same conceptual space. The resulting graphical representation shows both the relations or "closeness" of objects to each other as well as where participants fall on the map in regard to their preference for the objects. The generation of coordinates is, however, somewhat problematic because for conceptual reasons it is not appropriate to take into account participant-to-participant and object-to-object relationships in unfolding calculations. In other words, the analysis only takes into account participants' relative preferences for the objects, not whether participants are similar to each other or whether there are any objective similarities or relationships between the objects. As a result, an unfolding matrix contains significantly fewer comparisons than a standard MDS

matrix. Standard MDS imputes locations based upon proximity data for each object in relation to every other object on the map while unfolding only considers respondent to object relations. This smaller number of comparisons translates into fewer constraints on the placement of points and thus a higher potential for unhelpful or trivial solutions. Because traditional MDS programs utilize algorithms designed solely to reduce mathematical stress, their use with relatively less constrained unfolding data has a tendency towards mathematically correct, but essentially meaningless, solutions. In such cases, unconstrained mathematical stress minimization degenerates into to an overreduction of the data into useless patterns, common examples being two solitary points or points arranged in a perfect circle around a central point. Thus, obtaining useful solutions for unfolding problems is more complicated than simple mathematical stress reduction. It requires algorithms that place external constraints on stress reduction meta-analytically. For these reasons, I opted to use the PREFSCAL (Busing et al., 2005) model, which has proven effective at finding scaling solutions similar to those produced by traditional programs such as ALSCAL and KYST (Kruskal & Wish, 1978), but without being prone to the problem of degeneracy common to unfolding solutions.

For unfolding to produce any meaningful or useful results, the preferences analyzed must possess a degree of consistency from participant to participant in their ordering. All participants need not prefer the same objects but there must be systematic patterns to how specific objects are ordered or grouped listwise. Such patterns or consistencies, if they exist, become by default the underlying structure of the landscape that is mapped through unfolding. Individual items that are preferred in common with each other gravitate together and in so doing outline the patterns or forms which give shape to individual preferences. People may list completely different items as being most or least important to them, but if those that rank a certain item as important also tend to attach high importance to particular other items, the unfolding algorithm will naturally place

those items in close proximity to each other on the map. Through the step-by-step process of reducing dimensionality while maintaining fit to the data (“minimizing stress” in MDS terms), every object gradually shifts into a geometric position where it is spatially “close” to items that are also preferred by participants with similar tastes. Thus, the resulting arrangement of items and the placement of individuals among those items may reflect underlying forces, both natural and societal, that shape tastes or preferences.

The goal of this study was to use unfolding to better understand the criteria that people use to define a worthwhile life. By looking for underlying structure to these criteria, I hoped to gain insight into the forces that shape individuals’ construal of meaning in their lives. I was looking to reduce the many different criteria that we had derived earlier into some number of more essential dimensions that structure individual visions of what makes life good. I thereby hoped to further our understanding of how visions of a good life arise. When we see differences across individuals and societies, what might underlie these variations?

Proceeding with this unfolding analysis required a different set of data than that used in the initial study. A matrix of preferences for specific items compared to each other was needed, not the sort of open-ended responses we had obtained earlier. It was necessary to record how participants prioritized or ranked each specific criterion in relation to all the others. Given our ability to reliably categorize 96% of the responses from four different national groups in our previous study, I judged that the set of criteria used there would be adequate to work with here. The next phase then required getting samples of people to rank the criteria in relation to each other. This would allow the proper use of unfolding to reveal any patterns or structure underlying such preferences. If there are indeed fundamental orientative dimensions that structure the visions that individuals have of a good life, this unfolding analysis was expected to shed light on them.

Method

Participants. In order to provide a high degree of contrast for multidimensional scaling, I chose to compare mainland Chinese and Canadian participants in this study. These two nationalities showed the most dissimilarity in the prevalence of reported criteria of all groups compared in the initial study. The clear contrast ensured that the resulting multidimensional structure would encompass quite different cultural approaches to defining a good life and thus offer some degree of cross-cultural applicability. It would also maximize the chances for a clearly divergent and thus interpretable dimensional structure. Canadians were further differentiated into three subgroups (East Asian, South Asian, and European Canadian) in recognition of the possibility that non-European Canadians might differ in orientation from European Canadians (recall that the initial study used only Canadians of European descent). The relative orientation of these major subgroups of Canadian society with regard to the good life criteria would, it was hoped, provide insight into how such orientations vary within and between national and ethnic divisions.

Data from a total of 584 participants were included in the analysis. Of these, 97 (50 women, 47 men) were students of Chinese ethnicity from Jilin University in the People's Republic of China. The remaining 487 participants were students from the University of Toronto in Canada. Of the Canadian sample, 151 (84 women, 67 men) were of Western European ancestry, 104 (53 women, 51 men) were of South Asian ancestry (self-identified as of Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, or Sri Lankan descent), and 232 (144 women, 88 men) were of East Asian ancestry (self-identified as of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean descent). Participant age ranged from 17 to 32 years. Mean age was 20.54 for the Chinese sample, 20.24 for European Canadians, 19.94 for South Asian Canadians, and 20.01 for East Asian Canadians. Canadian participants received course credit for participating in the study.

Procedure. Participants completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires at individual workspaces in a large room. Two research assistants remained present during the completion of the questionnaire to provide instruction and respond to questions.

After reading and signing appropriate consent forms, participants were instructed to imagine themselves at 85 years old, near the end of their life. Thinking thus in terms of a long life that was near its end, they were asked to read over the list of 30 specific criteria derived from the initial four-nation study and, indicate each criterion's importance in defining their own life as good or worthy. Ratings were made on a 1 (*not important at all*) to 9 (*of the utmost importance*) scale. After assigning numeric ratings to each criterion, participants ranked statements given the same rating against each other. For example, if they assigned a rating of 9 to four different statements, they were forced to rank each of those four statements from first through fourth in personal importance. Then they ranked all of the 8's against each other, and so on, until every criterion had been given what amounted to a unique 1-30 ranking. Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed. The entire procedure, including informed consent and debriefing, took less than 45 minutes.

Results

Ratings of good life criteria. Data collected for this study included both absolute 1-9 ratings of all criteria and their 1-30 rankings according to relative preference. Analyzing whatever meaningful structure might underlie the criteria for a good life will require examining a number of different levels of association: of people with individual criteria, as well as among and between the criteria themselves. Thus, it will be important to understand how people of different cultural backgrounds relate to each criterion individually as well as how interrelations among the criteria influence the relative positioning of groups with regard to them. These associations, when taken together, will define the dimensional space within which individuals are able to

meaningfully prioritize their preferences. As I will discuss later, the trade-offs and choices that people must make within this structure are informed by, and take on meaning within, the cultural narratives shared within different societies.

The results begin with a general breakdown of how the criteria for a good life were rated by our various groups and the identification of basic patterns that arose in a series of univariate and multivariate analyses of the data. This is followed by a multidimensional unfolding analysis of the ranking data, which provides a more visual, holistic representation of the structure generated by the data.

Standardization of ratings. All ratings were standardized within-subject for two major reasons. First, the usefulness of the ratings was primarily relative rather than absolute. Presumably, individuals would find most of the criteria desirable to some degree (they were all provided by participants in previous studies as indicators of a good life). Natural limits of time, energy, and resources, however, require individuals to prioritize some desirable options above others (see Schwartz, 1995, 2005). Thus, an absolute numeric rating was not as important for my purposes as was the importance of each criterion relative to the others.

The second justification for within-subject standardization of ratings was the considerable evidence for sizable cross-cultural and inter-individual differences in scale response tendencies (e.g. Lee & Jones, 2002; Yeh, Kim, Chompreeda, Rimkeeree, & Lundahl, 1998). For example, some cultural groups tend to orient ratings towards the midpoint of scales while others anchor their responses to the extreme ends (Fischer, 2004). Thus, a rating of 7 on a 9-point scale might have quite different implications for a Chinese participant whose average rating across criteria was 5 than for a European Canadian whose average response was 7. Standardizing ratings within-subject preserves the relative magnitude of the ratings while controlling for differences between groups and individuals in overall scale use tendencies.

Standardized ratings or *z*-scores for the 30 criteria averaged are shown in overall order of preference in Table 3. It is noteworthy that all four groups assigned greatest relative importance to the same five criteria, indicating a great degree of agreement as to what was most important or central for determining a good life. These criteria, in order of importance, were *having a happy family*, *having a good marriage or romantic partnership*, *good relations with family*, *raising children well*, and *having close friends*.

Multivariate analyses. To examine whether the groups varied significantly in their overall conception of a good life (as would be expected given the deliberate choice of dissimilar groups), I conducted a MANOVA with ethnicity, gender, and their interaction as the predictors. Results revealed only a significant main effect for ethnicity, Wilks' Lambda = .41, $F(3, 579) = 6.34$, $p < .0001$, indicating the presence of significant differences across two or more of the groups for one or more of the criteria. Roy-Bargmann step-down analysis (Stevens, 1996; Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007) was then performed to identify the pattern of univariate differences that accounted for the overall multivariate effect. ANOVAs revealed significant group differences for 15 of the 30 criteria (see Table 4). To identify all independent contributions by individual criteria, each of the 15 criteria was inserted into an ANCOVA that included any higher-priority criteria (according to original ANOVA *F*-values) as covariates. Using a Bonferroni-corrected alpha level of .002, this step-down procedure revealed that 11 of 30 criteria contributed *independently* and significantly ($p < .002$) to the overall multivariate group effect. The adjusted group means for these criteria are given in Table 5. The pattern of groups differences for each is described below.

Table 3

Overall Relative Importance of Good Life criteria in Study 1.

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>z-score</u>		
Happy Family	.80	Remembered	-.25
Good Marriage	.72	Many Friends	-.36
Good Relationships with Family	.69	Travel	-.38
Raise Children Well	.64	Involved in Community	-.73
Close Friends	.61	Wealth	-.74
Well-Being	.52	Harmony with Nature or God	-.91
Pleasurable Experiences	.45	Power	-.95
Fulfilling Career	.43	Religion	-1.14
Living a Moral Life	.35	Status	-1.34
Wisdom	.34		
Meeting Potential	.27		
Overcoming Challenges	.23		
Having a Positive Impact	.20		
Successful Career	.20		
Respect	.15		
Hobbies	.12		
Successful Children	.09		
Financial Security	.06		
Educational Attainment	-.01		
Independence	-.03		
Achieving Great Things	-.10		

Z-scores calculated within-subject. Rankings reflect ratings of each criterion relative to all others averaged across all subjects regardless of nationality.

