Situating Psychological Well-Being: Exploring the Cultural Roots of Its Theory and Research

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Psychological well-being is a seminal concept in counseling and yet it is seldom discussed, researched, or critiqued; this article examines the cultural values and assumptions underlying its theory and research. Contemporary understandings of psychological and subjective well-being are placed in cultural and historical context to illuminate their Euro-American cultural roots. Approaches to psychological well-being are shown to presuppose ontological and liberal individualism as notions of the self and as normative prescriptions for the good or ideal person. It is argued that culture-free theories or measures of well-being are unattainable; all understandings of psychological well-being are based on moral visions.

> It is not possible to live as a human being without having an idea of what it is to be human. (Heelas & Lock, 1981, p. 3)

> At work in a theory of social science is a vision of life, and it is only when this vision is made manifest and analyzed that the merits and demerits of the theory can be fully recognized. (Fay, 1987, p. 1)

Throughout human history, normative understandings of well-being have defined particular human characteristics and qualities as desirable and worthy of pursuit or emulation (Brinton, 1959/1987; MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1989). Such normative understandings are epitomized by traditional philosophies and religions that often stress the cultivation of certain virtues (Coan, 1977; Diener, 1984). In contemporary Western society, these norms are largely provided by notions of psychological well-being. Psychological well-being is among the most central notions in counseling. It plays a crucial role in theories of personality and development in both pure and applied forms; it provides a baseline from which we assess psychopathology; it serves as a guide for clinical work by helping the counselor determine the direction clients might move to alleviate distress and find fulfillment, purpose, and meaning; and it informs goals and objectives for counseling-related interventions. Moreover, an understanding of psychological well-being may be a transcendental requirement for human existence, what Geertz (1973) terms a "pervasive orientational necessity" (p. 363). In other words, human beings always and necessarily live on the basis of some understanding of what is a better, more desirable, or worthier way of being in the world (Christopher, 1996; Christopher & Fowers, 1996, 1998; Coan, 1977; Taylor, 1988, 1989).

Yet, as a topic itself, psychological well-being receives relatively little attention. This stands in stark contrast to the sheer quantity of published material devoted to psychopathology. Compared with psychological well-being, topics related to psychopathology dominate journals. Indeed, although numerous journals are dedicated solely to increasing our understanding of psychopathology (e.g., *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *Journal of Affective Disorders*), there are no journals specific to psychological well-being. Interest in psychological well-being and positive mental health seems to have peaked between the late 1950s and 1970s. Since this time, interest seems to have waned, especially in the type of theorizing done by Jahoda (1958), Maslow (1968, 1971), and Shostrom (1973), with the possible exception of the somewhat marginalized field of transpersonal psychology (Boorstein, 1980; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983; Wilber, 1977, 1995). Contemporary research conducted on psychological well-being usually involves discerning the variables that enhance or diminish well-being with a specific population through the use of some preexistent measure of well-being. Well-being itself is defined in these studies as the outcome on a particular measure or set of measures. Consequently, focus is on the variables that affect well-being, whereas the nature of well-being itself is secondary to these studies.

These observations suggest a curious discrepancy: Although notions of psychological well-being lie at the core of counseling, very little time is spent theorizing or researching about this. We have differentiated, scrutinized, and articulated those aspects of social reality and human behavior that we term *psychopathology*, but we have failed to invest

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the same amount of time and energy differentiating, scrutinizing, and articulating aspects of well-being. Such a discrepancy suggests that we are not as explicit or clear about our understanding of psychological well-being as we are about what we see as problematic about human behavior. Under these conditions, we may be simply drawing on our "common sense" understandings of well-being in a largely unrecognized and uncritical manner. This can be problematic in a number of ways. If, as Geertz (1983) argued, common sense is itself a cultural system, then our understandings of psychological well-being may be much more informed by our own culture then we have tended to consider. To use the language of a previous article (Christopher, 1996), Western concepts of psychological well-being may be deeply shaped by our culture's individualistic moral visions. Moreover, by failing to account for the assumptions and influences underlying the field of psychological well-being, we may fall prey to what Bernstein (1978) termed *disguised ideology*. In fitting with the positions of multiculturalists such as Pedersen (1991) and Sue and Sue (1990), it is crucial for us to understand the cultural values and assumptions that underlie the field of counseling.

This article explores those values and assumptions that underlie two reigning approaches to psychological well-being. I attempt to show not only that the theories and research on psychological well-being are substantively shaped by Western individualistic moral visions of the good or ideal person but also that the general neglect of psychological well-being, as an area of inquiry, is related to our cultural values and assumptions. Contemporary theory and research on psychological well-being will be situated in a cross-cultural and historical context that demonstrates their heritage in Western cultural history (cf. Coan, 1977; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; M. B. Smith, 1985; see also Author's Note). This aim is meaningful for at least three reasons. First, our common sense, culturally informed notions of psychological well-being are likely to be at odds with clients whose ethnic backgrounds are different from ours. Second, as counseling and counseling-related interventions are increasingly applied in non-Western parts of the world, it is necessary to have some critical awareness of what is actually being exported. Third, gaining some awareness of the cultural roots of our understanding of psychological well-being is a first step toward critically assessing our own presuppositions (and perhaps revising our own theories).

At this point, it is essential to briefly define what I mean by individualism, for as Foucault (1984/1986) warned, individualism "is so frequently invoked" that "entirely different realities are lumped together" (p. 42). Although individualistic outlooks can be found outside Western culture (i.e., Elvin, 1985; Munro, 1985; Nakamura, 1964), in this discussion I am limiting *individualism* to a specific moral vision that emerged in Western history beginning with Renaissance humanism. As a moral vision, individualism combines ontological claims about the nature of the self with normative prescriptions about the good or ideal person.

