

# Conceptualizations of the Good and the Bad Life: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Christine N. Winston, Hemali Maher, and Veena Easvaradoss  
Women's Christian College

Scholars and laypersons conceptualize the good life similarly; however, good life conceptualizations vary systematically across different groups of people. The objective of the present study, therefore, was to qualitatively explore developmental trends in Indians' conceptualizations of the good life. Adolescents, young adults, and adults responded to an open-ended questionnaire on conceptualizations of the good life. Constant comparison analysis of the responses yielded 5 overarching constituents of the good life, namely: an ideal self, a pleasant life, fulfilling relationships, achievement, and a better world. Developmental progressions in conceptualizations of the good life and individual differences in motivational orientation were identified. Together, the findings hint at cross-cultural similarities, developmentally accorded variations, and individual differences in conceptualizations of the good life.

**Keywords:** good life, bad life, approach versus avoidance, change versus maintenance, culture

I think that if I'm able to figure out exactly what makes life ideal, I am already 99% there.  
—19-year-old male

The epigraph, a 19-year-old participant's conceptualization of the good life, informs us that the question of *what makes life ideal* is a subject of inquiry that is of interest, not only to scholars, but also to nonscholars. Indeed, Armon and Dawson (2003) have contended that there is "a dramatic similarity" (p. 271) across philosophers', psychologists', and laypersons' conceptualizations of the good life. Accordingly, irrespective of whether psychologists have derived their conceptualizations of the good life from philosophical works (e.g., Seligman, 2002) or laypersons' narratives (e.g., Tafarodi et al., 2012), they have identified overwhelmingly similar constituents, such as relationships, achievement, and pleasure.

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Christine N. Winston, Hemali Maher, and Veena Easvaradoss, Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christine N. Winston, Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai-600 006, India. E-mail: [christinewinston@live.com](mailto:christinewinston@live.com)

## How Do Researchers Identify the Constituents of the Good Life?

Bonn and Tafarodi (2014) have defined conceptualizations of the good life as “cultural narratives describing how a desirable life would play out” (p. 742). Although conceptualizations of the good life are informed by culture, evidenced as between-culture differences, there are individual within-group differences in how the good life is conceptualized. We, therefore, modify Bonn and Tafarodi’s (2014) definition, by replacing the word “cultural” with “personal” to define conceptualizations of the good life as “personal narratives describing how a desirable life would play out.” There are two distinct approaches that researchers adopt to identify the constituents of the good life: the deductive approach and the inductive approach.

### The Deductive Approach

Psychologists who employ the deductive approach test a priori hypotheses that certain predetermined constituents, deduced primarily from philosophical writings and empirical findings, are associated (statistically, in most cases) with living the good life. Accordingly, those features that differentiate between the two criterion groups (i.e., those leading the good life vs. those leading the nongood life) are reported as constituents of the good life. Correlations and predictive relationships between the constituents of the good life and the criterion are also studied; those constituents that are found to be “significantly” associated with the criterion of living the good life are identified as constituents of the good life. Peterson, Park, and Seligman’s (2005) study is a classic example of the application of the deductive approach to identifying the constituents of the good life. Three constituents of the good life (i.e., pleasure, engagement, and meaning) were derived from philosophical writings and psychological findings on hedonism, eudemonia, and flow, operationalized, and correlated against an external criterion (i.e., life satisfaction). The findings revealed that engagement and meaning are stronger correlates of life satisfaction than pleasure; accordingly, the researchers concluded that “interventions that cultivate the good life . . . that target engagement and meaning will prove most fruitful” (p. 37). Researchers also study demographic differences in the endorsement of each of the constituents of the good life as well as the extent to which each constituent contributes to living a good life.

Implicit to the deductive approach is the assumption that individuals are incapable of accurately ascertaining what *actually* makes life good. Indeed, research findings suggest that individuals tend to mispredict the effect that future events, both positive and negative, will have on their affective states (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). One limitation of the deductive approach, however, is that there might be discrepancies between scientific and folk theories of what the good life entails. Bronk (2008), for instance, found that responsibility to and respect from community did not emerge as constituents of adolescents’ conceptualizations of the good life, although scholarly literature indicated otherwise. A priori determination of the constituents of the good life can therefore result in errors of omission (excluding relevant constituents) and commission (including irrelevant constituents), especially when a given framework is applied invariantly across groups differing by demographics such as age, gender, or culture. Another concern is with respect to the researchers’ implicit beliefs and judgments about the good life and how it is to be operationalized. For instance, researchers have routinely used measures of happiness as indicators of whether an individual is leading the good life. Recent research findings, however, suggest that the good life cannot be equated with a happy life; indeed, some cultures have been found to be averse to happiness (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014).

Furthermore, even the findings of studies conducted on American samples suggest that the good life is more than just a happy life (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinksy, 2013).

## The Inductive Approach

The inductive approach requires the researcher to explore folk theories and laypersons' narratives to identify the constituents of the good life; furthermore, the emergent constituents are not evaluated against an external criterion. Researchers who employ the inductive method are interested in "what people *think* will make their lives worthwhile" and not "what *actually* makes people happy" (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013, p. 1840) because "knowing how a value is to be *lived* requires knowing what life one is trying to live" (Tafarodi et al., 2012, p. 785). The inductive approach, in this manner, overcomes the limitations of the deductive approach because the constituents of the good life are arrived at, inductively, based on the participant's narratives. Thus, unlike the deductive approach, which may employ either a quantitative, qualitative, or a mixed-method route to studying good life conceptualizations, the inductive approach demands a predominantly qualitative methodology.

Tafarodi et al.'s (2012) identification of a comprehensive set of 30 distinct indicators of the good life, from responses to an open-ended question, is a good example of the inductive approach to studying good life conceptualizations. Using multidimensional scaling, they represented the 30 constituents along two intersecting axes: prudential/practical and beneficent/moral (*x*-axis) and internal/subjective and external/social (*y*-axis). Researchers who employ the inductive method also compare good life conceptualizations across different demographic groups to identify similarities and differences in what are considered to be the essential constituents of the good life (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013; Tafarodi et al., 2012).

## Do Constituents of the Good Life Vary Across Different Demographic Groups?

Individuals differ in what they consider to be the constituents of the good life. Indeed, there may be "as many conceptions of the Good Life as there are persons who seek it" (Armon & Dawson, 2003, p. 271). Nevertheless, researchers have been successful, not only in consolidating a comprehensive and ubiquitous set of constituents of the good life, but also in identifying predictable patterns in good life conceptualizations across different groups of people. Because past research studies have found no gender differences in good life conceptualizations (Tafarodi et al., 2012), the following discussion has been confined to developmental trends and cultural differences in good life conceptualizations.