Table 4

MANOVA results showing estimated marginal mean ratings for each ethnic group (within-subject *z*-scores) controlling for the effects of gender and the gender-by-ethnicity interaction. Significant differences in ratings occurred between at least two of four groups for all criteria listed.

	EC	SA	AC	Chinese	<i>F</i> (3, 579)
Remembered	-.085 ^b	.147 ^b	-.195 ^b	-.896 ^a	19.260
Status	-1.647 ^a	-1.626 ^a	-1.120 ^b	-.876 ^b	17.727
Travel	-.089 ^b	-.609 ^a	-.371 ^b	-1.068 ^a	17.197
Many Friends	-.572 ^a	-.588 ^a	-.328 ^a	.188 ^b	14.686
Power	-1.198 ^a	-1.265 ^a	-.683 ^b	-.723 ^b	14.083
Well-Being	.600 ^{ab}	.335 ^a	.460 ^a	.894 ^b	12.991
Positive	.421 ^b	.465 ^b	.018 ^a	.018 ^a	12.239
Impact					
MetPotential	.423 ^b	.264 ^{ab}	.268 ^b	-.090 ^a	11.004
Greatness	.072 ^b	.029 ^b	-.047 ^b	-.517 ^a	10.628
Wealth	-.843 ^{ab}	-.834 ^{ab}	-.471 ^b	-1.043 ^a	10.509
Religion	-1.347 ^a	-.446 ^b	-1.216 ^a	-1.130 ^{ab}	8.570
Relate Family	.573 ^a	.627 ^{ab}	.714 ^{ab}	.897 ^b	7.284

EA=European Canadian, SA=South Asian Canadian, EA=East Asian Canadian, Chinese=Chinese (PRC)

Tukey HSD results indicated by superscripts, where a is significantly ($p < .001$) smaller than b and ab is not significantly different than the other groups.

Table 5

Results from the Roy-Bargmann stepdown procedure. Estimated marginal mean ratings (within-subject z-scores) generated using ANCOVA (criteria with higher *F*-values used as covariates). Gender and the gender-by-ethnicity interaction was controlled for in all steps.

	EC	SA	EA	Chinese	<i>F</i> (3, 579)
Remembered	-.100 ^{a,b}	.147 ^a	-.186 ^b	-.946 ^c	17.062
Status	-1.687 ^b	-1.723 ^b	-1.131 ^a	-.746 ^a	21.721
Travel	-.088 ^a	-.587 ^b	-.347 ^b	-1.084 ^c	11.066
Many Friends	-.568 ^b	-.565 ^b	-.334 ^b	.244 ^a	11.079
Power	-1.108 ^b	-1.253 ^b	-.740 ^a	-.859 ^{a,b}	7.760
Well-Being	.602 ^{a,b}	.344 ^b	.469 ^b	.831 ^a	7.439
Positive Impact	.332 ^a	.322 ^{a,b}	.068 ^b	.221 ^{a,b}	4.233
MetPotential	.387 ^a	.230 ^{a,b}	.303 ^a	-.050 ^b	9.834
Greatness	.156 ^a	.035 ^{a,b}	-.087 ^{a,b}	-.370 ^b	6.690
Wealth	-.655 ^a	-.628 ^a	-.589 ^a	-1.358 ^b	14.841
Religion	-1.361 ^b	-.693 ^a	-1.117 ^{a,b}	-1.075 ^{a,b}	5.605

EA=European Canadian, SA=South Asian Canadian, EA=East Asian Canadian, Chinese=Chinese (PRC)

Tukey HSD indicated by superscripts, where a is significantly ($p < .001$) larger than b, and b is significantly larger than c. Items marked with superscript a,b are not significantly different from a or b, but significantly larger than c.

Travel was rated significantly higher by European Canadians than all other groups, and lower by Chinese than all other groups. *Status* was rated higher by East Asian Canadians and Chinese than by European Canadians and South Asian Canadians. *Being remembered* was rated higher by all groups than by Chinese, and higher by South Asian Canadians than East Asian Canadians.

Having many friends was rated higher by Chinese than by all others. *Having a positive impact* was rated higher by European Canadians than by East Asian Canadians. *Power* was rated higher by East Asian Canadians than by European Canadians and South Asian Canadians. *Well-being* was rated higher by Chinese than by South Asian Canadians and East Asian Canadians. *Meeting potential* was rated higher by European Canadians and East Asian Canadians than by Chinese. *Wealth* was rated higher by all groups than by Chinese. *Doing great things* was rated higher by European Canadians than by Chinese. Finally, *religion* was rated higher by South Asian Canadians than by European Canadians.

The manner in which specific combinations of criteria for a good life are endorsed differently by groups lies at the heart of this study. Differences represent, theoretically, divergences in the idealized vision of a good life passed along by cultures. The predictable ways that these patterns differ, in turn, can provide a window into more fundamental features that underlie the formation of these visions. Examining the pattern of group differences just described with this in mind, it is possible to describe what is distinctive about each group's vision of a good life. European Canadians, in particular, appear to desire to live up to their potential by accomplishing noteworthy things, having a positive impact on their surroundings, and being able to travel the world. East Asian Canadians also placed a high value on living up to their potential, but this was reflected more in the attainment of status and power. Mainland Chinese also held status in high regard, but associated it with a broad social network and being mentally and

physically healthy. Finally, South Asian Canadians were distinctive in their regard for religion and the desire to be remembered well.

The above pattern suggests that European and Asian Canadians are focused more on goal-directed activity, giving priority to living up to potential, traveling, and gaining status. South Asian Canadians, in contrast, appear to be more concerned with spiritual and reputational matters, as evidenced in their focus on religion and being remembered well. In the realm of aspirations or goals, Chinese and East Asian Canadians appear to be more oriented towards socially recognized achievements such as status, power, and wealth, whereas European Canadians are oriented towards more personally defined outcomes such as having a positive influence and travelling. I will explore these contrasts and their implications for the structural decomposition of the good life in more detail, after describing the results of the multidimensional scaling analysis.

It is important when discussing structural patterns to bear in mind that all four groups, on the whole, expressed many similar preferences. In the following section, multidimensional scaling analysis will provide a means of visualizing how ideas about a good life centered on a number of criteria rated as important by all, while also illustrating the manner in which the groups tended to differ from each other. This analysis allows for the identification of dimensions of variation and stability in visions of a good life and the manner in which cultural groups align themselves on these dimensions.

Multidimensional Scaling Analysis: Unfolding Preference Data

To gain an understanding of how associations among criteria and varying patterns of preference fit together, ranked preference data were analyzed using multidimensional unfolding. Specifically, I used PREFSCAL (Busing et al., 2005) which implements a penalized majorization algorithm (assigning increasing distance penalties as proximities approach zero) to

avoid the collapsed or trivial solutions that sometimes occur in unfolding analyses. This method has proven to be especially effective at avoiding trivial solutions while retaining a high degree of goodness-of-fit to the data (Borg & Groenen, 2005). The two-dimensional spatial arrangement of data seen in Figure 1 remained consistent throughout analyses starting from multiple different initial configurations and transformation types, supporting the sufficiency of this basic dimensional and spatial arrangement. Stress was minimized ($\sigma_n = .112$, $\sigma_1 = .348$) using a classical Spearman scaling solution and ordinal transformation. The spatial map of 30 criteria and group ideal points shown in Figure 1 reflects results from this model.

Referring to the unfolding map (Figure 1), ideal points for Chinese, South Asian Canadian, European Canadian, and East Asian Canadian samples can be seen towards the center, both complete and by gender. Overall, ideal point placements show clear separation by ethnicity, suggesting meaningful differences among groups in their reported priorities in defining a good life. The relative proximity of all ideal points to the center of the map, however, suggests a degree of overall similarity in their rankings.

Figure 1

Unfolding map illustrating criteria for a good life and group ideal points.

AC= Asian Canadian, EC=European Canadian, SA=South Asian Canadian, Chinese=Chinese

Clustering of criteria. In looking at the distribution of criteria across the horizontal and vertical dimensions, several meaningful clusters can be identified (Figure 2). Towards the center of the map, a number of criteria having to do with close relationships can be found: *having a happy family, having close friends, close relationships with family members, and close friendships*. All fall in close proximity to each other as well as to the group ideal points. The central positioning of these items as well as their proximity to the group ideal points indicates that they were seen as universally important or ranked highly by all groups. Towards the bottom of the map, a further distance away from the ideal points are criteria such as *power, status, wealth, and many friends*. A bit further up and closer to the ideal points can be found another group of criteria related to career including items such as *successful career, fulfilling career, educational attainment, and having successful children*. Towards the top of map, likewise, we see several additional clusters of criteria. Moving from left to right there are clusters containing the items *travelling, hobbies, and independence*, then *overcoming challenges, meeting potential, and gaining wisdom*, and finally, *leading a moral life, and having a positive impact*. Finally, on the far right of the map *religion* and *achieving harmony with nature or god* fall close together in conceptual space.

Interpreting the dimensions. The overall structure or dimensionality of the map is a matter of speculative appraisal and thus open to multiple interpretations. I will, however, briefly propose an interpretive solution as a basis for future inferences and predictions (see Figure 3). The vertical axis appears to represent the *locus* of the goods, ranging from external, objective, and social goods such as power, status, and community involvement at the bottom to subjective, personal, and internal goods such as independence, overcoming challenges, and attaining wisdom at the top. The horizontal axis appears to represent the *morality* of the goods, ranging from hedonistic or prudential concerns such as pleasure, travel, financial security, and wealth on

Figure 2

Unfolding map with conceptual clusters.

AC= Asian Canadian, EC=European Canadian, SA=South Asian Canadian, Chinese=Chinese

Figure 3

Theoretical interpretation of dimensions

the left to spiritual and beneficence concerns such as harmony with God/nature, religious devotion, moral life, and having a positive impact on the right.