Individualism relies on an atomistic understanding of the person as being metaphysically discrete and separate from other persons. Geertz (1983) provided a classic statement of this position:

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

The individual is seen as the primary reality—the supposed "man" in the state of nature (gender bias intentional)—whereas society is a derivative, second-order level of reality that is simply a collection of individuals (Dumont, 1986; Sullivan, 1986). Society becomes the arena where relatively autonomous and self-contained people, who already contain their own objectives, needs, desires, interests, potentialities, and rights, express and act on these inner attributes (Dumont, 1980; Lukes, 1973). Such an individual should be "self-defining" (Taylor, 1985a, 1985b), able to step back from his or her life and rationally determine the best manner of pursuing self-chosen goals and interests (Sandel, 1982). The self is seen as prior to these goals or interests, and "what matters above all, and what is most essential to our personhood, are not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them" (Sandel, 1984, p. 86). Sullivan demonstrated the centrality of individualism to American sociopolitical structures through his analysis of liberal individualism. As embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, liberal individualism rests on the belief that government should provide and enforce rules of fair conduct so that people can pursue life as they see fit (see also Sandel, 1982, 1984).

Different versions of individualism have been identified. One powerful strategy adopted by Taylor (1975) and Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) is to demonstrate the roots of these different versions of individualism in particular historical epochs. Thus, utilitarian individualism (Bellah et al., 1985) can be linked back to the European Enlightenment and its emphasis on the instrumental pursuit of rational goals. Expressive individualism can be traced to the romantic movement with its emphasis on self-cultivation and artistic expression of the wellsprings of nature that lie within. However much these individualistic conceptions seem like common sense to those in the West, they are "rather peculiar . . . within the context of the world cultures" according to researchers like Geertz (1983, p. 59) and Shweder and Bourne (1984).

We now consider how individualism in its different guises underlies and informs the two main approaches to studying psychological well-being: subjective well-being and Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being. Before this consideration, three caveats need to be elucidated.

First, although terms such as *individualism*, *collectivism*, *Western*, and *non-Western* are helpful for preliminary analyses, they are overgeneralizations that obscure much diversity. Anglo, Italian, and Jewish ethnic groups in the United States might all be considered Western, yet there are significant differences among them. Second, Spiro (1993) warned us not to assume that cultural accounts of the self (like individualism) are necessarily the same thing as the person's

"mental representations of their self" or even "with their very self itself" (p. 117). In consequence, I treat both individualism and also the many non-Western alternatives increasingly termed *collectivism* (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Kim, Triandis, Kâgitçibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Triandis, 1989) as indigenous conceptions of the person or self and not as actual accounts of the person or self. Third, the very notion of psychological well-being is itself a Western concept. The division of well-being into a psychological dimension and a presumably physical dimension is a direct byproduct of our philosophical, particularly Cartesian, heritage. It seems to be a division that is unique to Western culture. As Lock (1982) emphasized, "there is no mind/body dichotomy in East Asia medicine and no concept of mental health as distinct from physical health, either historically or at the present time" (p. 220).

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

The predominant approach to studying well-being has been termed *subjective well-being*. Subjective well-being consists of two general components: (a) judgments about life satisfaction and (b) affective balance or the extent to which the level of positive affect outweighs the level of negative affect in someone's life (Andrews & Withey, 1976; A. Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Diener, 1984). *Life satisfaction* is based on an individual's subjective cognitive appraisals. This approach "relies on the standards of the respondent to determine what is the good life" (Diener, 1984, p. 543). Diener (citing Shin & Johnson, 1978) claimed they captured the essence of this orientation when they described it as "a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria" (p. 543). Research on *affective balance* uses a notion of well-being that corresponds to the popular usage of the term *happiness*. Happiness is an affectively oriented evaluation of well-being that entails a "preponderance of positive affect over negative affect" (Diener, 1984. p. 543). Simply stated, from this perspective we are doing well (we are happy), when we experience (i.e., individual's appraisal) more positive than negative feelings in our life.

It is not surprising that researchers have relied on this approach; on the surface it seems to preserve the scientific neutrality valued by mainstream social science (Bernstein, 1978; Richardson & Christopher, 1993; Taylor, 1985a, 1985b). Although such an approach to well-being seems to avoid the imposition of particular cultural values and norms, on closer examination it is clear that this approach is directly linked to certain Western individualistic assumptions and values—or moral visions.

Subjective well-being places the onus of well-being on the individual. It is the individual alone who determines the standards and criteria by which to evaluate her or his life. Researchers in this tradition defer to the individual both the responsibility for evaluation and for the selection of norms by which the evaluation is made.

The attempt to evaluate well-being subjectively, without relying on normative standards, is consistent with the political liberalism and liberal individualism central to Western societies. For liberal political theorists such as Dworkin, "a liberal society is one that as a society adopts no particular substantive view about the ends of life. The society is, rather, united around a strong procedural commitment to treat people with equal respect" (Taylor, 1992, p. 56). The field of subjective well-being seems to manifest this same outlook in its theories and research. As an approach to psychological well-being, subjective well-being refrains from making strong claims about the good life and good person. As embedded in the machinery and ideology of our liberal individualistic form of government, the good life is freedom to choose—the freedom to purse happiness as defined by the individual and as guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence (Sandel, 1984; Sullivan, 1986). Subjective well-being gives the individual this right. It advances a subjective approach that remains both democratic and egalitarian by minimizing the role of the expert with his or her criteria. Thus, the subjective well-being researcher has adopted the prevailing attitude of the liberal individualistic society: "A liberal society must remain neutral on the good life, and restrict itself to ensuring that however they see things, citizens deal fairly with each other and the state deals equally with all" (Taylor, 1992, p. 57).