## Developmental Trends

Armon and Dawson (2003) have developed an empirically grounded five-stage model of "value reasoning about the Good Life" (p. 271) that corresponds to the Piagetian framework of cognitive development. Individuals at the lowest stages (i.e., "egoistic hedonism" and "instrumental hedonism") are primarily concerned with the attainment of pleasure, while those at the highest stages (i.e., "individuality" and "autonomy/community") are concerned with self-fulfillment and common good; in between lies the "affective mutuality" stage, characterized by an orientation toward "mutuality in relationships and consensus in valuing" (p. 284). The findings of their 13-year-long longitudinal study indicated that the highest stages of value reasoning were demonstrated only by

adults (24 and above). Among young adults, age correlated positively with the increments in the stages of value reasoning. Other research findings also concur that age is inversely related to hedonism and positively associated with autonomic and homonomic tendencies (Peterson et al., 2005; Schwartz et al., 2012).

Because conceptualizations of the good life entail yet-to-be-lived conceptualizations rather than lived experiences, most studies have been conducted on young samples such as school and college students (Bronk, 2008; Tafarodi et al., 2012). There is, however, a paucity of research studies comparing the content of good life conceptualizations across different age groups. One of our objectives, therefore, was to compare and contrast conceptualizations of the good life across different age groups. We confined our sample to middle and late adolescents (14–18) and emerging adults (19–30). We chose to further divide emerging adults into two groups, young adults (19–24) and adults (25–30), because the constituents of young adults' good life conceptualizations (e.g., marriage, parenthood, career) actualize in adulthood; the constituents of adults' good life conceptualizations, we reckoned, may therefore, vary from young adults' conceptualizations (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006).

### Cultural Differences

Researchers have delineated cross-cultural similarities as well as differences in good life conceptualizations. Tafarodi et al., (2012), for instance, identified 30 distinct constituents that feature in good life conceptualizations, cross-culturally. They also found that cultures are similar in the emphasis that they place on certain constituents, such as relationships, ambition, and well-being. Universal human needs, such as the need for love, esteem, mastery, and competence, have been implicated in cross-cultural similarities in good life conceptualizations (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1987; Winston, 2016). On the other hand, cultures have also been found to differ in the importance ascribed to certain other constituents such as travel, social status, and religion (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013; Tafarodi et al., 2012).

The question of what is “good” necessitates value judgments that are largely informed by one's historical-cultural heritage and socioeconomic and political climate. Because “individuals internalize a sense of what is good or worthwhile from their surroundings” (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2014, p. 742), good life conceptualizations are largely shaped by the cultural worldviews and moral visions within which one operates. Accordingly, Tafarodi et al. (2012) found that cross-cultural differences in good life conceptualizations were “consistent with the cultural ethos of each group” (p. 783). Persons of Chinese ancestry, for instance, have been found to be oriented toward “social capital and prudential concerns” (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013, p. 1851) in accordance with their Confucian heritage, while those with South Asians ancestry have been found to be oriented toward “spiritual, moral, and beneficent concerns” (p. 1851) reflecting the strong emphasis that South Asian countries (i.e., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) place on religion and spirituality. On the other hand, Canadians with European ancestry, consistent with an individualistic value structure, have been found to be oriented toward “internally oriented” concerns (p. 1851). On the basis of their findings on differences in good life conceptualizations across different cultural subgroups, Bonn and Tafarodi (2013) have argued against the use of broad categorizations such as “collectivists,” “Eastern,” and “Asian.” Accordingly, the following paragraph is a brief overview of existing literature on Indians' conceptualizations of the good life, as they were the target sample for our study.

Cross-cultural research findings suggest that Indians, in comparison to other cultures, are primarily oriented toward moral and beneficent concerns. For instance, “having had a

positive impact on others and having made the world a better place” (Tafarodi et al., 2012, p. 791) emerged as the most important constituent of their good life conceptualizations (reported by 48% of the sample). It is noteworthy, however, that living a “moral life according to my personal principles” (living ethically; 33%) rather than living “in accordance with my religious faith” (living religiously; 2%) was considered to be a constituent of the good life. Relationships, well-being, and achievement were all highly valued (35% and above); on the other hand, community involvement, having many friends, and pursuing hobbies and leisure-time activities were rarely reported as constituents of the good life (2% or less).

### **Is the Good Life Merely the Opposite of the Bad Life?**

Researchers have been successful in identifying and consolidating a generalizable set of constituents of the good life; however, they only tell half the story. It is important to not only understand people’s hopes and dreams, but also their fears and worries. Cantril’s (1977) seminal study of the *Pattern of Human Concerns* across 18 countries is one large-scale investigation that examined not only people’s hopes but also their fears about the future. He classified responses into many overarching categories such as personal character, economic situation, family, and social, that were common across all countries; however, differences also surfaced. For instance, not being able to pay *dowry* (money paid by the bride’s family to the groom’s family) was a constituent of Indians’ conceptualizations of the bad life but did not feature in Americans’ conceptualizations. In most cases, the constituents of the bad life were simply the opposites of the constituents of the good life. For instance, “emotional stability” (p. 130) featured as a constituent of the good life and “emotional instability” (p. 134) featured as a constituent of the bad life. However, in some cases, certain constituents were unique to conceptualizations of the good life (e.g., “modern conveniences such as a car, bathroom, new furniture, fine clothes, and large appliances;” p. 130) while others were unique to conceptualizations of the bad life (e.g., “becoming anti-social or a criminal;” p. 134).

### **Why Should Conceptualizations of the Good and the Bad Life Be Studied Qualitatively?**

Qualitative methodologies, as Cantril’s (1977) findings demonstrate, have much to offer to the study of individuals’ conceptualizations of the good life and the bad life because the lexical and semantic nuances of a person’s response, upon which categorization to the good or the bad life rests, is lost in quantification. The response category, “money,” for instance, can include four different types of responses: “be rich,” “not be poor,” “be poor,” and “not be rich.” In a typical psychometric assessment, “not be rich” and “be poor” (constituents of the bad life) would be the reverse-scored equivalents of “be rich” and “not be poor” (constituents of the good life). However, as Cantril’s (1977) findings have demonstrated, constituents of the bad life are not merely the antonyms of the constituents of the bad life that “load” on the same factor. Furthermore, “be rich” and “not be poor” are not synonymous; they are two distinct constituents of the good life; similarly, “not be rich” and “be poor” are two distinct constituents of the bad life. Research findings on the semantic differences in the way goals are stated suggest that an orientation toward “positive desirable goals” are more adaptive than “striving to avoid negative, aversive goals” (Emmons, 2003, p. 115).