Considering the placement of ethnic ideal points in relation to these conceptual dimensions, some interesting observations can be made. Specifically, all groups gravitate towards the highly-ranked relationship criteria but with regard to the dimensions outlined they spread show a marked spread between them. Chinese and East Asian Canadians are similar in leaning towards the hedonistic-prudential side of the morality dimension. South Asian Canadians, in contrast, lean more towards the right side of this same dimension, showing greater concern with spirituality and beneficence. European Canadians, while falling in between South and East Asian Canadians on the morality dimension, lean more than the other groups toward the subjective-internal side of the locus dimension. East and South Asian Canadians tend more towards the map's center in regard to locus.

Discussion: Study 1

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the associations among good life criteria, with an eye to revealing an interpretable structural pattern in their arrangement. Such a pattern, it was hoped, would provide some clues to the types of basic forces that shape and direct cultural accounts of what makes life good. Trends or systematic variation between groups could, in theory, be linked to aspects of a culture such as socialization practices, traditions, means of production, economic affordances, etc., thus allowing for a more holistic understanding of how culture and visions of a good life are mutually constitutive. Considered in this light, the study was informative. The unfolding analysis revealed a level of commonality to the visions of a good life expressed by people from different backgrounds as well as broad dimensions of variation along which culture appears to exert influence.

Structuring the Good Life: Relationships and the Locus and Morality of Goods

The results permit two main inferences regarding the structure of beliefs about a good life. First, being connected or relating to other people is of great importance to all the groups studied. Second, visions of a good life seem to vary along two major dimensions, the first being the locus of criterial goods, and the second their morality. With regard to the first, the ends that are desired in life are structured along an axis that contrasts internally focused and highly subjective and personal goods from those that are external, objective, and social in nature. With regard to the second, goods that represent “higher,” moralized concerns are contrasted with those that involve material comfort, security, and pleasure.

Universality of relations. This structure relates easily to the characteristic responses provided by members of the groups studied here. There was a striking degree of similarity or consistency across groups in their preference for criteria pertaining to close and enduring relationships such as *having close friends*, *having a good marriage or romantic partnership* and *having a happy family*. Each of these criteria was rated highly by all groups, suggesting a level of universality in the perception that relatedness, or some form of close connection to others, is key to the constitution of a good or worthy life.

Interestingly, this finding coincides with a number of different theoretical conceptions of a good or fulfilling life (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Erikson, 1950; Ryff, 1998). It should be remembered, however, that these results only represent what people *believe*, or at least claim to believe, constitutes a good life. They do not necessarily point to what actually makes people happy or results in some objective measure of life satisfaction. Thus, the present findings should not be taken as direct support for any particular theoretical standpoint on the roots of human happiness.

These results do, however, provide compelling evidence that close and enduring relationships are considered central to a good life by all four groups studied here. This is not surprising. Many would argue that the need for companionship is biologically based (e.g. Bakan, 1966; Bowlby, 1988; Erikson, 1969). The point here, however, was not to determine what actually makes for a satisfactory or good life, but to better understand people's *beliefs* in this regard, especially in regard to how those beliefs might be constituted. So, again, the first important finding is that every group we looked at viewed close and enduring relationships as central to their vision of a good life.

Separation of groups. Beyond this cross-cultural similarity in the importance of relationship-oriented criteria, there were also significant differences among groups. These differences are evident in the relative dispersion of ethnic group ideal points across the two dimensions of the unfolding map. I provided above an interpretative framework for how the various criteria could be understood to be arranged dimensionally. A group's ideal position on the map represents a higher-order orientation in their beliefs or an abstract description of what they focus on in defining the content of a good life. Do they look to the things that they feel will make them happy or fulfilled? Or do they look to the things that they know others can see and appreciate? Are they focused on their material welfare and the pursuit of pleasure? Or guided more by moral, often spiritual, concerns? Chinese, the findings suggest, are invested more than the other groups examined in security, wealth, and social and personal enjoyment. This defines a particular kind of ambition. South Asian Canadians, on the other hand, lean somewhat more towards goods that are less concrete and practical, and defined more by their moral value. European Canadians appeared more oriented than the other groups to internally calibrated goods, suggesting that the private life of the self was more important to them.

The overall similarity in position between the Mainland Chinese and East Asian Canadian participants is also noteworthy. Those participants who identified themselves as East Asian Canadian were quite similar to Chinese participants in the positioning of their ideal points. In other words, East Asian Canadian appeared more similar to Chinese than to other Canadian groups in their valuative priorities. This finding specifically highlights the diversity in conceptions of the good life that exist within Canada's multicultural liberal democracy, illustrating that the priorities expressed by any individual or group are not simply reflections of some dominant and nationally binding master narrative. Instead, the priorities that any individual expresses will more closely reflect the stories and conversations that he takes part in on a day to day basis and which will differ significantly across ethnocultural communities living within the same diverse nation. The people that one interacts with regularly such as parents, peers, co-workers, and neighbours probably have a much stronger influence on how one interprets one's own life than does any broad national or "Western" narrative (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Harris, 1998). In other words, the people or groups that one identifies and affiliates with directly and most extensively will have the greatest influence in forming and reinforcing the conceptions by which one interprets the meaning and value of one's life.

Along similar lines, the areas where East Asian Canadians differed significantly from the Chinese were *being remembered*, *meeting potential* and *travel*; all very typical "Canadian" or "North American" preferences. Also, East Asian Canadians, though significantly different than the Chinese in their preference for these criteria, fell between the Chinese and European Canadians in how they rated them, suggesting, as might be expected, a kind of gradual shift in preferences away from what might be assumed to be the more traditional East Asian preferences of their parents towards that of other Canadian groups in some areas, but not to the same degree in others. Quite possibly, there are generational shifts occurring within all of these ethnic groups

either towards some future multicultural mean or towards divergent constellations of priorities (see Arnett, 2002). Either way, change is most certainly occurring in the cultural narratives that define these priorities. These data, due to their cross-sectional nature, can only hint at the extent to which such processes are occurring.

Beliefs about the Good Life and Personal Experience

To summarize, in this first study it is possible to see the outlines of how visions of a good life might be structured. There seems to be a universal core which is fleshed out or developed according to how individuals learn to orient toward goods differentiated in relation to locus and morality. The balance that each person finds between the poles of both dimensions can be assumed to depend on both personal characteristics and the affordances and acceptable practices within their particular sociocultural environment.

In this study, a number of clear differences in the importance given to various good life criteria were found across the groups examined. South Asian Canadians and Chinese, for example, appear to have markedly different orientations on the morality dimension. How might such differences be important for determining what one attends to and elaborates on in the flow of events and experience that defines one's life? That is, how do abstract ideas about what makes a life good actually play out in people's day-to-day experience? This was the focus of the second study.

Study 2: The Content of Life Narratives and the Good Life.

Rationale

The first study was aimed at articulating a structural framework for understanding cultural variation in visions of a good life. The present study was designed to examine the experiential significance of these visions, with regard to their influence on how individuals elaborate on and remember what happens to them over time. Specifically, can we find cultural

differences in how people narrate their lives, or construct a life story, that parallel differences in what they believe a good life consists of?

Our initial foray into studying the good life (Tafarodi et al., in press) demonstrated that, across the four nations studied there were, in addition to a number of common themes, notable cultural contrasts in how people described a good life *when asked to do so directly*. The first study of this dissertation used multidimensional scaling to better understand the underlying structure of the cultural contrasts that emerged. The results showed that conceptions of a good or worthwhile life appear to have an underlying order: Those who evaluate certain criteria as important also tend to favour specific others. Beliefs about the good life, thus, seem to cluster in natural, comprehensible ways, and people tend to lean in their preferences towards sets of beliefs that are characteristic of their cultural background.

South Asian participants, for example, gave higher priority to criteria related to spiritual or beneficent goods such having a positive impact and pursuing a moral or balanced life, as compared to Chinese participants, whose main concerns tended more toward practical and conventional goods such as career success and social status. I loosely interpret this to reflect broader cultural orientations toward the good life. Individuals from South Asia learn to orient themselves outward spiritually, and to be guided more by abstract moral principles. Individuals from China, on the other hand, fix their attention on clearly defined activities that promise material gain, status, and possibilities for pleasure.

How Important are Beliefs About the Good Life?

At this point, we may ask, “How deep do these cultural orientations run?” Specifically, do abstract cultural conceptions about what makes a life good influence how individuals perceive and understand day-to-day happenings in the context of their life narrative? As opposed to highly intellectualized conceptions of the good life, what people deem noteworthy to include in a

narrative account of their lives provides an *implicit* reflection of what they think is important according to their valuative commitments. If conceptions of a good life are truly constitutive of how people make sense of their lives, as I have argued, this should be evidenced in the stories they tell of the personal past.

The goal of this second study, then, was to determine whether the good life criteria identified so far, and the cultural orientations which they form, do in fact help give cultural sense to everyday experience by giving prominence to certain kinds of events and understandings over others.

Open-Ended Narratives as an Expression of Beliefs

I chose to analyze narratives produced by international students from China and South Asia. Undirected stories that individuals tell about the past will tend to form themselves around what they remember as noteworthy (e.g. Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2005). If cultural orientations toward the good life influence how individuals interpret happenings in their lives, then this influence should be equally evident in how those happenings are recounted and shared with others. That is, personal narratives produced by those with particular commitments regarding what matters in life should emphasize the topics and concerns of greatest importance according to those commitments. Specifically, in this case, Chinese participants should describe and interpret their past in somewhat different terms from South Asians because these groups, according to the findings of the first study, appear to emphasize different goods and rewards.

Life Stories of International Students

For several years prior to this research, I was engaged in an unrelated project which involved, in part, the recording of spoken, post-arrival life narratives from international students at the University of Toronto. While working on the first study of my dissertation, I began to see that these recorded narratives could serve as an excellent resource for studying how individuals

from different countries weave their experiences into meaningful stories reflecting their cultural commitments. Because speakers were not directed in deciding on the structure and content of their narratives, the stories they told about their experience since arriving in Canada can be taken to reflect what they think is important and noteworthy to recall and communicate. To the degree that cultural orientations to the good life are important in the organization of everyday experience, these orientations should be discernible in what participants talk about in the reconstruction of the past.

Any account of the past will, of course, address many of the mundane aspects of daily life common to all students, such as eating, sleeping, socializing, studying, and coursework. Some of the good life criteria identified in my earlier research as central to a good life have little direct bearing here (e.g., having children). Nonetheless, there should be significant correspondence between what people emphasize in their personal narratives and what matters in the life they are trying to live, at least with regard to general orientations or dispositions. I therefore expected to find such correspondence here.