Individualism emerged, in part, as a socially constructed moral vision that provided ideological resources during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment for rejecting what came to be seen as the hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian excesses of the Middle Ages (Lukes, 1973; Taylor, 1989; Ullmann, 1966). This newly created view of the self, identified by MacPherson (1962) as *possessive individualism*, casts the individual as the possessor or owner of his or her own being. This represented a radical transformation of our sense of self—what Berlin (as cited in Bernstein, 1978) called "a great liberating idea"—and it enabled activists during the Enlightenment to demand the freedom to restructure society, politics, and religion, and even the principles of scientific and rational thought.

Before individualism, the masses were not believed to possess the intelligence, discipline, or courage to choose their own destinies or rule their own lives. The *munt*, for instance, was a medieval social institution that codified a patriarchal view of relationships. The *munt* emphasized obedience to hierarchy because those higher on the hierarchy in essence knew what was best for their underlings. Hence, the kingdom was understood as very much in the trust of the king, just as a father was the guardian of his child, and a husband the guardian of his wife (Ullmann, 1966). By constructing the person as the owner of himself [gender bias intentional] the Enlightenment wrested control of the self away from the church and king and in doing so undermined the existing sociopolitical and religious systems. This coincided with the creation of new "positive" epistemologies (i.e., empiricism) that in principle empowered the average citizen by locating the source of knowledge in the information received through a person's senses rather than in the Bible and the classics, which only a small elite could read or had access to (Ullmann, 1966).

From this heritage we have developed an emancipatory and antiauthoritarian outlook (Baumeister, 1986; Johnson, 1985; Richardson, 1989; Taylor, 1975). As we have progressively expanded our sense of what we want freedom from (Bellah et al., 1985; Berlin, 1969; Taylor, 1989), each generation has found new sources of arbitrary authority. Americans have inherited a suspicion of anyone telling us how to live, telling us what the good life is, or in this case defining for us what psychological well-being is. The antipsychiatry movement (Laing, 1967; Szasz, 1961) in the 1960s exemplifies this suspicion; however, even mainstream theorists such as Rogers (1961) and Ellis (1962, 1997) have been concerned with liberating the individual from social expectations. The field of subjective well-being thus fits squarely in the middle of our individualistic culture, for the use of any norms or standards to assess psychological well-being runs the risk of being seen as dogmatic, ethnocentric, or relative. As we shall see, this subjective and relativistic thrust stands in contrast with non-Western cultures (and our own earlier heritage) in which there were clear standards of conduct that were frequently derived from the order of the cosmos itself (Brinton, 1987; Lovin & Reynolds, 1985; MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1975, 1985a, 1985b).

Satisfaction With Life

A closer inspection of the two components of subjective well-being reveals even more the influence of Western cultural values and assumptions. Satisfaction with life measures such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) presuppose that the high scoring person is one whose life is satisfactory or fulfilling. In some ways this is not problematic for Americans who are taught to stress their uniqueness and to engage in a process of self-promotion. Indeed, this imperative permeates our lives so thoroughly that average Americans assume they are above average in many domains (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and it is the clinically depressed who are most likely to see themselves "realistically" (Alloy & Abramson, 1979). In many non-Western societies such as Taiwan and Japan, the kinds of self-assertions that Americans consider normal and a sign of health are considered immature and an invitation to bad luck (Bond, 1986; Hu, 1944; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Generally, in collectivist cultures one should be modest and avoid drawing attention to oneself. For instance, in Japan there is a common aphorism that warns "the nail that sticks out gets pounded down" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, Chinese are far less inclined than Americans to say they are experiencing a state of well-being, even if they believe they are (Hu, 1944). These tendencies identified among Asians to be what we could call "self-effacing" and "self-abnegating" (Bond, 1986) do not mean that one actually feels weak or necessarily treats oneself negatively. What frequently happens in collectivist cultures is a sort of reciprocity, in which one is self-effacing but family and friends compensate by providing praise or a more "objective" evaluation of the person (Christopher, 1992). Thus, in the United States we are taught to "toot our own horn," whereas in Taiwan one should let a friend, neighbor, or family member do the tooting.

Historically, in most cultures the person's subjective impression of himself or herself has been devalued, discouraged, or considered of minor importance. Individuals were usually valued for the social roles they played, not because they had natural rights and inherent dignity (King & Bond, 1985; Munro, 1985; Sullivan, 1986; Ullmann, 1966). For instance, in the Middle Ages the individual commonly was seen as important only to the extent that she or he was an instrument or "vehicle through which God acted" (Ullmann, 1966, p. 45; see also Baumeister, 1986). This downplaying of individuality was revealed in art forms such as painting and sculpture and in narrative forms such as myths and fables (MacIntyre, 1984; Morris, 1987; Ullmann, 1966). Through history and across cultures the individual's own desires, goals, or wishes have been frequently subordinated to those of the larger collective. This is true whether the group is the larger family or kin group or the nation, as evidenced in the totalitarian states of the twentieth century.

Although self-expression, self-promotion, and the pursuit of self-chosen satisfactions can be seen as virtues from the perspective of Western psychology and its moral vision of individualism, they are seen as signs of selfishness and immaturity in many collectivist cultures (King & Bond, 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, a psychological measure that implicitly draws on the "self-serving bias" or "tendency to false uniqueness" that accompanies Western individualism is of questionable value for use in cultures that exhibit a "modesty bias" or "other-enhancement bias" (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Heine & Lehman, 1995).