Qualitative findings also allow for a nuanced study of the different meanings that people attach to a given constituent of the good life. Consider for instance, [Peterson et al.'s \(2005\)](#) finding that, although pleasure is not as strong a correlate of life satisfaction as engagement and meaning, the simultaneous pursuit of all three paths to happiness is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction. While this finding supports the contention that individuals can indeed pursue all three routes to happiness, we do not know if, and what, qualitative differences exist in how pleasure is conceptualized by those who pursue pleasure as the sole path to happiness and those who pursue pleasure as one of the three paths to happiness. Also, what does it mean to “simultaneously” pursue all three routes to happiness? Does it imply simultaneousness in time; for example, cooking a dish that I enjoy making (engagement) for homeless people (meaning) while sipping on a glass of champagne (pleasure)? Or does it imply the pursuit of that which is simultaneously pleasurable, engaging, and meaningful (e.g., playing a sport that I am good at, for charity)? Or does it, as [Maslow \(1987\)](#) has articulated about self-actualizing people, entail the inextricable enmeshment of pleasure, engagement, and meaning in how life itself is experienced?: “duty cannot be contrasted with pleasure nor work with play when duty *is* pleasure” (p. 191). These are questions that qualitative studies alone can answer. And it is for this very reason that humanistic psychologists have underscored the relevance of qualitative and idiographic methods of inquiry in positive psychological research ([Friedman, 2008](#); [Robbins, 2008](#)). However, despite the advantages afforded by qualitative techniques to the nuanced study of good life conceptualizations, most researchers have relied either on quantitative data or quantified qualitative data ([Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013](#); [Tafarodi et al., 2012](#)). The objective of the present study, therefore, was to rely solely on qualitative data and qualitative techniques to inductively study conceptualizations of the good life and the bad life.

As is implied in the aforementioned literature, the present study serves to bridge the “divide” ([Friedman, 2008](#), p. 113) between humanistic and positive psychology. For instance, the objective of the study stems from a mission shared by both camps: conceptualizing, approximating, and promoting the good life ([Robbins, 2008](#)). The two fields do differ, however, in how the good life is envisioned. Humanistic psychologists articulate paradoxical and contextually-determined conceptualizations of good and bad (and related terms, such as positive and negative; [Wong, 2011](#)) and have therefore been critical of de-contextualized and atomist methods of inquiry in positive psychological research (e.g., resilience; [Friedman & Robbins, 2012](#)). These differences are also reflected in the “methodological . . . divide” ([Friedman, 2008](#), p. 113) that exists between the two schools of thought. By qualifying nomothetic findings, overrepresented in positive psychological literature on conceptualizations of the good life, with contributions from inductive methodologies, promulgated by humanistic psychologists ([Robbins, 2008](#)), the present study not only bridges the divide, but also advances the shared mission of the two fields.

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample ( $N = 166$ ) of 62 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 ( $M = 15.32$ ;  $SD = .59$ ), 57 young adults between the ages of 19 and 24 ( $M = 21.61$ ;  $SD = 1.50$ ), and 47 adults between the ages of 25 and 30 ( $M = 27$ ;  $SD = 1.57$ ) formed the sample for the present study. In this article, the terms “girl” and “boy” refer to adolescents, “young man” and “young woman” to young adults, and “man” and “woman” to adults.

Adolescents were recruited from two Higher Secondary Schools in the city of Chennai; girls formed a majority of the sample ( $N = 77.4\%$ ). Young adults were primarily recruited from two colleges in the city of Chennai. Young women formed 51.7% of the sample and young men formed 48.3% of the sample. A majority of the young adults (87.7%) were single; the remaining 12.3% reported being in a relationship. Adults were recruited through snowball sampling. Men formed 59.6% of the sample and women formed 40.4% of the sample. With respect to marital status, 51.1% were single, 27.7% were married, 14.9% were in a relationship, 2.1% were divorced, and 4.3% chose the option "other."

## Measure

Tafarodi et al., (2012) found that questioning individuals on their conceptualizations of the good life "most often results in a long and embarrassed silence ∴ . . . people are guided by tacit and unquestioned commitments, not ideological manifestoes" (p. 786). They overcame this obstacle by asking participants to imagine themselves as 85 years old and to then list the criteria by which they would evaluate if they have lived a good life. There are two primary limitations, owing to which, we did not follow the same procedure. First, looking forward, into the future, and looking backward, at a hypothetical past, have different implications for how the good life is conceptualized primarily because imagining the nearness of death, at 85 years, will elicit responses that are confounded by attempts at terror management (Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009). Therefore, instead of working backward (i.e., the life that I would like to have lived), we decided to work forward (i.e., the life that I would like to live). Furthermore, good life conceptualizations are best understood when multiple questions rather than unidimensional questions such as "What is the good life?" are utilized (Wierzbicka, 2009). An open-ended questionnaire that indirectly taps on one's conceptualizations of the good and the bad life was therefore considered to be the most appropriate method of data collection.

The Conceptualizations of the Good and the Bad Life Questionnaire, consisting of 10 open-ended questions, tapping on one's conceptualizations of the good and the bad life, was developed for the purpose of the present study. Questions were designed to tap on different combinations of two dichotomies: real (lived experiences) versus conceptual (anticipated experiences) life constituents and positive (desirable features) versus negative (undesirable features) constituents. Questions 1 (If you were granted three wishes, what would you wish for? And why?) and 4 (What do you daydream about?) were designed to elicit constituents of "conceptual-positive" conceptualizations. Questions 5 (What do you worry about?) and 7 (What is the one thing that you think you cannot live without?) addressed "conceptual-negative" conceptualizations. Question 2 (What upsets you the most about life?) was designed to tap on "real-negative" conceptualizations and question 6 (What makes life worth living?) was related to "real-positive" conceptualizations. Questions 3 (What is the one thing about your life that you would like to change?), 4 (What do you think is missing from your life? Why do you need it?), and 9 (Is there anything in life that is worth struggling for? What might that be?) were designed to elicit "conceptual-positive" constituents that are rooted in a "real-negative" life conceptualizations. Question 10 (If there is anything else that you would like to add about what you think an ideal life entails, please do so in the space below.) was included so that participants can describe those aspects of one's good life conceptualization that have not been adequately tapped on, by the other questions. The instructions for the questionnaire were as follows: *Below are a few questions about your thoughts on life. Please answer the*