Hypotheses and Planned Analysis

The expectation for this study was that clear parallels should exist between what Chinese and South Asian international students talk about in their bounded (post-arrival) life stories and the good life orientations characteristic of their cultural group. To confirm this, I adopted the following strategy. First, I sought to develop a purely data-driven scheme for categorizing the focal concerns in participants' narratives by having coders with no knowledge of the results of Study 1 identify all recurring content categories represented in the narratives. Next, I used the structural results of Study 1 to generate specific predictions for how Chinese and South Asians would differ on these new content categories. Finally, I sought to test these predictions by statistically comparing the two groups on the prevalence of the categories in the narratives.

Confirmation would provide some degree of evidence that the previously identified good life orientations play a significant role in how individuals subjectively understand and interpret their day-to-day lives as an ongoing story.

Method

Participants. This study included 43 participants, all of whom were international students in their first year of study at the University of Toronto. Twenty-four participants (11 men, 13 women) were mainland Chinese from the People's Republic of China and the remaining 19 (13 men, 6 women) were South Asian from either India or Pakistan. There were no significant age differences as a function of cultural group or gender (all $ps > .28$). Mean age was 19.08 and 18.79 years for Chinese and South Asians, respectively. Nor were there any significant differences in SES (indexed as the highest level of education achieved by either parent) as a function of cultural group or gender (all $ps > .54$). Mean SES was 7.54 and 8.05 for Chinese and South Asians, respectively, on a 10-point scale ranging from *elementary school* to *advanced university degree*. These means reflect the fact that most participants had at least one university-educated parent. Finally, only one of the Chinese participants claimed to be a practicing member of a religion (Christian). In contrast, 13 of the 17 South Asians who provided this information claimed to be practicing members (9 Hindu, 3 Muslim, and 1 Sikh). The difference in religiosity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 23.14, p < .0001$.

Because of shared circumstances, first-year international students at the same Canadian university can be expected to have quite similar recent experiences to draw upon in looking back on their post-arrival lives. This high commonality of context would allow divergences in narrative content to be more easily attributed to cultural orientation as opposed to different social and material conditions.

Because of the labour-intensiveness of narrative analysis, this study was limited to two groups, Chinese and South Asians, with approximately twenty participants per group. The two groups were chosen for several reasons. First and foremost, the unfolding analysis in Study 1 showed considerable distance between ideal points for people of these two backgrounds, providing an apt cultural contrast. This is an instructive finding, given that the two geographical regions are sometimes crudely lumped together for purposes of comparison against Western samples. Their divergence in Study 1 is not especially surprising. Although South Asia and China have both been characterized as “collectivistic,” “interdependent,” and “sociocentric” in cultural orientation (e.g. Heine, 2005), and are both undergoing similarly rapid economic development and the rise of a newly-educated, technologically-skilled middle class, (e.g. Arnett, 2002), their philosophical and ethical traditions are quite different (Nakamura, 1997). These deeply-rooted traditions have been important for shaping the cultural narratives and conceptions of a good life in these two regions. Broadly speaking, one region can be categorized as secular (China) and the other as religious (South Asia). Specifically, Chinese culture is rooted in a practical Confucian philosophy which emphasizes virtues such as hard work and education, as well as the importance of role-dependent obligations and the cultivation of relationships for the maintenance and improvement of social standing (Gunde, 2002; Hunter & Sexton, 1999; Yao, 2000). South Asian culture, on the other hand, is grounded in a more religious worldview, derived from Hindu, Muslim, and other ascetic traditions, and emphasizes the importance of virtue, good work, selfless service, purity, and a balance between worldly and sacred concerns (Jahanbegloo, 2008; Mongia, 2005; Young, 2002). On both empirical and sociocultural grounds, then, comparing international students from these two regions appears promising for revealing differences in narrative content.

Chinese and South Asian participants were recruited from a list of first-year registered international (visa) students based on their country of origin (nationality). They were paid ten dollars for participating.

Procedure. Participants were interviewed individually. After arriving at the lab, each was seated in a room furnished with two comfortable chairs and a coffee table. After settling in, the participant was asked to read the informed consent materials. After agreeing to participate in a study that involved being recorded while discussing the experience of living and studying in Canada, the interview started.

Participants were asked to spend 30 minutes narrating their experiences since coming as international students to the University of Toronto. Interviewers were trained to act as interested and empathic listeners, encouraging the participant to continue their personal story for the duration of the interview with minimal prompting. The specific instructions given to participants indicated that the researchers responsible for the study were interested in the international student experience and wanted them to speak freely, honestly, and chronologically about their life experience in Canada. If participants expressed confusion about the topic or purpose of the interview, they were reminded that the researchers' interest was solely in learning about students' life and experiences, and that any event or topic which they wished to share would be relevant and appropriate to share. If the participant lost a train of thought or drifted from the task (for example, by asking the interviewer questions about his or her own life), the interviewer would gently bring the participant back to task by reminding them of the last time period they had been discussing. By focusing on time periods rather than specific topics of discussion, the prompts were kept content-free, forcing participants to select on their own the kinds of experiences, events, and interpretations to include in their narrative.

Results

Coding. Digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed and coded by six research assistants blind to the purposes of the study. Naive coders were used to generate a content category scheme in an unbiased manner.

Generation of content categories. The first step of the coding process consisted of each coder independently reading through the narratives and making note of each distinct topic that was discussed. The focus was on literal topicality or reference (i.e., “What is being talked about here?”). This produced six separate lists of topics, which were then compared and reduced to a single, unified list by superimposing, harmonizing, and combining overly narrow or idiosyncratic topics. Through several rounds of this process, the initial total of several hundred topics was reduced to 30 clearly represented and sufficiently inclusive categories (see Table 6). This number provided the level of resolution needed for statistically reliable comparative testing.

Parsing of narratives. To create a basis for applying the topical content coding scheme, two coders independently divided each narrative into blocks of text where the speaker was “talking about the same thing” (describing an event, making a sustained point, interpreting or evaluating somebody or something, drawing conclusions about a state-of-affairs, etc.). These self-standing blocks were of three types: narrated *events* (past happenings, set in time), *summaries* of past events or experiences, and time-independent (generalized) *interpretations*. Events, for coding purposes, were descriptions of discrete events that occurred at a specific time, such as “On New Year’s Eve, we went to watch the fireworks downtown....” Summaries were non-specific or general statements about activities or experiences that took place over a period of time, such as “I spent a lot of time in the library studying....” and “It was really cold during the winter and it snowed a lot...” Interpretations were time-independent impressions or opinions that the speaker expressed, such as “I don’t like the food in Canada very much” and “Canadians are

Table 6.

Content categories in Study 2 ranked according to the number of participants (out of 43) that discussed each.

Content Code	Number of participants
academics	42
friends/peers	41
difficulty/disappointment	36
living situation/roommates	35
entertainment/outings	33
time management	32
cultural adjustment	30
independence/responsibility	30
multiculturalism/diversity	29
well-being	27
clubs/sports/group activities	26
language	25
bureaucracy/relation to authority	24
physical environment/surroundings	24
finances/rent/tuition	23
loneliness/homesickness	22
holidays/special events	22
cultural understanding/cues	21
food	21
weather	21
future concerns/career/residency	16
returning home	14
employment-related concerns/visa/permits	13
achievement/success	13
family importance/missing family	13
being a face in a crowd/deindividuation	12
family obligation/parental sacrifice	12
sightseeing/vacations	11
romantic relationships/partners	9
parental approval	7

difficult to get to know sometimes. They are friendly or polite enough but they often don't say what they mean." If a narrative block was a mixture of two or all three types, as was infrequently the case, it was categorized as the type that characterized it the most. For example, "I spent pretty much all of November in the library. It was so boring. But I was able to catch up with all my assignments and get prepared for exams," was coded as a summary, although it places the experience in a specific month. The coders agreed on the tripartite categorization of 89% of the 383 narrative blocks, with $\kappa = .832$, indicating adequate intersubjective agreement. All disagreements were resolved through discussion. Coders also judged the valence of the coded narrative segments as positive, negative, or neutral in subjective valence. Agreement here was again adequate at 92%, with $\kappa = .877$.

Preliminary comparison of groups on block type and valence. The primary purpose of this study was to compare South Asian and Chinese international students on the prevalence of derived topical content categories. Interpretation of any resulting differences, however, would be complicated by significant differences between groups in the prevalence of block types. For example, if one group tended more toward interpretations than the other, and particular topics are, on the whole better suited to affording interpretations than, say, recounting of events, then group differences on the prevalence of such topics might be more reflective of narrative style than cultural orientation to the good life. Similar problems might arise if one group tended to be more negative, positive, or neutral than the other in their narratives. To examine these possibilities, a total of 13 exploratory univariate analyses were conducted, applying a Bonferroni-corrected significance level of .003 to protect against familywise alpha inflation.

To begin with, the two groups were compared on the total number of narrative blocks (an index of overall volume) using a 2 (nationality) $\times$ 2 (gender) ANOVA. No effects were

significant. Next, the same model was applied to the proportion of this total accounted for by narrated events rather than summaries or interpretations. Again, no effects were significant. The same result emerged for the summaries and interpretations proportions. The valence of the blocks was also analyzed. Parallel ANOVAs revealed no differences by group or gender for the proportion of blocks that were positive, negative, or neutral in valence. The same held for parallel ANOVAs conducted on the proportion of positive, negative, or neutral segments for events, summaries, and interpretations considered separately. In sum, it appeared that Chinese and South Asian students, and men and women, produced much the same sorts of narratives in terms of basic block types, suggesting equivalence in overall structural composition. For this reason, it seemed justified to combine events, interpretation, and summary content together in looking at topical content categories.

The absence of group differences in block type and valence warrants the reporting of overall proportions. On the whole, 8% of narrative blocks were discrete events, 38% were summaries, and 54% were interpretations. Also, 42% of narrative blocks were positive and 42% were negative. Only 16% were neutral. A similar valence pattern held for only those blocks categorized as interpretations: 44% negative, 43% positive, 13% neutral. However, among the statements categorized as events, considerably more were rated as negative (63%) than positive (31%) in their subjective emotional quality. Only 6% of events were described in neutral terms. By contrast, the blocks categorized as summaries reflected more positive (44%) than negative (34%) content, with 22% of summaries rated as neutral. On the whole, then, when speaking of discrete events, participants were more likely to refer to negative occurrences. However, when speaking in general terms or summarizing their experiences, they tended to make more positive than negative statements.