Affective Balance

This modesty bias also seems to influence the other dimension of subjective well-being, affective balance. I (i.e., Christopher, 1992; Christopher, Lightsey, & Christopher, 1999) found that on the Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) American undergraduate students were more likely to endorse positive affect items (interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, and determined) to describe themselves, whereas Taiwanese undergraduate students were more likely to endorse negative affect items (upset, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, and afraid). Similarly, Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995) found that students in Korea and China were more accepting of experiences of negative affect than were American students. Before assuming that these differences are because Americans actually have more well-being, it is important to consider two other factors potentially influencing research findings. First, as previously discussed, measures of affective balance are likely to be subject to response bias. We can expect that many non-Western people would not engage in the type of self-enhancement bias typical of Americans. As Heine and Lehman (1995) suggested, "individuals in interdependent cultures come closer to realizing their cultural ideals by self-effacing thereby removing their distinguishing and potentially alienating features and allowing them to maximize their sense of belongingness"

(p. 605). In contrast, many Americans may self-promote and stress their positive attributes because as "independent and autonomous beings" they need to be self-contained and to find psychological resources within to maintain a sense of worth. Many non-Western people, drawing on a more interdependent sense of self, find support and acknowledgment from others and thereby can afford to see themselves as average or below average and in doing so strengthen the bonds of affiliation with others.

Differences in affective balance across countries can also be understood by looking at the presuppositions underlying the notion of affective balance. Affective balance assumes that well-being is partially based on the predominance of positive affect over negative affect in one's life (Bradburn, 1969). This assumption—that the emotional state is important to, if not determinate of, well-being—ties in with an individualistic moral vision that sees happiness as the yardstick of the good life. For Westerners, as Taylor (1985b) observed, "the good life is defined in terms of emotional satisfaction" (p. 262). For the purpose of contrast, let us consider traditional Chinese society in which the good life was measured not by happiness but by filial piety and the ability to live in harmony with others (King & Bond, 1985; Munro, 1969). In China a person's status or worth as a human being was based on the extent to which he or she is a dutiful son or daughter and fulfills family obligations (Mei, 1968); it was not based on a subjective emotional state. Therefore, it is quite possible that a Chinese person might have either never really considered whether they were satisfied or considered themselves to be satisfied even though they had, from our perspective, sacrificed what we might consider their own happiness. Or put another way, personal happiness has not traditionally been considered the highest good for the Chinese. (See Jahoda, 1958, and Ryff, 1989, for other problems resulting from equating happiness with mental health.) This interpretation draws support from a recent research finding that "how a collectivist feels about himself or herself is less relevant to his or her life satisfaction than is his or her view of whether he or she behaves properly in the organized social order" (Diener & Diener, 1995, p. 662).

As an approach to assessing well-being, affective balance is further complicated by its apparent dependence on Western emotions and its failure to include indigenous emotions of non-Western cultures. Western emotion terms have been found to have a two-dimensional scaling solution (Russell, 1980); they can be mapped along the first dimension of pleasant/good versus unpleasant/bad and the second dimension of active/high energy versus inactive/low energy. This same two-dimensional pattern of results is found in those non-Western societies that have been examined. However, collectivist cultures such as Japan also exhibit a third dimension not found in the United States (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This dimension pits self-centered or ego-centered emotions against other-centered emotions. It is important to note that these other-centered or social emotions are frequently neither positive nor negative. Some examples of other-centered emotions in Japan include *amae*, the hopeful anticipation of another's indulgence (Doi, 1971/1973); *fureai*, the feeling of connection to other; and *tanomi*, the feeling of relying on someone (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the Micronesian islands of Palau, *ta rengrir* refers to getting along or being of one mind (K. D. Smith & Tkel-Sbal, 1995), and in Ifaluk, *fago* refers to a mixture of sadness, love, compassion, and longing that is not entirely pleasant or unpleasant (Lutz, 1988). The Baining of Papua New Guinea have a term, *awumbuk*, that denotes a sort of social hangover. It is described as follows:

> A lassitude that people feel after the departure of visitors, friends, or relatives who have resided with them. . . . When the social group disbands, these connections are severed. The extended persona is destroyed and individuals must reconstitute their boundaries. . . . The departure induces a loss of social vitality and leaves the home party feeling relatively weakened and diminished, experienced as an additional weight or burden. (Fagans, 1985, pp. 380–381)

These examples have several implications related to our topic. First, they indicate different ways of construing the self. In individualistic cultures, most of emotional life focuses on the individual. This is consistent with our construction of ourselves as beings with interiority and depth (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Taylor, 1989). Emotions are generally regarded as private and personal, things that come from within. The individual in the West is thought of as "having" emotions in a manner consistent with MacPherson's (1962) analysis of possessive individualism. In many collectivist cultures, on the other hand, much of emotional life focuses on other people. Emotions are more interpersonal or intersubjective. People in collectivist cultures are more likely to use external cues (such as the social setting) to interpret their emotional experience, rather than looking within as Westerners do. To overstate the case, instead of "having" emotions as in the West, people participate in emotions as with group moods. This emphasis on social emotions is consistent with a more interdependent sense of self in which, as with the Baining, "the social actor is not a rigidly defined and delimited entity" for "the boundaries of the individual and the definition of the person are neither permanent nor immutable, but alter and adapt in specific contexts" (Fagans, 1985, pp. 380–381).