*questions in the space provided.* The time taken to complete the questionnaire ranged from 30 to 40 min.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from schools, colleges, a pool of the researchers' personal contacts, and a database of participants from previous research studies. After obtaining the requisite permissions from school and college authorities, students were approached and requested to participate in the research study. In schools and colleges, students who volunteered to participate were seated in a classroom; after obtaining the informed consent of the participants, the questionnaire along with a personal demographic sheet was provided. At the end of the administration procedure, participants were debriefed about the objectives of the study; any query raised regarding the objective or nature of the study was answered. Some college students inquired if they could complete the questionnaires in their free time as they were occupied with academic work during working hours; these participants provided their e-mail addresses and the questionnaire was mailed to them. To recruit adult subjects, the researchers identified individuals between the ages of 25 and 30 from a pool of personal contacts and a database of research participants from past studies who had expressed an interest to participate in future studies. An e-mail was sent to potential participants requesting their participation in the research study, bearing a link to a web page hosting the questionnaire, the personal demographic sheet, information about the study, and the contact details of the researchers.

## Data Analysis

In the interest of full disclosure, it is necessary to articulate the hermeneutic framework within which the data was interpreted. Although the present study is one among a series of studies which seek to identify the role of Maslowian needs in conceptualizations of the good life, no attempt was made to test Maslow's (1987) theory or any related theory. Instead, the objective was to inductively derive a theoretical framework of good life conceptualizations that is data-driven. We therefore remained agnostic to existing literature on the subject matter until after the data was analyzed; the one exception, however, was literature that was reviewed in order to identify the best means to elicit participants' conceptualizations of the good life. Similarly, developmental transitions were not interpreted within the confines of existing frameworks; instead, responses belonging to a particular (sub-)category (e.g., Pleasurable End-states), were compared across the three age groups, to identify between-groups similarities and differences.

Because the objective was to explore rather than test hypotheses regarding Indians' conceptualizations of the good and the bad life, the Constant Comparison Method, a method closely associated with the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), was employed to analyze the data, because it allows the researcher to develop theories and concepts that are "grounded in [the] data" itself (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). It requires that "each piece of data . . . be compared with every other piece of relevant data" (Boeije, 2002, p. 393) to identify similarities and differences between the different units of meaning. In recent times, researchers have used the Constant Comparative Method "outside of Grounded Theory" (Fram, 2013, p. 1) and have dispensed with some of its features (e.g., theoretical sampling; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The units of analysis for the present study, the participants' responses to the open-ended questions, were analyzed in three steps. The first step in data reduction was open coding, during which each unit of meaning was assigned a code. We then applied axial

coding to the initial codes by comparing each code with every other code and with each chunk of text in order to arrive at categories and subcategories. A final set of categories and subcategories were analyzed using selective coding to identify themes. The data was reanalyzed after a period of one week and coded again; the two sets of codes, categories, and subcategories were compared with each other and with the data. Those themes, categories, and subcategories that emerged during both rounds of analyses were retained. A third round of analysis was undertaken to compare and contrast themes, categories, and subcategories across the three age groups.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis are subsumed under three broad headings: universal similarities, developmental progressions, and individual differences. Under “universal similarities,” the overarching constituents of the good life, identified from the data set, are compared with existing literature on good life conceptualizations. Next, for each emergent constituent of the good life, responses across the three age groups are cross-compared in order to explicate developmental progressions, which, in turn, are compared with past research findings, sourced from other cultures. Finally, individual differences in the manner in which participants described their conceptualizations of the good life (i.e., differences that are not attributable to demographics such as age or culture) are built into a comprehensive classification of motivational orientation underlying conceptualizations of the good life.

### Universal Similarities

An ideal self, a pleasant life, fulfilling relationships, achievement, and a better world emerged as the overarching constituents of the good life. Similarities, rather than differences, are prominent between these findings and the findings of studies carried out on samples from other cultures (e.g., emphasis on relationships, achievement, and contribution to society; [Emmons, 2003](#); [Tafarodi et al., 2012](#)). From the perspective of need theorists, cross-cultural similarities reflect universal human needs such as the need for love, achievement, and mastery that require constant gratification ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#); [Maslow, 1987](#)). As [Maslow \(1987\)](#) has noted, one’s “philosophy of the future” (p. 59) is rooted in one’s need hierarchy. The response categories and subcategories that were subsumed under the five overarching constituents of the good life are presented in [Table 1](#). Again, similarities, rather than differences, are prominent. Indeed, constituents that are often referred to as “western” ideals (e.g., autonomy and authenticity) emerged as constituents of Indian young adults and adults’ conceptualizations of the good life. The centrality of autonomy and authenticity to young adults and adults’ conceptualizations of the good life is apparent in following excerpt taken from one young man’s response:

As long as you are allowed to express and fight for your beliefs, without fear of dying in the process, and as long as you have a shot at achieving your personal dreams without having to sacrifice them all for others, I think that is an ideal life.

Similarly, our participants, in a rather uncollectivistic style, were acutely aware of the flaws in social norms and structures and demonstrated no restraint when critiquing and challenging these establishments. These responses resonate with a drastically changing worldview, at least among urban youth, and reflect the homogenization that results from cultures becoming WEIRD (Western-Educated-Industrialized-Rich-Democratic; [Hen-](#)

Table 1  
*Qualitative Differences in Adolescents', Young Adults', and Adults' Conceptualizations of the Good Life*