Comparing Groups on Topical Content Categories

Topical coding. To look at topical prevalence, each narrative block was independently categorized by two pairs of coders using the 30-category scheme derived earlier. Coders were allowed to assign as many content codes as required to describe the themes present within a given block. For example, if the block described a particularly difficult period of the semester when the participant was studying constantly but in the end was able to finish their assignments and achieve high marks, it would be assigned codes for *academic concerns*, *overcoming obstacles*, and *success/achievement*.

To ensure consistency in application of the codes, the coding process was done by pairs of coders in two redundant rounds. Thus, each transcript thus was coded twice in its entirety, each time by a separate pair of coders. Afterwards, the two sets of codes were compared and discrepancies resolved by the primary investigator. Overall agreement was high at 87%.

Predictions from dimensional orientation and criterion preference. Admittedly, the correspondence of good life criteria, as examined in Study 1, and topical categories of narrative reference, as examined here, is by no means simple and direct. For example, one might predict that a group that gives higher priority to “having many friends” in its vision of a good life should be more likely to refer to our derived topic of “friends/peers” in the course of narrating personal experiences. This expectation is reasonable, but it should be noted that while the criterion refers to a particular state-of-affairs in relation to friends (i.e., having many), the topic does not. In fact, even references to the importance of having *few* rather than many good friends would fall into the topical category. For this reason, it should be born in mind that the predictions that follow are tentative at best. Even so, making rough predictions of topical prevalence on the basis of cultural commitments to a certain vision of a good life offers a bridge from high-level attitudes and

beliefs to everyday life. This, as discussed, is crucial for demonstrating that the latter really does matter for the shaping of experience.

On the whole, it is defensible to claim that the prevalence of topical content in a relatively unconstrained personal narrative will reflect degree of concern with or interest in that topic. That is, if a topic is of greater concern to a group, if they talk about it more *in any way*, it is likely to be more central to their conception of what life should be about. Thus, if Chinese are found to speak more than South Asians about *friends/peers*, it can be taken to indicate that friend-related concerns are more prominent in defining their experiences and memory for those experiences. They could be saying many different things about friends, but the simple fact that they speak with greater frequency about friends suggests that friendship is more important as an *organizing principle* in how Chinese understand their lives.

Rather than focusing on specific one-to-one correspondences between narrative topics and good life criteria, it might be more useful to start with the structural orientations revealed in the unfolding analysis (Study 1). Recall that South Asian and Chinese participants were positioned differently on the morality dimension, with the former closer than the latter to the spiritual and beneficence side. Chinese appeared as more concerned with prudential matters, chiefly those relating to security, career, wealth, and comfort or pleasure. This allows the prediction that instances of the *academics* and *achievement/success* content categories will be more prevalent in Chinese than in South Asian narratives. On the other hand, there is reason to expect that instances of the *well-being* (which was discussed as mostly spiritual and/or psychological), *multiculturalism/diversity* (a moral social concern), and *independence/responsibility* (featuring the theme of accountability) content categories will be more prevalent in South Asian than in Chinese narratives.

Shifting from the dimensions revealed in Study 1 to the actual criterion preferences, it will be recalled that Chinese participants in that study ranked “having many friends” higher than did all other groups. This distinction permits the additional prediction that instances of the content categories *friends/peers* and *clubs/sports/group activities* will be more prevalent in Chinese than in South Asian narratives in this study.

Modeling of topical prevalence. Because it was rare for participants to refer to any particular topical content category more than twice in their narratives, block frequencies were coded into three ordinal categories: 0, 1, and >1 (see Table 7). Frequencies were then analyzed by means of a cumulative logit model (McCullagh, 1980), which uses the strategy of averaged dichotomization, to examine whether the likelihood of higher prevalence for each topical category differed across nationality and gender. No significant gender differences or gender by group interactions were found. Gender was therefore dropped from the model.

The results for the reduced model revealed significant or marginally significant between-group differences for 6 of the 30 coding categories: *independence/responsibility*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.47, p = .06$, *well-being*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.20, p = .07$, *friends/peers*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.46, p = .06$, *clubs/sports/group activities*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.72, p = .02$, *romantic partners*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.96, p = .05$, and *language*, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 17.91, p < .0001$. The form of these differences was as follows. Consistent with prediction, South Asian students were 1.59 times as likely (adjusted odds) as Chinese students to have one or more (as opposed to zero) narrative blocks, and two or more (as opposed to one or zero) blocks, that referred to *independence/responsibility*. Also consistent with prediction, they were 2.84 times as likely as Chinese to refer to *well-being* with greater frequency. Chinese, consistent with prediction, were 8.49 times more likely than South Asians to refer to *friends/peers* with greater frequency, and 4.27 times more likely to refer to *clubs/sports/group activities* with greater frequency. Unexpectedly, however, they were also 9.29

Table 7

Number of narrative blocks referring to each topical content category by nationality.

	<i>Number of Blocks</i>					
	South Asian			Chinese		
	0	1	>1	0	1	>1
Academics	0	0	19	1	0	23
Friends/Peers	2	3	14	0	1	23
Difficulty/Disappointment	5	2	12	2	11	11
Living Situation/Roommates	5	5	9	3	7	14
Entertainment/Outings	3	2	14	7	5	12
Time Management	5	2	12	6	7	11
Cultural Adjustment	3	9	7	10	4	10
Independence/Responsibility	5	3	11	8	11	5
Multiculturalism/Diversity	9	7	3	15	6	3
Well-Being/Balance	4	7	8	12	6	6
Clubs/Sports/Group Activities	11	5	3	6	7	11
Language	18	0	1	0	8	16
Bureaucracy/Authority	7	5	7	12	8	4
Physical Environment/Surroundings	9	2	8	10	8	6
Finances/Rent/Tuition	10	5	4	10	9	5
Loneliness/Homesickness	9	7	3	12	5	7
Holidays/Special Events	10	6	3	11	8	5
Cultural Understanding/Cues	12	4	3	10	7	7
Food	11	7	1	11	9	4
Weather	9	5	5	13	6	5
Future/Career/Residency	13	3	3	14	6	4
Returning Home	13	6	0	16	8	0
Employment Concerns/Visa/Permits	15	3	1	15	6	3
Achievement/Success	15	4	0	15	7	2
Family Importance/Missing Family	13	4	2	17	4	3
Deindividuation	12	5	2	19	5	0
Family Obligation/Parent Sacrifice	14	3	2	17	7	0
Sightseeing/Vacations	13	5	1	19	5	0
Romantic Relations/Partnerships	18	1	0	16	5	3
Parental Approval	15	2	2	21	2	1

Note. Table values represent the number of participants falling into each frequency category.

times more likely to refer to *romantic partners* with greater frequency. Chinese were also 448.07 times more likely to refer to *language* with greater frequency. This last difference is hardly surprising given the higher English fluency of the South Asians. Notably, the predicted differences for *multiculturalism/diversity*, *academics*, and *achievement/success* were not confirmed. In summary, 4 of the 7 predictions were confirmed (at least marginally in terms of significance) and two unexpected differences emerged. I will attempt to interpret this mixed pattern of results in the next section.

Discussion: Study 2

On the whole, the post-arrival life narratives of both South Asian and Chinese international students were dominated by predictable concerns and involvements related to schoolwork, campus affairs, informal social life, and cultural adjustment. This reflects the demands faced by all young adults adjusting to university life in a new country. There were also, however, notable group differences in topical representation, and these can be interpreted in light of the predictions that were made on the basis of the results of Study 1.

Specific Predictions

From the ranking differences found in Study 1, I predicted that Chinese would speak more about *friends/peers* and *clubs/sports/group activities* than did South Asians. Both of these predictions were confirmed. Also, the unfolding results from Study 1 led me to predict that South Asians would refer to *independence/responsibility*, *well-being*, and *multiculturalism/diversity* with greater frequency than the Chinese. The first two (but not the last) of these were confirmed.

The disconfirmed predictions (in regard to *multiculturalism/diversity*, *achievement*, and *academics*) cast some doubt on the present claims. It is important to bear in mind, however, that each of the topical categories used here refers to a broad range of potential content as well as context. Because the narratives centered on everyday life, and all of the participants were

recently arrived international students at the same university located in a richly multiethnic city, it is perhaps not surprising that these three particular categories would be mentioned with similar frequency by both groups. All of the participants were describing life in a new physical, social, and cultural environment where issues related to ethnic/linguistic/religious diversity would be hard to avoid. Similarly, because all participants were first-year university students, it is not surprising that a preoccupation with achievement and academics was similarly evident in both groups.

More generally, it should be noted that the topical category frequencies compared in this study do not speak to how Chinese and South Asians might understand the categories differently and diverge in assigning practical or moral significance to them. The methodology and analytic strategy used, for all the rigour they provided, presented clear limitations in this regard.

More Speculative Expectations

Beyond the clearly grounded predictions discussed above, I also had some speculative expectations based on a looser and more connotative interpretation of the dimensional orientations apparent in the Study 1 unfolding analysis. Specifically, I predicted that Chinese participants, in their narratives, would focus more on concrete goals and established, predictable relations, whereas South Asians would be more exploratory and open-ended in their stories, expressing more flexible goals and relationships. The Chinese, I predicted, would elaborate on stories and events that fit within a more conservative and clearly delimited framework of goals and activities. South Asians, on the other hand, would be more open, or outwardly focused, drawing attention in their discussions to relevant contextual factors such as the surrounding social or physical environment.

Clearly, the complexity of these qualities cannot be inferred from simple topical prevalence, at least not using the broad topics derived here. Because of this, I opted at this stage to use a more interpretive, qualitative, and exploratory approach to assessing these differences. In place of strict quantitative comparisons that were simply not possible here, I tried to get a feel for *how* some of these categories were being discussed, that is, *the ways that* participants discussed or referred to specific topics. To explore these nuances, I sought to unpack a selection of topical categories further, to look more specifically at *what was being said* on the topic in question, and what this implied about the speaker's orientation to the topic.

To maximize the likelihood of identifying group differences in how the same topic was addressed, I focused my attention on those categories which yielded significant differences in prevalence. This decision was based on the reasoning that differences in emphasis are often accompanied by differences in orientation to the topic, with the latter helping to explain or account for the former.