The identification of social emotions in non-Western cultures does not necessarily mean that Americans do not experience these emotional reactions. However, it does indicate that for Americans such social feelings are largely undifferentiated. This lack of differentiation implies that these feelings may not be as important to Americans—they have not been accorded enough value to have been labeled, given a specific word. This general neglect of interpersonal emotions is consistent with our individualistic moral vision in which the interpersonal dimensions of reality and of the self are downplayed in favor of a view of the self as independent and autonomous. Indeed, as with the notion of codependency, we often consider people who strongly experience social emotions as pathological.

The existence of these social emotions raises a number of issues for a measure such as the PANAS. First, what does it

mean that emotions with a social referent are not included in the measure? What happens to scores on the PANAS for those from collectivist cultures when their three dimensional emotional experiences are compressed into the two dimensions of the West? Second, if a large part of non-Western people's emotional life is based on interpersonal emotions, then how appropriate is it to evaluate an individual's well-being based on his or her emotional balance. For instance, if individuals from Ifaluk took the measure and were experiencing *fago*, they might (response bias aside) indicate that they are experiencing sadness, a negative emotion from the perspective of the PANAS. However, *fago* is both negative and positive, and the ability to feel *fago* is seen as a sign of maturity by the Ifaluk (Lutz, 1985).

Given these considerations it is not surprising that Diener and Diener (1995) found that the average life satisfaction of a country is highly correlated with its degree of individualism. These results support the hypothesis that, despite intentions to be value-neutral, subjective well-being is actually normative; its very design presupposes values and assumptions that are central to Western culture. We now consider a second approach to well-being.

RYFF'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Ryff (1989) critiqued research on subjective well-being for what she saw as its impoverished theoretical basis. She acknowledged that current approaches to subjective well-being have been extensively evaluated, and that psychometrically solid measures have been constructed. What she took issue with is not particular measures and indexes per se, but rather she holds the view that subjective well-being research was a result of historical accident and was "not designed to define the basic structure of psychological well-being" (1989, p. 1070). Acting on the basis of her critique, Ryff (1989) developed an alternative approach to well-being that she refers to as psychological well-being. Synthesizing ideas from the personality theories of Malsow, Jung, Rogers, Allport, Erikson, Buhler, Neurgartens, and Jahoda, she constructed a measure of well-being around six subscales: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relations With Others, Purpose in Life, Personal Growth, and Self-Acceptance. The strength of Ryff's measure of psychological well-being is also ironically its Achilles' heal; to the extent that she integrates Western personality theorists, she also includes the cultural values and assumptions underlying their work. A hermeneutic analysis that draws on history and anthropology helps to situate Ryff's criteria of psychological well-being and raises questions about their universality.

Autonomy

Ryff equates autonomy with attributes such as self-determination, independence, internal locus of control, individuation, and internal regulation of behavior. Underlying these attributes is the belief that one's thoughts and actions are one's own and should not be determined by agencies or causes outside one's control. This belief, although common in Western psychology, is also one of the main ideals and defining values of individualism (Lukes, 1973). It is related to the Western concepts of liberty and freedom, and, as Kant (1965/1781) theorized, it is our capacity for autonomy that brings us our dignity as human beings.

Autonomy is a value that emerged in Western culture for historical reasons. As the following examples illustrate, it is not at all clear how relevant or appropriate autonomy is for non-Western cultures, or for women and ethnic minorities. For instance, Shweder and Bourne (1984) empirically compared whether the concept of the person varies in India and the United States and concluded that "the concept of an autonomous, bounded, abstract individual existing free of society yet living in society is uncharacteristic of Indian social thought" (p. 190; see also Roland, 1988). From the Japanese perspective, we are less than fully human when we are stripped away from our social connections (Nakamura, 1964). According to Rosenberger (1992), "The very word for self in Japanese, *jibun*, implies that self is not an essentiality apart from the social realm. *Jibun* literally means "self part"—a part of the larger whole that consists of groups and relationships" (p. 4). Lebra maintained that the Japanese individual is "in some sense a 'fraction' only becoming whole when fitting into or occupying one's proper place in a social unit" (as cited in Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 246). Similarly, Read (1955) found in his fieldwork in New Guinea that the Gahuku-Gama refuse to "separate the individual from the social context" or grant a person "intrinsic moral value apart from that which attaches to him as the occupant of a particular social status" (p. 257). In many parts of the world conformity is not seen as the moral weakness that it is for Americans. Indeed, in many cultures conformity is a sign of maturity and strength (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, a Japanese "person can be diverted from a belief or principle, but such diversion from principle is accepted favorably by others because it shows that he or she has warm empathy" (Azuma, 1984, p. 970). And as Gergen (1973) noted, "if our values were otherwise, social conformity would be viewed as prosolidarity behavior" (p. 312). Thus, the importance of autonomy and its opposite, conformity, varies depending on whether the self is construed in independent or interdependent terms.

Significantly, the meaning of an attribute like autonomy can also vary across cultures. Munro (1985) offered a penetrating analysis of how such stereotypically Western values as uniqueness, privacy, autonomy, and dignity were present in ancient Chinese culture but held a different meaning than they do for contemporary Americans (see also, Elvin, 1985; Nakamura, 1964). Bodde described how "Confucian 'individualism' means the fullest development by the individual of his creative potentialities—not, however, merely for the sake of self-expression but because he can thus fulfill that particular role which is his within the social nexus" (p. 66, as cited in King & Bond, 1985, p. 36). Taiwanese students value self-reliance even more than Americans but apparently because this is a prerequisite to being able to help

others (Christopher, 1992). Similarly, for the Northern Cheyenne "individuality supports a tribal purpose, a tribal identity" because "individuals are like the poles of a tipi—each has his own attitude and appearance but all look to the same center [heart] and support the same cover" (Strauss, 1982, p. 125). Although values and assumptions may be shared across cultures or time, they may be accorded different significance or ranked differently within that culture's hierarchy of values and assumptions. Thus, although autonomy and respect are values found in both Chinese and American cultural history, the Chinese are more likely to place more weight on respect, whereas contemporary Americans give priority to autonomy. Thus, both the meaning and weighting of autonomy can vary depending on local contexts. These points apply to Ryff's other subscales as well.