| Constituent                                                      | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                  | Adolescents                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Young adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| An ideal self<br>Physical indicators<br>Attractiveness<br>Health | Fantastical changes to physical appearance<br>( <i>I want to be the most beautiful person in the world.</i> )                                                                                                                  | Possession of socially desirable physical features ( <i>I dream about being tall.</i> )<br><br>Physical strength and fitness ( <i>I want physical strength to do all that I can.</i> )                                                                                                                                        | Weight-reduction ( <i>Being fat upsets me. I wish I could lose those extra pounds I gained after delivery.</i> )<br><br>Health and the absence of illness ( <i>I worry about sickness and poor health. Nothing makes sense without good health.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Psychological indicators<br>Freedom from temporal concerns       | Fantastical changes to a painful past ( <i>I want to change my past.</i> ) and control over an uncertain future ( <i>Not knowing what my future will be like upsets me.</i> )                                                  | Fantastical changes to a painful past ( <i>I would go back and stop myself from dropping music and painting.</i> ) and control over an uncertain future ( <i>Thoughts about the future and its insecurity upsets me.</i> ), with an emphasis on death of loved ones ( <i>I worry about the death of my dearest members.</i> ) | Fantastical changes to a painful past ( <i>I wish for the ability to time travel . . . so that I can fix the mistakes that I have done in the past</i> ), control over an uncertain future with an emphasis on personal decisions ( <i>I worry about how life is going to end up . . . how my dreams can be shattered with a single wrong decision.</i> ), and death of loved ones ( <i>I worry about the death of near ones, especially my parents.</i> ) |
|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Skills and abilities                                             | Possession of academic skills and abilities ( <i>I wish for the ability to understand chemistry.</i> ), with or without fantastical undertones ( <i>I want to become a genius in math because I am weak in that subject.</i> ) | Personal ( <i>I want to manage my time better.</i> ) and interpersonal competencies ( <i>I would like to change the way I deal with new people or strangers. It is very awkward for me.</i> )                                                                                                                                 | Personal ( <i>Not being able to decide what to do upsets me.</i> ) and interpersonal competencies ( <i>I would like to empathize more with others</i> ), and domain-specific skills ( <i>I want to understand and have the ability to perform different genres of music.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                             |

(table continues)

Table 1 (*continued*)

| Constituent           | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       | Adolescents                                                                                                                                        | Young adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Character development | Absence of weaknesses ( <i>I don't want to carry hatred.</i> )                                                                                     | Absence of weaknesses ( <i>I get tensed and annoyed if things are not on the right track or the way it has to be. I would like to change this character of mine.</i> ) and the presence of strengths ( <i>I wish for the ability to face challenges and failures, to be unperturbed by situations.</i> ) | Absence of weaknesses ( <i>I'm highly lethargic and resistant to change and I need to do something about that.</i> ) and the presence of strengths ( <i>I wish for personal strength to handle difficulties.</i> )                                                                     |
| Authenticity          | —                                                                                                                                                  | Freedom from relational conformity ( <i>I want to be a free woman who is not defined by her relationships</i> ) and societal norms ( <i>It upsets me that I will have to conform to societal norms that I do not agree with such as the belief that you must give birth if you are a woman.</i> )        | Freedom from coercion to conform ( <i>I want to live life my way . . . I feel I'm being made to listen to others.</i> ) and absence of consequent distress ( <i>The inability to feel liberated and satisfied with what you are doing because of the norms of society upsets me.</i> ) |
| Meaning               | —                                                                                                                                                  | A sense of direction ( <i>I worry about losing my way.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Cosmic meaning ( <i>I want to know the true purpose of existence.</i> ) and terrestrial meaning ( <i>Living for a purpose makes life worth living.</i> )                                                                                                                               |
| A pleasant life       | Happiness ( <i>I want to be happy and cheerful all the time.</i> ) and the absence of negative emotions ( <i>An ideal life means no sadness.</i> ) | Happiness as compensation for negative affective states ( <i>I wish for more happy moments because lately, things have been a bit tense and a few moments would help lighten things up.</i> )                                                                                                            | Happiness and higher-order states such as bliss, wonder, and awe ( <i>I dream about seeing things in nature . . . that keeps me awed.</i> )                                                                                                                                            |

Table 1 (continued)

| Constituent                                        | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                    | Adolescents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Young adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Means to pleasure<br>Pleasurable activities        | Sensory gratification (An ideal life is a life in which I can eat, sleep, and repeat.), leisure ( <i>I cannot live without watching T.V.</i> ), and the absence of work ( <i>When you enjoy, like not study for the whole day, life will be awesome.</i> )                          | Excitement and adventure ( <i>I want to take an adventurous trip atleast twice a year because if we can't spend the money we earn on something that thrills us, life is pointless.</i> )                                                | Leisure and relaxation ( <i>I dream about a relaxing vacation on an island</i> ), hobbies and interests ( <i>I have so much work load . . . I am not able to spend more time for hobbies.</i> ) and the experience of life, in itself ( <i>The unexpectedness of each second of life and the suspense in every day makes life worth living.</i> ) |
| Wealth and resources                               | Flamboyance and extravagance ( <i>I want all the bikes and cars in the world.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Luxury and comfort ( <i>I dream about living in a beautiful house of my own in the heart of the city.</i> )                                                                                                                             | Freedom from the struggles that come with money ( <i>I wish that there is no fighting over money.</i> ) and without money ( <i>We should have money to our name so that we do not depend on anyone.</i> )                                                                                                                                         |
| Fulfilling relationships<br>Existing relationships | Absence of negative interpersonal experiences ( <i>It upsets me when my dad compares me to others.</i> ) and presence of positive interpersonal experiences, with an emphasis on reception ( <i>The love and care from my family is the one thing that I cannot live without.</i> ) | Absence of negative interpersonal experiences ( <i>Quarrels with my girlfriend upsets me</i> ) and presence of positive interpersonal experiences ( <i>I do not think that I can live without people around me who care about me.</i> ) | Absence of negative interpersonal experiences ( <i>My mom's refusal to see me as I am upsets me</i> ) and presence of positive interpersonal experiences, with an emphasis on provision ( <i>Sacrifice for our loved ones makes life worth living.</i> )                                                                                          |

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

| Constituent                  | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                              | Adolescents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Young adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Missing relationships        | Deceased ( <i>I want my mother back alive.</i> ), separated ( <i>I wish that my friend comes back to this school again.</i> ) and would-have-liked-to-have-had-relationships ( <i>If I had an elder brother I would have his company and would enjoy a lot with him.</i> ) | Deceased persons ( <i>I wish to bring back the people I love</i> ), romantic relationships and marriage ( <i>I daydream about a partner. The feeling of falling in love is something that I have never experienced. Though I have a lot of female friends, I never really could fall in love.</i> ), and children, with an emphasis on having children ( <i>I dream about having a bunch of kids.</i> ) | Romantic relationships and marriage ( <i>I daydream about being happily married to the one I love.</i> ), and children, with an emphasis on raising children ( <i>I wish to guide my family and particularly my daughter and instill the right values in her.</i> ) |
| Achievement                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Process-oriented achievement |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Learning and mastery         | —                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | The interest to learn ( <i>I long for the urge to learn new things</i> ) and the possession of knowledge ( <i>I want to be a resourceful person by knowing a lot of information and having a lot of knowledge.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                    | The pursuit of knowledge ( <i>I would like to pursue gathering knowledge for as long as possible.</i> )                                                                                                                                                             |
| Overcoming challenges        | Avoidance of challenges ( <i>An ideal life is a life with no obstacles.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                              | Acceptance and enjoyment of challenges ( <i>It's in the problems that I have discovered that I can achieve more.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Enjoyment of challenges ( <i>The challenges that life throws at me, even the uncertainties of life make life worth living.</i> )                                                                                                                                    |