The six categories on which Chinese and South Asians differences in prevalence were group activities/clubs/sports, romance, friends, well-being, independence, and language. As described above, my intention was to gain additional insight into why these topics were emphasized more by one group than the other, and to see if the differences were related to the more speculative contrasts in good life orientation that had been suggested to me, however tentatively, by the earlier unfolding analysis. Again, this analysis was meant to be exploratory and interpretive, not rigorous and confirmatory. I will address each of the six topical categories in turn.

Language and the Chinese. Language was mentioned almost exclusively by Chinese participants. Essentially, these references described practical language difficulties, presumably reflecting a large group disparity in English language training and preparation. This is not at all

surprising. Nearly all South Asians attended English-language schools in their home countries before coming to Canada, whereas most of the Chinese did not. Accordingly, this difference in prevalence says little about either group's orientation to language. Rather, it simply reflects linguistic training and exposure. As such, it is largely irrelevant to the present purpose and will not be discussed further.

Well-Being. The category labelled *well-being* was three times as likely to be mentioned with higher frequency by South Asian participants. Blocks coded in this way sometimes referred to physical health, but much more commonly to mental health and spiritual balance. One theme on this topic that was more common in South Asian than Chinese narratives was the need to limit the demands of social connections, exemplified here by the statements, "I am still struggling to achieve a balance because, I think I was a little too distracted, which was stressful. Finals are coming up. I feel very comfortable now. I think I can do well in my studies, I can do well socially, everything." In other words, there was a concern with the negative impact of socializing too much or spending time with friends at the expense of school work and other priorities. Others, such as this Indian woman, spoke of the need to establish an identity separate from parents and friends: "In a family setting, you have responsibilities and certain obligations, but once you're here, you're sort of free from that, you know, in a good way... in a way that can be productive. You can make your own time, be like yourself, not do what everyone else wants all the time. I wanted to have time to myself. That was my main priority." These examples reflect a greater desire on the part of South Asians to balance the at times conflicting demands of social life, schoolwork, and personal development.

Romantic Relationships/Partners. The category of "romantic relationships/partners" was nine times more likely to be mentioned with higher frequency (averaged across dichotomizations) by Chinese than South Asian participants. Most commonly, instances of this

category referred to feelings of homesickness and depression. Romantic partnerships were seen as providing, in a sense, a surrogate family within which the participant could share experiences and mitigate loneliness. Participants spoke of being unhappy or depressed until they found a boyfriend or girlfriend. The following quotes from Chinese participants are good examples of this theme: “If I feel sad... he always comforts me so if I feel happy I can share with him. So I feel so happy to have a boyfriend here. I think many Chinese girls think the same thing. Because here you feel homesick and when you feel sad or happy you have no one to share it with,” and “I think most international student would do is, making girlfriend or boyfriend because they are...uh...alone here. So for me, I need to talk to someone. Well...I cannot phone my, call my dad or mum all the time. So I need find someone.”

Romantic references among South Asian participants, on the other hand, more often illustrated the challenges or difficulties involved in maintaining a romance and negotiating one's needs with those of one's partner. A South Asian woman provided this example: “I think around like after Valentines' Day we had like this huge fight and stuff like that. So that kind of, I guess that kind of also slowed me down from studying and stuff like that. We did eventually work things out but that was definitely a really bad month for us.”

Group Activities/Clubs/Sports. “Group activities/clubs/sports” as a category was four times more likely to be mentioned with higher frequency by Chinese than South Asian participants. This category refers to recreational activities with peers, such as sports, clubs, and parties. Typical examples from Chinese narratives are: “Sometimes I go to like the Yoga or some dance class. Yah, it's quite interesting. Yeah... doing some exercise and going to the gym with friends,” and “I'm also thinking like more participate in the school activities like.... Joining student unions and I wasn't able to do any of these this time. I think I'm going to join some during the summer.”

Interestingly South Asians more often referred to such activities as taking up a lot of their time and being something of a distraction. This is reflected in the following example from a South Asian man: “I was going out and doing things with a bunch of people from res. Going out to hang out and it was taking a lot of time. Like every day was something. Instead of being the social guy, I decided maybe it’s time to take some time off from the social activities. So I stopped ... Trying to get in touch with them... It’s time to study a little bit.” Chinese participants, in contrast, often claimed to not have as much time as they would like for engaging in such activities and hoped or planned to do more in the future. Chinese also referred more often to formally organized activities and identifiable clubs/organizations whereas South Asian participants tended to refer to informal activities and loose-knit groups of friends.

Independence/Responsibility. Finally, South Asian participants were three times more likely than Chinese to make statements related to independence or responsibility with higher frequency. These statements for both groups most often referred to moral or practical autonomy. On the practical side, there were many references to shopping, cooking, and laundry. This is clear in these quotes from Chinese participants: “The main goal for me is I get used to the life here. I learn a lot of stuff, like, [laughs] how to do laundry, how to go grocery shopping, how to balance your budget, and everything...” and “We have to buy the food and it’s very expensive. So we have to go to grocery regularly and then buy the grocery and then they cook it.... We try to learn it, but, back there in China, I asked all my friends—no one has ever used the knife to chop, like to cut. Yeah. Because food there is so cheap, like, we always eat outside, we don’t really do that, or mom would do it sometime, but....”

Instances of this category, especially for South Asian participants, often contained an element of interpretation. They discussed what it *means* to live away from home – the more subjective kinds of moral challenges and rewards inherent in negotiating an independent life. For

example, a South Asian woman gave this explanation: “When you’re here and you have the chance to be a different person and maybe I mean be, you know, be different from what you were and do things you would not normally do....I like spending more time by myself and I never did that back home. I was always with somebody. I think it is [good]. I don’t know...maybe it is bad.” Thus, more often for South Asian than for Chinese participants, there seemed to be an element of moral development and exploration or discovering new facets of the self, exploration which, from an Eriksonian perspective, can be considered crucial for healthy identity development.

Cultural Themes

The higher-resolution descriptions provided above help in further characterizing how South Asian and Chinese narratives differed in the sorts of issues that were addressed, reflecting the differential concerns of the two groups. Roughly speaking, it seems that Chinese participants were more focused on forming well-defined dyadic partnerships and being members of formal groups. South Asians, by contrast, appeared to associate more with loose-knit groups of peers and have greater interest in negotiating independent identities. Also, although both groups discussed the importance of balancing school and social life, they seemed to approach this problem from opposite directions. Chinese participants most often began by discussing how focused they had been on their studies and how they needed to find ways to open up and develop social connections. South Asians, on the other hand, seemed to more naturally drift towards patterns of open socializing and exploration, and talked more often of the need to be more disciplined and task-focused, and limit the influence of others.

As I tentatively expected, Chinese focused their narratives on a more limited set of relationships (close dyads, romantic partnerships, and formal groups) and goals (feeling safe and secure in relationships and academic success). South Asians, on the other hand, appeared more

diffusive or outward-facing in their focus. They affiliated more often with informal groups of peers and engaged in unplanned activities. South Asians also spoke more often about negotiating independence and changing relationships with others. They seemed to have concern with not just directing their attention to very specific priorities, but also maintaining a broad and balanced horizon of engagements.

Overall, then, the narratives analyzed in this study seem to lend some support to the idea that the divergent good-life orientations of Chinese and South Asians, as evidenced in Study 1, translate into predictably different concerns and emphases in the narrative accounts that they communicate to others. Some of the specific grounded predictions were not confirmed, but the overall pattern of significant differences, coupled with suggestive evidence from my examination of *how* the categories were referenced by the two groups, is at least consistent with my reading of the broad cultural orientations outlined in Study 1.

Tentatively, we can say that the two groups tend to occupy somewhat different standpoints in how they relate to others, pursue goals, and structure their lives, consistent with what they think make a life good or worthwhile. In the broadest terms, Chinese seem to be more invested in cleaving to established patterns of practical investment and concern, whereas South Asians are more comfortable and approving of unstructured exploration and experimentation conducive to (often moral) self-development.

Even so, the high degree of similarity in the form and content of narratives across groups should not be overlooked. Both Chinese and South Asian international students were primarily concerned with friends, school, and the practical challenges commonly faced by all students who are living away from home. The subtler differences in how South Asians and Chinese made sense of these common experiences and shaped them into a story should not be over-emphasized. Nevertheless, the fingerprints of cultural orientations to the good life were at least evident in this

study, suggesting that they are influential in the shaping of everyday experience and its transformation into narrative.

If South Asians are indeed more open and oriented toward a broader and more spiritual and moral array of goods than the Chinese, who appear more committed to conventional, practical, and material advancement and pleasures, why might this be? Where do these orientations to living a good life come from? In the final section, my discussion of these results will speculatively address this question.

General Discussion

Dimensions of a Good Life: Locus and Morality

The main purpose of this dissertation was to better understand people's beliefs about what constitutes a worthy or good life. More specifically, I was interested in these beliefs as an important aspect of cultural orientation. To look into the form and function of cultural conceptions of a good life, I conducted two studies. First, I used multidimensional scaling to reveal the dimensional structure underlying relations amongst the various goods that people see as constituting the life they hope to live. I was then able to examine where different cultural groups are located in the space defined by these dimensions. In the second study, I looked at the extent to which this relative positioning is reflected in the life narratives of international students from South Asia and China. Taken together, the two studies offer a useful way of understanding the logic and experiential implications of how different societies envision a good life. In developing this understanding, the findings led me to focus on the importance of the life goals and activities emphasized by different societies, and how the different ideal narratives these constitute give shape and meaning to everyday experience.

Study 1 used multidimensional scaling to identify two core dimensions of how a good life is defined: the *locus* of goods worth pursuing, and the *morality* of those goods. The findings from

this study suggested that individuals and cultural groups can be meaningfully distinguished within this derived dimensional space. Specifically, Study 1 indicated that some people are more focused on hedonistic or prudential concerns whereas others are more concerned with beneficence and spiritual matters. Chinese were closer to the former characterization than were South Asians, who leaned more toward the latter. Study 1 also identified a second dimension that distinguished those who orient toward socially visible and externally realized ends such as power, status, wealth, and prestige – ends that can be metaphorically characterized as “outward” in nature – from those who concern themselves with goods that are more internal, subjective, and personal, such as realizing one’s potential, wisdom, travelling, and living in accord with one’s principles. In Study 1, European Canadians expressed the strongest preference for such subjective or personally-defined goals.