Environmental Mastery

Ryff (1989) defined environmental mastery as the ability to "choose or create environments suitable to his or her psychic conditions" (p. 1071). This criterion is also a central part of individualism. Environmental mastery presupposes a particular view of the world as, to use Weber's (1946) term, *disenchanted*—without deeper purpose or *telos*. The mature individual from the Enlightenment onward is one who can rationally face this disenchanted world and calculate the most effective means of accomplishing self-chosen goals. The ability to manipulate, control or master the environment both confirms and proves this vision of the world as disenchanted (Taylor, 1975). Clearly, however, this disenchanted world is at odds with the views of many non-Western cultures in which the world is embued with deeper meaning and purpose (Pedersen, 1979). In cultures that see the world as part of a larger cosmos or natural order, harmony with and adaptation to one's environment are promoted. In Bali, for instance, surrendering to the will of the gods is seen as the appropriate response to hardships and life in general.

Although Americans are encouraged to pursue self-chosen goals by exerting efforts to control or master their environment, many non-Western cultures advocate adapting to the social order. Such differences show up in cross-cultural research on the psychology of control. Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn (1984) identified two types of control that people use. *Primary control* entails influencing existing realities, through personal agency, dominance, and even aggression. In contrast, *secondary control* is based on individuals attempting to align themselves with existing realities by exerting control over the psychological impact of events and leaving the environment largely unchanged. Weisz et al. found that Americans rely predominantly on primary control, whereas Japanese rely more on secondary control. This is reflected in one of Japan's indigenous psychotherapies, Morita therapy, in which the client is encouraged to "[a]ccept things as they are" (Lebra, 1992, p. 116; Reynolds, 1976, 1980). Such findings raise questions about the appropriateness of using environmental mastery as a universal criterion of psychological well-being.

Positive Relations With Others

Ryff (1989) defined positive relations with others as warm, trusting interpersonal relations and strong feelings of empathy and affection. At first glance this subscale/criterion seems most sympathetic to or compatible with collectivism. However, there is a significant difference between having relations with others and being psychologically constituted by one's location in a social network. In other words, what is the self that is in relations to others? Is it the individualistic self who has relationships to get certain psychological needs, such as intimacy, met? Or is it the self experienced as metaphysically connected to others such that identity already incorporates others, and the self is no longer "skin-encapsulated" or a "dimensionless point of subjectivity." It may be the case that the Western understanding of the individual, even one with a strong "support network," seems from the perspective of some non-Western cultures such as the Orissa in India as "alien, a bizarre idea cutting the self off from the interdependent whole, dooming it to a life of isolation and loneliness" (Shweder & Bourne, 1984, p. 194).

Purpose in Life

Ryff (1989) suggested that having "a clear comprehension of life's purpose, a sense of directedness, and intentionality" are important parts of the "feeling that there is purpose and meaning to life" (p. 1071). This concern for purpose in life seems tightly linked to individualism with its stress on human freedom. Traditionally, in Western history and in most collectivist cultures, people lived in worlds of "fate" (Berger, 1979)—purpose and meaning were seen as embedded in the very structure of the cosmos. Although questions of purpose and meaning have certainly surfaced around the world throughout history, particularly in times of cultural transition, it is unlikely they have ever been as widespread as they are in the contemporary West. Indeed, Frankl (1967) viewed our contemporary preoccupation with purpose and meaning as "our collective neurosis" (p. 117). In contrast to the premodern world (Taylor, 1975) or much of the non-Western world, modernity relies on both an objectified, materialistic view of the world that lacks any inherent meaning, design, or purpose and a view of the person as fundamentally separate, unique, and alone. It becomes the responsibility of the individual to define meaning in their life—to choose their own "world view" (Berger, 1979).

On situating purpose in life in a historical context, it seems clear that we must ask questions about the nature of the self that is to obtain purpose. For example, is purpose attained by radically free modern individuals stepping back from life, from their commitments, and choosing whatever suits them? Or is purpose bound up with one's locus in a larger order of some sort that defines what is meaningful and worthy of pursuit? What does it mean to use purpose in life as a criterion of psychological well-being if the self in question is the latter? Moreover, does the type of meaning that is derived make a difference? In other words, does the sense of purpose of a Balinese Hindu, a French existentialist, and an Ameri-

can neo-Nazi all confer the same psychological benefits? Is it really possible to decontextualize purpose such that the type of purpose has no bearing on well-being?

Personal Growth

Ryff (1989) defined *personal growth* as the continuing ability to "develop one's potential, to grow and expand as a person" (p. 1071). This notion of self-growth has clear roots in both our Enlightenment and Romantic heritages. For example, Taylor (1988, 1989) pointed out how during the Enlightenment the notion was prevalent that self could be remade. For instance, Locke

> develops a view of the subject and his formation in which in principle everything is, as it were, up for grabs, susceptible in principle of being shaped in the direction desired. The mind is a tabula rasa. . . . The ideal stance of the rational subject is thus not to identify with any of the tendencies he finds in himself, which can only be the deposits of tradition and authority, but to be ready to break and remake these habitual responses according to his own goals, as far as this is possible. (Taylor, 1988, pp. 308–309)

Similar sentiments are also found in the Romantic tradition as in the idea that a person should cultivate the "inner voice of nature" (Taylor, 1975). For the Romantics, the self is seen as containing an inner force that must struggle to express itself against external obstacles. Importantly, and perhaps uniquely in human history, this is the source of the ingrained American tendency to view commitments "from marriage and work to political and religious involvement—as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 47).