Table 1 (continued)

| Constituent                                      | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                  | Adolescents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Young adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Outcome-oriented achievement<br>Goal fulfillment | Short-term performance goals, limited to academics, ( <i>I worry about failing in my exams.</i> ) and long-term career goals ( <i>I want to join the army.</i> )                                                                                                                                              | Short-term performance goals ( <i>Not doing consistent hard work to achieve my goals upsets me.</i> ) and long-term career goals ( <i>I want to become a singer.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Fulfillment of duties ( <i>I worry about work tasks and deadlines</i> ) and pursuit of unmet or abandoned career goals ( <i>I worry about my unfinished novel.</i> )                                                                                          |
|                                                  | Fantastical fame and stardom ( <i>I want to be more famous than celebrities.</i> ), and recognition from loved ones ( <i>Making my mother happy and my father proud of his daughter is something that is worth struggling for</i> ), or society, in general ( <i>I want to have a good name in society.</i> ) | Fantastical fame and stardom ( <i>I should be the most popular and idolized person in the planet.</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Avoidance of the social ramifications of failure ( <i>If I get stagnated in my career, how will my family treat me in the future?</i> ) and the lack of recognition for success ( <i>I worry about not getting the deserved appreciation for my talent.</i> ) |
| A better world<br>Concern and contribution       | Fantastical changes to humanity ( <i>I wish that everyone should live for a 100 years.</i> ) and nature ( <i>The environment should change and become more greenish.</i> )                                                                                                                                    | Realistic changes to humanity ( <i>It upsets me when I see someone being treated unfairly or to see someone either suffering or pain being inflicted on them.</i> ), preservation of nature ( <i>The current state of the environment upsets me.</i> ), and absence of constraints to contribution ( <i>Seeing poverty around and the fact that I don't or can't do much about it at this point upsets me.</i> ) | Realistic ends ( <i>I want to make life easier for the ones less privileged than I.</i> ) and the preservation of nature ( <i>Nature getting destroyed with the actions of humans upsets me.</i> )                                                            |

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

| Constituent            | Qualitative differences and characteristic responses                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                   |        |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
|                        | Adolescents                                                                                                                       | Young adults                                                                                                                                      | Adults |
| Critique and challenge | Rudimentary critique of social injustice, limited to inequality ( <i>All people should be treated equally (no caste, etc.).</i> ) | Critique of different manifestations of social injustice ( <i>Nothing upsets me more than the inequality and discrimination in the society.</i> ) | —      |

rich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Schwartz & Sagie, 2000; Tafarodi et al., 2012). Despite these overwhelming concurrences with good life conceptualizations recorded from members of very different cultures, we did find a few interesting cultural differences (i.e., between Indian and other South Asian countries). For instance, our findings concur with past research findings that, unlike other South Asian cultures (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013) who tend to be strongly oriented toward religious and spiritual concerns, Indians are more oriented toward moral and beneficent concerns (Tafarodi et al., 2012). Indeed, many participants expressed a desire to lead a virtuous life and to make the world a better place; however, references to God, religion, and faith, were extremely few and limited to the responses category, “Meaning.” One young woman, for instance, wrote, *The fact that God had given me life and had created me for a beautiful purpose is what makes life worth living*. Some responses also made it obvious that participants differentiated between religion and values and favored the latter. One man, for instance, while noting that teaching the next generation, the values that he was taught, makes his life worth living, clarified what he meant by “values” by noting, within parentheses, *(Doesn’t mean the religion but moral values)*. Some participants also articulated the harm that can be caused by religion. One man, for instance, wrote:

We fight among each other over such silly issues such as religion, caste, creed, and color of skin, forgetting in the meantime that without food, water, and air, irrespective of these “differences,” we will face similar consequences. So fundamentally, we are the same. No matter how it looks like!

The apparent paradox of overwhelming between-culture similarities co-occurring with nuanced within-culture differences, result from the fact that, although the overarching constituents of the good life are universally endorsed, the specific manner in which the constituent is conceptualized is informed by one’s unique interaction with his or her sociocultural environment. For instance, although an intimate romantic relationship is almost universally considered a constituent of the good life, the affordances that each culture presents to its members (e.g., same-sex romantic relationships; premarital sex) vary. Nevertheless, each reported constituent of the good life and what it specifically entails, presented in Table 1, when compared with existing literature, indicates an overwhelming concurrence with findings from other cultures (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013; Tafarodi et al., 2012).

## Developmental Progressions

A close reading and analysis of the qualitative differences in good life conceptualizations, across the three age groups, presented in Table 1, makes apparent trends, patterns, and progressions. We identified five different developmental progressions, each of which is presented in Table 2, and discussed briefly in the following section. Examples, in Table 2, are restricted to one constituent, per progression, for the sake of brevity.

**Fantastic to realistic.** The most obvious developmental progression that emerges from Table 1 is the transition from fantastical ideation to realistic thinking, with increments in age. Adolescents tended to be fantastical, not only in describing desired ends, but also in articulating the means by which the desired ends can be achieved. The example provided in Table 1, for instance, demonstrates the fantastical means (i.e., *to be reborn*) by which adolescents sought to achieve the good life. As is evident from Table 1, this transition persisted across all five constituents. One boy’s response, *I want to be become a millionaire to help the poor*, for example, illustrates the fantastical undertones of