Study 2 followed up on the findings of the first study by examining the narratives of international students from South Asia and China. Specifically, the focus was on whether the cultural orientations revealed in Study 1 were expressed in how individuals described and interpreted their experiences. Although the findings were mixed, South Asian and Chinese participants did diverge in the substance of their narratives in a manner that, at a general level, harmonizes with the comparative results of Study 1.

Cultural Orientations to the Good Life

Taking the findings of the two studies broadly and suggestively, South Asians can be described as more flexible and balance-oriented in their actions, and as more often guided by abstract moral principles and spiritual concerns. Chinese participants, in contrast, appear to have a more centripetal or inward focus with regard to activities, focusing them tightly around a narrow and concretely guided set of practical and social concerns. Consistent with this characterization, it has been suggested elsewhere (Gunde, 2002; Hunter & Sexton, 1999) that the

Chinese place strong emphasis on the importance of disciplined and clearly-targeted effort, and are especially concerned with collectively recognized indicators of status and prestige. The Chinese have been characterized as possessing a distinctive combination of ambition or drive to succeed and conservative, conformist tendencies (Yao, 2000). They tend to limit their activities to those that are directly and socially evaluable. South Asian culture, on the other hand, has been described as emphasizing diversity, integration, and spirituality (Mongia, 2005; Young, 2002). In fact, the region of South Asia is distinctive for the manner in which it blends many diverse ethnicities and religions into a dynamic whole. China is quite ethnically varied as well, but diversity, integration, and tolerance do not seem as constitutive of Chinese master narratives and traditions as they are for South Asians. Looking westward to European Canadians, the results of Study 1 indicated that they differed from the other groups in their focus on subjective or self-defined objectives. This result fits well with the importance of self-expression, autonomy, and individual choice that is characteristic of North American and other post-materialist cultures (Friedman, 1990; Inglehart, 2006; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). These parallels between good life orientations and the observations of other cultural scholars suggest that the dimensions of “activities” and “goals” may hold broader significance as structural axes of cultural differentiation.

In the remaining sections, I will explore the previously described cultural differences in greater detail. First, however, it is important to offer some theoretical context for how these dimensions should be understood.

Humanity is Diversity

Arguably, cultural differences result from universal processes and species-specific potentialities common to all people. Human beings have evolved to create shared symbolic forms which enable them, as cooperative groups, to adapt to life within diverse and changing social and

physical environments. In comparing cultural groups, we are not looking at *essential* differences, but, rather, at how each group has creatively adapted the tools and capacities of our species to a unique configuration of local conditions over time. Thus, the diversity evident across groups in customs, practices, and beliefs should be understood to illustrate the versatility of human beings as a single-natured species. Even seemingly incommensurable differences between societies can be assumed to result from the same processes of collective learning and adaptation that exist in all societies.

A good or successful life, conceived as a subjective vision, is something that every individual in every society aspires to. The content of these narrative visions is bound to vary in line with the distinctive personal and communal circumstances that define a human life. That life does not unfold *within* a society as much as *through* it and, as the results of Study 2 indicate, the very experience of that unfolding is determined in part by the vision of what it is supposed or hoped or feared to be. Such visions are always negotiated through dialogue with others within the matrix of enculturation that is constitutive of society. Thus, although it is important to identify and explain differences in cultural orientation across societies, it should be recognized that such differences result from a far deeper commonality: that people everywhere learn to make sense of themselves and their world through their interactions with others.

Cultural Characteristics

Why would South Asians be more guided by abstract moral commitments in their approach to activities, and more open and flexible in their interactions with their surroundings? Conversely, why would the Chinese be more concrete, practical, and tightly focused in their activities, and more oriented towards clearly defined and socially recognized goods? What might incline the Chinese participants to place more focus on building up resources and social capital, as compared to South Asians, who seem to concentrate more on balancing multiple interests?

Similarly, what is it about our own society that might incline Canadians towards subjectively defined, self-expressive goals? Our task now is to try to explain these differences, however speculatively.

Chinese: Effort and Connections

Study 1 suggested that Chinese people were especially concerned with social status, power, and having many friends. In Study 2, Chinese participants spent a comparatively large amount of time discussing romantic partnerships and involvement in organized social activities. Also, the unfolding analysis implied that the Chinese were, compared to the other groups, more tightly focused in their orientation to activity. Thus, Chinese participants on the whole demonstrated a tendency to invest themselves in a few clearly defined activities or objectives to the exclusion of others. They tended to be more bounded and exclusive in their areas of concern, which usually revolved around formal activities and well-defined relationships.

I propose that these tendencies relate to two important cultural currents in Chinese society. The first of these is an emphasis on improving the self through focused effort, hard work, and the fulfillment of social obligations, consistent with the Confucian moral tradition (Yao, 2000). Confucian tradition emphasizes the realization of success and virtue through disciplined effort and the proper fulfilment of social roles. From this perspective, hard work, or the application of energy in “productive” ways, becomes a moral imperative for many Chinese. At the same time, the culture only recognizes a relatively small number of narrowly defined avenues for success (Gunde, 2002). In the Chinese view, success should be recognizable to others. External indicators such as material goods and social status become closely tied to virtue. To be a good person is, in part, to work hard and not be distracted by temptation, laziness, or other vices. Such discipline and perseverance is believed lead to success. Material goods and

social status, in this view, are external markers of cultivated character, visible indicators of one's quality as a person.

A second important current in Chinese culture is the importance of social networks. These networks negotiate and maintain status, obligations, entitlements, and prestige. This important theme in Chinese culture is referred to in Chinese by the term *guanxi* (Hunter & Sexton, 1999). The concept of *guanxi* can be roughly translated as social capital. It relates to favours, reciprocity, and the maintenance of connections (Guthrie, 1998). *Guanxi* is analogous, in many ways, to the "Good Ol' Boys" networks of the southern United States, whereby success in many domains is dependent on "who you know." For the Chinese, these social networks tend to promote social conservatism, conformity, the maintenance of "face," and standardized forms of appearance (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002).

The Confucian conception of virtue as disciplined effort, together with the emphasis on fitting into and maintaining social networks, helps us better understand the mindset of the typical Chinese international student. These students want to excel and prove their worth, but see only a limited number of paths or opportunities for doing so. They desire to distinguish themselves and feel obligated to work hard, but feel they must do so within a very strictly defined set of rules and social hierarchy. Understandably, then, Chinese students tend to focus very narrowly on academic matters. Where they do invest time in social relationships, they tend to be of a clearly defined and often functional nature. They wish to maintain appropriate appearances and connect to the "right" people. The relationships emphasized by Chinese participants in these studies (romantic partnerships and organized social activities) provide well-carved roles and traditional structure, thus providing low-risk avenues for the establishment of social connections and identity.

A number of developmental studies (e.g., Hsueh, Tobin, & Karasawa, 2004; Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) have suggested that Chinese culture on the whole does not encourage experimentation or exploration. Chinese parents and teachers tend to be highly directive and restrictive starting in early childhood. They can be especially critical of perceived violations of social norms and expectations. It is not difficult to imagine how cultural narratives and traditional beliefs regarding the importance of role fulfillment, focused effort, and *guanxi* might engender a socially conservative approach to effortful engagement. Chinese cultural character, in this light, might be characterized as a distinctive amalgam of ambition and conformity.

South Asia: Diversity and Spirituality

South Asians, relative to the other groups examined in the present studies, were distinguished by a flexible, balanced, and spiritual orientation. They spread their interest and efforts more widely and expressed more concern with the effects of their actions on others. In the first study, South Asians placed relatively high importance on religion, having a positive impact, and being remembered. In the second study, narrative analysis revealed that South Asians spoke significantly more about well-being and independence. These characteristics, I suggest, relate to a general tendency toward flexibility, openness, and tolerance of diversity (see Young, 2002), as well as significant investment in spiritual or other non-materialistic concerns (Mongia, 2005; Roy, 1976).

Interpreting these results in relation to South Asian cultural narratives is complicated by the great variety of ethnolinguistic groups and religious traditions that make up the region (Kumar, 2003; Young, 2002). No one particular tradition or cultural theme can be taken as broadly representative of the area. What is perhaps most defining of South Asia as a region (here I am referring to the Indian subcontinent and, more specifically, to the modern-day nation-states

of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) is its historical relationship to the western world. Insofar as there is a unifying collective identity across the diverse populations of this region, it relates to their common experience as constituents of the British empire, and their postcolonial efforts to establish independent and valued identities within both the geopolitical region and the global economy. South Asia was comprised of many states until it was forcibly unified by the British. The struggle for independence from Britain, combined with the residual political dominance of the English language (Mongia, 2005; Vyas, 1992) did more to unify this region than perhaps any other event. Historically speaking, then, the narratives that broadly characterize the peoples of this region reflect their subjugation by Britain, the imposition of English as the language of power and, later, the fight for independence (Carter, 1998).

Insofar as there ever was a South Asian (or at least Indian) master narrative, it was enunciated through moral contrast with British or “western” culture (Jahanbegloo, 2008; Roy, 1976). The spirituality, diversity, and inclusivity of South Asia were highlighted in this contrast. Britain in the early 20th century was white, English-speaking, and largely secular as compared to South Asia or “Mother India,” which was comprised of a multitude of ethnic groups who spoke hundreds of dialects, and worshipped as many gods and deities. Spirituality and diversity, thus, became especially salient through juxtaposition against western culture. These traits, combined with tolerance and respect for the rights of others, helped mobilize collective action. They gave the region’s peoples a sense of shared identity in the fight for independence (Palkivala, 2002).

In the same way that an individual’s separation from parents involves the organization of diverse aspects of self into a consolidated identity that stands out as separate and distinct from others, India and its surrounding region came to define itself against the background of western empire, especially Britain. A master narrative was created whereby South Asians saw themselves as exemplars of spirituality and tolerance. India was held up by some as the spiritual conscience

of the mid-twentieth century (Kumar, 2003). Gandhi was able to famously deploy this image in a revolution that is best remembered for its unique reliance on inclusive spirituality, civil disobedience, and nonviolence (Vyas, 1992; Young, 2002).