In discussing personal growth Ryff never addresses certain key questions. For instance, growth in what direction? Is personal growth an asset in and of itself? Or are we implicitly requiring that such personal growth be along certain dimensions, in certain domains, and with respect to certain values? Are we able, for instance, to applaud the personal growth of a member of the Ku Klux Klan who is advancing in the ranks and becoming a strong spokesperson and leader?

Self-Acceptance

Ryff (1989) maintained that "holding positive attitudes toward oneself emerges as a central characteristic of positive psychological functioning" (p. 1071). Yet Ryff did not specify what the nature of this self is. What if one lives in a culture, such as Java (Geertz, 1973), that does not think of "selves" as a primary reality? What would it mean to have self-acceptance in a society that does not value "selves"?

Moreover, it is not clear whether the self should always be accepted. Are there not times when actions or behaviors are so morally reprehensible that we cannot accept the self and instead demand that the self be radically transformed? Common speech suggests that we now think of self-esteem as almost a natural right people are entitled to instead of something earned. In addition, self-acceptance also seems to imply that the self is self-alienated. What is the part of the self that is evaluating and deciding if it will accept the totality? Is this not the self-defining subject that Taylor (1975) identified as peculiarly Western?

It may also be that the contemporary Western preoccupation with self-acceptance and self-esteem are partially dependent on "ontological individualism" (Bellah et al., 1985). In other words, these concerns may be predicated on a notion of the self as metaphysically separated from other human beings, society, nature, and the cosmos. Such an independent self becomes the sole locus of concerns about acceptability or worth. Johnson (1985) spoke to this issue when he wrote, "The positive heightened significance given to self-determination and self-actualization is accompanied by a personal sense of heightened responsibility and an inflated propensity for guilt, self-recrimination, and self-doubt" (p. 120; see also Draguns, 1989; Rosaldo, 1984). If the self is construed interdependently as in collectivist cultures, then worth and acceptability become partially issues diffused throughout the ingroup, and the locus of evaluation is not as narrowly focused on the individual. This is not to say that self-acceptance is not a concern in collectivist societies or that self-acceptance is not an aspect of psychological well-being. Rather, it is to recognize that because of our moral vision self-acceptance may be more of a concern or issue for Westerners, and we may as a result give it a more prominent position in the hierarchy of psychological virtues.

Summary

Having considered some of the ways in which Ryff's (1989) subscales are consistent with or even build upon Western individualism, I would like to note several additional points that seem to bear on her measure as a whole. First, most of the normative criteria in the subscales are decontextualized and procedural. For instance, purpose in life is discussed without reference to the type of purpose, self-acceptance without reference to the moral status of the individual that should be accepted, and personal growth without reference to the direction of the individual's growth. Other subscales, such as Environmental Mastery and Autonomy, are clearly concerned with the means of living, but they are silent about the ends. In this sense Ryff's quasi-neutrality emphasizes a set of values that are normative respecting the means of living (e.g., promoting efficient means–ends relations) but sets aside all questions of the direction or end. Presumably, these questions should be left to the individual. By focusing on the inner psychological world and on the means of satisfying subjectively defined goals and purposes, this approach fits right in the middle of the liberal individualist tradition (Sullivan, 1986). My intent is by no means to prove that Ryff's criteria lack any merit or are "all bad" or even that she has no awareness of these issues (see Ryff, 1985, 1989). Rather, it is to show how the very virtues that constitute psychological well-being from within the Western psychological tradition are predicated on individualistic presuppositions.

CONCLUSION

The main point I wish to emphasize from this discussion is that our understandings of psychological well-being, including both theories and measures, are clusterings of cultural assumptions and values. Theories and measures of psychological well-being may be best thought of as different "takes" on the good or ideal person. Understandings of psychological well-being necessarily rely upon moral visions that are culturally embedded and frequently culture specific. If we forget this point and believe that we are discovering universal and ahistorical psychological truths rather than reinterpreting and extending our society's or community's moral visions, then we run the high risk of casting non-Western people, ethnic minorities, and women as inherently less psychologically healthy. In addition, we blind ourselves to the indigenous virtues, such as *fago* among the Ifaluk, that other people cultivate and promote and from which we might learn something about coping with the new dilemmas and challenges we and our clients encounter. Moreover, in those situations in which we have values or practices that might come to seen as desirable or useful by those from another culture, we are likely to communicate them in an unsubtle or heavy-handed manner if we decontextualize them and obscure the historical roots that they can never fully escape.

By placing contemporary understandings of well-being in cross-cultural and historical contexts, this critique disclosed two main ways in which individualism influences the cross-cultural application of theories and measures of well-being. First, our contemporary individualistic moral vision may be greatly "Other" to certain cultures or time periods. This total otherness is perhaps most apparent from anthropological research with groups like the Baining in Papua New Guinea. Such groups live with very different understandings of personhood and of normality and abnormality. The distance separating our moral vision from theirs is staggering, suggesting that our understandings of well-being may contain little of relevance for them.