Table 2  
*Developmental Progressions in Conceptualizations of the Good Life*

| Nature of progression           | Sample constituent       | Characteristic responses                                                            |                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                 |                          | Adolescents                                                                         | Young adults                                                                                                                       | Adults                                                                                                                                         |
| Fantastic to realistic          | An ideal self            | <i>I want to be reborn as a beautiful girl.</i>                                     | <i>I want six pack abs.</i>                                                                                                        | <i>I dream about being thin one day.</i>                                                                                                       |
| Extreme to moderate             | A pleasant life          | <i>I want to be the richest person in the world.</i>                                | <i>I want to earn loads of money.</i>                                                                                              | <i>I want to be free from financial struggles at home.</i>                                                                                     |
| Ego-centric to ego-transcendent | Fulfilling relationships | <i>I want to have a best friend that I can share my most personal secrets with.</i> | <i>I want closeness with the people with whom I share a mutual bond of love.</i>                                                   | <i>My son's dreams [are worth struggling for]. I wish that he can pursue his dreams without worrying about whether it would be affordable.</i> |
| Hedonistic to Sisyphean         | Achievement              | <i>An ideal life is a hassle-free life with no problems.</i>                        | <i>A life without hardship, struggles, and failures would be ideal. But it's not possible. It's just life.</i>                     | <i>Living itself is a struggle. It is worth it. There is a strange sense of triumph when you overcome even a small obstacle.</i>               |
| Conceptual to operational       | A better world           | <i>I want everyone to lead a life without any disease or health problems.</i>       | <i>I worry about the people who are terminally ill with no one to help them. I dream about helping them and making them happy.</i> | <i>I've gained experience working with special needs children . . . I would like to implement my knowledge and skills and help them.</i>       |

adolescents' altruistic goals. Young adults and adults, on the other hand, tended to provide more realistic means and ends. A classic example of the transition from fantastical to realistic conceptualizations of the good life is evident in the manner in which adolescents, young adults, and adults wrote about deceased loved ones. While participants of all three age groups dwelt on the irreparable costs of death and loss, adults, unlike adolescents and young adults, expressed no desire to bring deceased loved ones back to life. One woman, for instance, wrote, *I miss my demised father. I am sure I would have been a completely different person, had he been around.* This finding indicates that adults have a greater awareness and acceptance of the permanence and irreversibility of death, a contention that is in accordance with existing literature (Gesser, Wong, & Reker, 1987). Another indicator of adolescents' fantastical orientation stems from conceptualizations of the good life as an alternate reality. In other words, young adults and adults' conceptualizations of the good life tended to provide descriptions of a desirable future whereas adolescents' conceptualizations also included constructions of a desirable alternate past and present. The response category, "Missing Relationships," illustrates this point. Whereas adults conceptualized the good life as a life in which missing others such as a romantic partner and children are present in the future, adolescents longed for "would-have-liked-to-have-had"

relationships (e.g., *I wish for an elder brother because I am the only daughter for my parents*) that necessitate a different past and present. These findings, together, indicate that, with age, individuals have a greater acceptance of the unchangeable aspects of human existence and a more realistic outlook on life. The one exception to this developmental transition was “Temporal Concerns” as participants of all three age groups desired fantastical means to change a negative past, probably because there is no realistic means by which one can *change* or *reverse* the past.

**Extreme to moderate.** One developmental transition that runs parallel to the “fantastic to realistic” progression is the transition from extreme to moderate conceptualizations of the good life. Adolescents’ responses were filled with superlatives such as *most beautiful, richest, friendliest, happiest, and smartest*, expressed in an all-or none fashion. Perhaps such extreme expectations and standards explain why intense emotions such as “feeling on top of the world” and “being in the depths of despair” become less common with age and experience’ (Seligman, 2002, p. 58). Moderation, expressed with a sense of poignancy, characterized young adults and adults’ responses. For instance, whereas one girl wished to be *happy and cheerful all the time*, a young woman wished for *more happy moments* as a refreshing change from an otherwise negative present. Similarly, while many adolescents conceptualized the good life as a life filled only with leisure-time activities and hobbies such as *watching T.V., listening to music, and playing football*, adults wished to pursue leisure-time activities and hobbies as a break from stressful work. One woman, for instance, wrote, *Work keeps me occupied majority of the time and adds on to physical and mental stress. To break free from that, I would like to add some fun and peace to life*. Our finding that fantastical and extreme responses characterize adolescents’ conceptualizations concurs with Eyman, Mikawa, and Eyman’s (1990) contention that adolescents “demonstrate less reality testing . . . extremeness in their response . . . and more elaborate and less restrained fantasies” (p. 168).

**Ego-centric to ego-transcendent.** Adolescents’ responses tended to revolve around the needs and wants of the self while young adults and adults’ responses also included the needs and wants of the other. This transition from egocentrism to ego-transcendence becomes obvious when the responses categorized under “Fulfilling Relationships” are scrutinized. While participants of all three age groups dwelt on both the reception and provision of socioemotional benefits such as love and care, self-disclosure, and intimacy, adolescents tended to emphasize the reception of socioemotional benefits while adults tended to focus on the provision of socioemotional benefits. More specifically, adolescents tended to describe fulfilling relationships in terms of what they expect from the other person. One girl, for instance, wrote that a good life is *a life filled with love and people who care for you*. Young adults and adults, on the other hand, described fulfilling relationships in terms of what they expect to do for the other person. For instance, one young man desired *interaction with the opposite sex because I need it to be more open and to understand them better*. Transcendent recognition of the other’s needs, rather than the self’s needs, were prominent in adults’ responses. As one man wrote, *Taking care of my mother, wife, and family well makes life worth living*.

It must be borne in mind that, similar to the other developmental progressions, the transition from egocentrism to ego-transcendence, featured in other constituents also. For instance, some adolescents’ conceptualizations of a better world were rooted in the self’s needs. One girl, for instance, commented on the curtailment of her freedom, by virtue of being a girl, and then proceeded to note, *We should struggle for more freedom, like, parents should let girls go out, have belief in them*. On the other hand, young adults and adults’ conceptualizations of a better world were rooted in the other’s needs. One man

observed that a better world is one in which *a poor fellow could eat 3 times a day to fill his stomach*. Young adults and adults also expressed ego-transcendent concerns about nature and the environment, as demonstrated in the following excerpt taken from one's man response: *I want to understand clearly how nature works . . . I want to learn how to work with nature without destroying it*. This finding is consistent with Schwartz et al.'s (2012) inclusion of "preservation of the natural environment" under the value category, "Universalism," which also subsumes concern ("commitment to equality, justice, and protection for all people") and tolerance ("acceptance and understanding of those who are different from oneself;" p. 669).

Another particularly intriguing example is "Pleasurable Affective States;" adults, differed from adolescents and young adults, in that, in addition to happiness, they desired higher states of consciousness such as *awe and wonder*. Existing literature suggests that, in comparison to happiness which entails attention to the self, awe entails revisions of "mental representations of the world," "a sense of smallness of the self," and an enhanced "sense of the self as part of a greater whole" (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007, p. 960). It becomes apparent, therefore, that even the experience of pleasure may be an ego-transcendent exercise for adults. These developmental trends are also in accordance with Armon and Dawson's (2003) stages of value reasoning about the good life, which suggests that, as age progresses, individuals move away from hedonistic parasitism (How can others benefit me?) and toward a paradoxical enmeshment of (self-oriented) autonomy and (other-oriented) community (How can I benefit others?). Our findings are also in accordance with Elkind's (1967) work on adolescent egocentrism and McAdams' work on generativity in adulthood (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993).