Thus, the modern history of South Asia shows a tendency towards openness, tolerance for diversity, and the blending of traditions (Jahanbegloo, 2008; Mongia, 2005; Young, 2002). There has also been greater emphasis there than in China or western countries on spiritual or transcendental aspects of existence (Carter, 1998; Palkivala, 2002; Roy, 1976). Consistent with this, South Asians participants in the present studies were more concerned with matters of spirituality and religion, and less rigidly focused on specific activities with measurable outcomes. They were also more concerned with balancing multiple interests.

North America: Prosperity, Self-Expression, and Choice

European Canadian participants in the first study appeared to place great importance on personally-defined objectives or internally measured goods. To be specific, they assigned high priority to travel, achieving greatness, having a positive impact, and meeting personal potential as compared to other groups. These criteria cluster on the upper portion of the unfolding map which corresponds to “internal goods.” All are highly subjective: One must define for oneself what “being great,” “having a positive impact,” or “living up to potential” mean exactly. Articulating such goods over time can, in fact, become an exercise in self-expression. Comparing these preferences to those of the other groups recalls the “new individualism” that Friedman (1990) has described as emblematic of North American culture. This is a focus on, and even reverence for, the expression of individuality and identity through choice. The ideal of authenticity -- the injunction to “be all that you can be” and independently “express yourself” through a “true calling” -- seems to be especially prevalent among middle-class, college-educated North Americans (Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Developmental research (e.g. Quinn, 2005; Rosenthal & Roer-Strier, 2006) has highlighted how child-rearing practices and folk theories of socialization and ideal maturation tend to perpetuate the above commitments. For example, young children in North American environments are given a high degree of choice as to their activities and playmates and are rewarded for sharing their own unique experiences and point of view. They are also encouraged toward open expression of beliefs, feelings, and creative imaginings. It is not hard to see how such parenting practices would contribute to a North American vision of the good life that emphasizes personal choice and the expression of a “true self” (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996).

Evolving Cultural Narratives

Inglehart (2000, 2006) has, over several decades, shown a relationship between the cultural value placed on self-expression and changing economic conditions. Individuals raised from an early age in prosperous environments, where the basic needs of existence can be taken for granted, place a much greater emphasis on self-expression as opposed to survival-oriented values. Inglehart’s findings also point to a generational lag between economic and cultural change as shifts in values. Evidence of the beginnings of such a shift in Chinese culture can be seen in recent research by Tobin and his colleagues (2009). Comparing Chinese parenting practices and folk theories in 1985 to those of 2003, they argue for a significant move toward child-centered thinking. Specifically, discourses among parents, teachers, and school administrators have shifted toward promoting independence, creativity, and the rights of the child, while still continuing to emphasize both Confucian and socialist ideals. It will be interesting to see whether these changes come to be reflected in how future generations of Chinese imagine a good life. In contrast, American schools in the 21st century seem to be shifting in the direction of greater academic rigour and increased discipline (Tobin, Hsueh, &

Karasawa, 2009). It is an open question whether these changes might relate to a reduction in perceived security among North Americans due to post-9/11 or economic concerns.

Although it is often difficult to see from within, ideals and practices are constantly evolving in all cultures. Only time will tell how visions of a good life held by the cultural groups examined here will change. If Inglehart's claims are taken at face value, we should expect the wealthier segments of both South Asian and Chinese cultures to endorse more self-expression in their ideals of a good life over time. If austerity and economic uncertainty increases, on the other hand, we may see a shift towards survival-oriented attitudes, as recently evident to some extent in the U.S.

The Centrality of Interpersonal Relations

It seems clear from this research that conceptions of a good life are anchored in significant interpersonal relationships. In Study 1, Chinese participants, as well as Canadian participants of South Asian, East Asian, and European backgrounds, gave the highest priority to close and enduring relationships. Without exception, all ethnic groups placed having a happy family, having a good marriage, good relations with family, raising children well, and having close friends toward the top of their lists. I suggest that such commonality is reflective of our evolutionary heritage. Human beings are drawn to each other for security, protection, recognition, and fulfillment (Bowlby 1969; Cosmides & Tooby, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Furthermore, we look to our peers for meaning and direction. In the simplest, most existential sense, we are lost without others. Culture and group membership *implicitly* shape conceptions of a good life through providing a narrative organization for life's complexities. The present research also shows that relationships are *explicitly* important. Close and enduring social connections were central to the good life for all groups studied.

Relationships not only shape the stories through which individuals imagine the unfolding of their lives, but also assume a central role in those stories.

Imagining a Good Life

At this point, it is possible to present a tentative picture of how humans envision a good life. There appears to be a common core that consists of highly valued relationships. The relative importance of specific relationships such as those with friends or family may vary in importance across individuals and groups, but they are almost always in the picture. Building outward from this common core, culture and social surroundings shape the relative valuation of internal-subjective vs. external-objective, and prudential-hedonistic vs. moral-spiritual, goods. These two dimensions – locus and morality – appear to structure and define the broader orientations by which different groups envision what makes life good.

Conclusion

I have argued on the basis of this research that sociality, locus, and morality are fundamental features of people's narrative conceptions of a good life, and that it is against this structural framework that differences in cultural orientation can be understood. Admittedly, however, the two studies reported here have barely scratched the surface of this topic. Accordingly, I will briefly touch upon some of the limitations of the present research, and some of the questions it raises for future investigation.

Limitations

An important limitation of Study 1 was the use of a single item to assess the subjective importance of each good life criterion. Because each of the thirty criteria was represented as a single phrase, considerable ambiguity in both sense and reference was possible, and, accordingly, varying interpretations across individuals and groups were invited. For example, it is quite possible that Chinese and North American participants understood criteria such as wealth,

positive relations with family, and well-being rather differently, given the culture-specific connotations of these phrases. An alternative questionnaire might make use of several items per criterion to provide a more stable and reliable representation of each construct.

Language may also have been an issue in Study 2. To simplify the procedure, all interviews were conducted in English by native English speakers. Whereas South Asian participants were essentially native English speakers, however, many Chinese participants had some difficulty expressing themselves in English,. This leaves open the question of whether Chinese participants were willing and able to express their spontaneous thoughts and feelings to the same extent as were South Asians in the interview context. Future studies should allow participants to narrate in their language of choice. On this point, it would be informative to compare the narratives produced by bilingual participants in English with those they produce in their native tongue. Differences in content and structure as a function of language would be especially informative about the organizational and interpretive force of both the language and the culture it mediates. For example, would an English-Hindi bilingual exhibit more spiritual or religious tendencies when narrating their life in Hindi rather than English?

One can also question the implicit assumption in this study that public endorsements of particular good life criteria are honest indicators of what individuals feel is important in life, as opposed to what they think it is socially appropriate to claim. Taking this concern seriously, it could be argued that the results of Study 1 are more reflective of the moral façade upheld by each cultural group than of the private desires and commitments of its members. The results of Study 2, however, offer some evidence against this interpretation. That cultural commitments about good life criteria were reflected, at least in part, in the spontaneous life narratives that participants offered suggests that the responses given in Study 1 are at least adequate indicators of what people care about. Although spoken life narratives may themselves be guided and self-

censored in line with self-presentational concerns, the parallels across studies in what was emphasized by Chinese and South Asian participants provides some convergent evidence for the sincerity of both sets of responses.

Finally, it is not yet clear to what degree the core dimensions identified in Study 1, and their bipolar interpretations, are valid. Future work should explore and further refine the theoretical construction of these dimensions by experimenting with different operational definitions of their conceptual content. Designing and testing multiple-item measures that converge upon these bipolar constructs would be useful for this purpose. Given such additional refinement and validation, the dimensions of locus and morality, and their importance for framing visions of a good life could be better understood and elaborated on.

Related Areas

As mentioned in the introduction, the present research shares common ground with the study of values (e.g. Inglehart, 2006; Schwartz, 2005). The values tradition, however, has focused mainly on asking participants about abstract concepts such as security and self-expression without delineating the more specific ways in which such values are expressed in concrete actions and practices. As a result, it could be argued that such value constructs represent inferences from patterns of conduct and concern rather than subjectively experienced cultural commitments that guide action (see Tafarodi et al., in press). In contrast, the focus in the present research has been on the substantive indicators of what makes a life subjectively good and the import of these for the content of life narratives. Good life criteria, as examined here, are not abstract values, but represent the ends and means through which those generalized values might be expressed. Nonetheless, in looking at the dimensions of a good life as revealed here, parallels with findings from values research are not hard to draw. For example, values such as openness

and conservatism (Schwartz, 1995) and self-expression (Inglehart, 2000) are clearly reflected in the orientations towards goals and activities that I have described.

More generally, this research contributes to cross-cultural psychology by moving away from binary contrasts of broad cultural “types” (e.g. Heine, et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 2003) and toward the distinctive ideational patterns of specific cultural groups. The latter approach, in my view, reveals important distinctions between groups that are too often clumped together as tokens of “Eastern” culture. It also points strongly toward the importance of relationships for all groups, suggesting a universality that tends to be downplayed in a lot of research that contrasts cultural or societal types.

Finally, this research falls in line with the growing theoretical understanding of identity as a form of narrative (McAdams, 2001), the idea that each person’s conception of self is best understood as an ongoing story with chapters and themes and variations rather than as something that is “achieved” and persists unchanged thereafter. In highlighting how narrative conceptions of a good life are characterized by cultural themes, the present research emphasizes how diverse conceptions of self-in-relation-to-world can form in different societies.

Future Directions

Many ideas for future studies can be drawn from this limited work. The most obvious and practicable of these would be to study other groups using the same methods. Assessing more cultural groups according to the logic of Study 1 would help clarify and add validity to the dimensional structure revealed there. Similarly, collecting life narratives from European Canadian domestic students would complement and inform the comparisons made in Study 2.

It would also be informative to look at how different positions within a complex, stratified society are related to beliefs about the good life. Social class, educational background,

media exposure, ethnicity, generational standing, political orientation, and lifestyle are all promising candidates for predicting differences in visions of a good life within any population.

Finally, it would particularly useful to look at how beliefs about the good life interface with plans, intentions, actions, and the subjective experience of well-being. The limited evidence presented here suggests that the life a person hopes for has significant bearing on the experience and understanding of what actually comes to pass. If we are genuinely interested in improving the experience of individuals around the world, an important starting point would be to increase our understanding of how people in different societies make sense of their actions and what happens to them in light of the life they are trying to live – which may not be the same life we want for ourselves.

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