Second, even though certain elements of moral visions may be shared across cultures, these elements are often interpreted and weighted differently in different contexts. In Taylor's (1985b, p. 247) language, there is a real "diversity of goods" in every society. These "goods" are weighted differently both across cultures and by different individuals and groups in a particular society (see also R. L. Campbell & Christopher, 1996). Thus, although theories and measures of well-being developed in the West might reflect values and assumptions that have a counterpart in non-Western cultures, non-Western cultures might arrange and prioritize these elements in a very different manner. Despite initial similarity, these values and assumptions can only be fully understood within the larger interpretive framework that includes a culture's notion of the self and the good or fulfilled life. As a result, different components of our understanding of psychological well-being (like autonomy or happiness) cannot simply be transported to another culture without risk of serious misrepresentation and misunderstanding.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

I would like to suggest four specific implications for the practice of counseling.

1. The "goods" promoted as psychological well-being (i.e., autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, personal growth, self-acceptance, happiness, and the freedom to live life as one sees fit) overlap to a significant degree with the goods that shape our treatment goals and motivate our choice of interventions in counseling. When we examine and critique approaches to psychological well-being, we are at the same time illuminating many of the core concepts and "goods" underlying the practice of counseling and putting ourselves in a position to effectively reconsider any blind spots or shortcomings they may contain. I would stress that this process is perfectly congruent with what often goes on in counseling itself—identifying and rethinking assumptions and values that guide a client's (and sometimes our own) life and living. If we fail to identify and recognize these "goods" in relevant situations, we both shortchange the counseling process and help to uncritically perpetuate a cultural status quo that may be deficient or unjust (Braginsky, 1992; Cushman, 1996; Prilleltensky, 1994).

2. The idea of developing entirely culture-free measures, theories or interventions is seriously misguided. Any notion of psychological well-being will always be, in part, a conception of the good or ideal person formulated from a particular vantage point. It is important to be alert to the need to articulate assumptions and values that are called into question or need to be clarified in the light of events. However, to describe this critical reflection as a matter of achieving some kind of detached objectivity and neutrality only impedes awareness of our own cultural "embeddedness" and can have deleterious effects in practice. For instance, a counselor on the International Counseling Network (ICN) listserv remarked, "Our role is not to interject our values on others. Shouldn't we be more concerned with the client we are serving? How can we help them make decisions within the value system they find meaningful?" Such sentiments appeal to many of us, partly because they probably reflect a desire to respect clients and avoid authoritarianism. However, they are subject to two serious shortcomings. First, from a hermeneutic perspective of the sort I have adopted in this article (Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Christopher, 1993; Richardson & Woolfolk, 1994), the idea of a "hands off" approach is impossible when we have genuine or vital interaction with others, including clients. Trying to avoid confronting these issues is itself another way of dealing with them that exerts influence, for better or worse, just like any other stance or intervention. Thus, although the counselor from the listserv intends to be value-neutral, he or she actually relies on certain Western liberal values and assumptions (the same values and assumptions found earlier to underlie subjective well-being). Second, the comments from the listserv imply a severe relativism in the face

of which counselors may lose their own effective voice or powers of persuasion in confronting attitudes or behaviors that are pathological or morally insensitive (cf. Christopher, 1996; Doherty, 1995).

3. Third, there is no good reason to view our inescapable cultural embeddedness as a "bad" thing, as a shortcoming or harmful limitation. Rather, it is a precondition for us to know anything at all or participate meaningfully in human life and its struggles (Gadamer, 1975). In the hermeneutic view, what is healthy, worthwhile, right, or good, has to be worked out in an ongoing "dialogue" between one society and another, among individuals within a given culture, or between counselor and client. As counselors, we need to develop what Gadamer called "effective historical consciousness," so that we can cultivate awareness of how the theory, research, and practice of counseling as well as our individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, are shaped by our cultural traditions. What is "bad" is acting as if we are not culturally embedded.

We can gain partial clarity about our own embeddedness in culture—our own historicity—by drawing on historical and cultural studies (Cushman, 1996; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; M. B. Smith, 1985). By understanding and learning from the indigenous conceptions of well-being of previous historical periods and of non-Western people, we can gain further insight into the assumptions and norms underlying our own concepts of psychological well-being. In addition, we can better safeguard against uncritically and inappropriately applying our understanding of well-being to those from differing cultural backgrounds. This will be especially important as the practice of counseling is increasingly used in non-Western societies and with the diverse ethnic groups in the United States.

4. There are no clear-cut answers or formulas for determining the nature of well-being, either in general or for specific clients. Instead, what is needed is an ongoing interpretive process and continuing dialogue. This process will always be somewhat "messy." We cannot simply apply stereotypic notions about different cultures to our clients. We cannot follow "cookbook" approaches to multicultural counseling that tell us to be directive with Asian Americans and not to expect eye contact with Native Americans. Instead we must approach each case, each client, afresh. We must interpretively come to understand their moral visions—the sense of self and good that underlies their lives and informs their actions. We have a responsibility to discuss these issues (Sue & Sue, 1990) and enter into critical conversation about them with our clients, our colleagues, and the general public. Such a dialogue will be about not only the means of counseling but also the ends we seek. At best, this dialogue will take the shape of a collaborative process (as stressed by many feminist counselors), one that takes seriously the moral visions of both the client and the counselor. In this way our reflections about psychological well-being can contribute to and even become one form of public philosophy (Bellah et al., 1985; Sullivan, 1986). We all benefit from such openness and scrutiny.

Author's Note. Because of the length of this article frequent overgeneralizations are made regarding non-Western people. The intent of this article is to use non-Western cultures to highlight our own cultural values and assumptions. Non-individualistic outlooks can be lumped together under the same rubric only through the crudest type of typology and analysis. Thus, it is essential to keep in mind that a term such as *collectivism* or *communalism* obscures much diversity.

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