**Hedonistic to Sisyphean.** Although participants of all three age groups conceptualized the good life as a life in which pleasure is abundant, adolescents differed from young adults and adults, in that, they conceptualized the good life as a life in which pain is absent, be it negative emotions, effortful work, or challenges and struggles. In response to the question, *Is there anything in life that is worth struggling for? What might that be?*, approximately one third of the adolescents (33.87%) reported that *nothing* is worth struggling for. Young adults and adults, on the other hand, demonstrated a greater acceptance and embracement of life's challenges and struggles. As one young woman wrote, *if everything was perfect, life would not be interesting and we will find no meaning to live*. Indeed, one man noted that *challenge is the one thing that is missing from my life. I need it to grow and not get too comfortable in my zone*. These findings suggest that the very challenges and struggles that are despised at a younger age are embraced and desired at later years. Perhaps then, having attempted and failed in wishing life's challenges and struggles away during one's adolescent years, adults resolve to conquer them. Indeed, adults are in agreement with Camus (1942/1955), who contended that embracing the upward Sisyphean climb makes life worth living. The developmental transition, therefore, indicates a progression from the hedonistic avoidance of pain to the Sisyphean embracement of challenge. This finding suggests that the negative relationship between age and pleasure, that past researchers have established (Peterson et al., 2005), may be more strongly tied to "minimizing pain" rather than "maximizing pleasure" (p. 25).

**Conceptual to operational.** Although conceptual descriptions of the good life (the "What?") featured in the responses of participants of all three groups, young adults and adults demonstrated greater personal investment in approximating the idealized good life (the "How?"). In other words, in comparison to adolescents who tended to merely describe the good life, young adults and adults also articulated the means by which they are currently approximating their conceptualized good life; this difference is comparable to

the distinction between goals and goal strivings (Emmons, 2003). More specifically, older participants reported striving to become one's ideal self, pursue a pleasant life, nurture fulfilling relationships, work toward achievement, and create a better world. Indeed, it may be because of difficulties in thinking of ways to approximate one's desired ends that adolescents resort to fantastical means. This developmental progression indicates that adolescents consider the good life as a future possibility whereas young adults and adults consider the good life as an actualizing reality. Consider, for instance, one young woman's means to approximate her conceptualization of the good life as a life filled with excitement:

I cannot live without things that I look forward to. Even if nothing exists I try and make up something to look forward to. It could be small—like shopping with friends or big—like a brother's wedding. But I definitely need that sense of excitement that comes when you're looking forward to something in life.

In psychological research, the term operational translates to the quality of being observable and measurable (Kerlinger, 1983). Similarly, adolescents' conceptualizations of the good life were largely conceptual (not observable or measurable in real life) whereas young adults and adults' responses were more likely to be operational (observable and measurable in real life). One adolescent, for instance, described a better world as an end state, as presented below:

I worry a lot about poor small children. While walking to my school, I see so many children like one and a half-year olds roaming on the road as if their parents are not responsible. I would like to take plenty of children who are poor and make them happy.

On the other hand, one young woman described how she is attempting to approximate her conceptualization of a better world: *I want to serve the nation. So, I am volunteering for an organization against corruption.* Conversely, young adults and adults expressed distress when their attempts to approximate the good life were stagnated or hindered. As one woman wrote, *What upsets me about life is that I'm not doing half as much as I can to give back.* We reckon that the trial-and-error learning that results from attempts to operationalize the idealized life allows one to evaluate and reconceptualize the good life less fantastically and more realistically.

It transpires that the five developmental transitions that we have identified are neither independent nor incompatible; all permutations and combinations are possible. Conversely, the five developmental progressions may just be different interpretations of the same phenomenon, as is apparent in one boy's fantastical, extreme, ego-centric, hedonistic, and conceptual response, *I want to be carefree and lead a life with no obstacles.* A final noteworthy point about developmental progressions in good life conceptualizations is that, much like cross-cultural similarities in the five overarching constituents of the good life, there is a strong concurrence between the transitions identified in the present study and findings from other cultures (Armon & Dawson, 2003).

## Individual Differences

During the course of the analysis, we identified numerous patterns in the manner in which participants articulated their conceptualizations of the good life, which were not attributable to group differences. A systematic analysis of these patterns allowed us to identify four different types of individual differences, each of which is presented in the following sections.

**What is the good life and the bad life?** Participants differed individually in whether they conceptualized the good life as a life in which good is present (e.g., *health*) or bad is absent (e.g., *betrayal*) and the bad life as a life in which bad is present (e.g., *death*) or good is absent (e.g., *a best friend*). Furthermore, they also differed in what they specifically considered to be good and bad. For instance, while many young adults considered marriage to be good, one young man considered marriage to be bad. He, therefore, conceptualized the good life as a life in which he is *free from marriage, a popularly voted task*.

**Why is the good life “good” and the bad life “bad”?** Participants cited a good or bad present reality (lived experience) and a good or bad future possibility (yet-to-be-lived experience) as the reasons why a particular constituent is deemed good or bad. In other words, participants based their judgments about good and bad either on their experiences or their expectations. For instance, participants who considered “fulfilling relationships” to be an essential constituent of the good life either provided justifications that are rooted in present reality (e.g., *The times when we are able to wordlessly connect with certain people makes life worth living*) or a future possibility, as is apparent from the excerpt of one young woman’s response:

According to me, the loss of a loved one could upset me a lot. If there is any other problem, I have the confidence to face it and solve it, but if I am to lose my loved one, I’ll definitely breakdown and may not know what to do next.

**How can the good life be approximated and the bad life avoided?** We identified two distinct types of motivational orientations that participants adopted to bridge their present realities and future possibilities: approach versus avoidance (Emmons, 1991) and change versus maintenance (Seta & Seta, 2013). Approach is a motivational orientation toward good and avoidance is a motivational orientation away from bad. Maintenance is a motivational orientation to preserve the present and change is a motivational orientation to alter the present. Combinations of the two types of motivational orientations yield four distinct categories of motivation: maintenance-approach (e.g., *I want to stay healthy*), change-approach (e.g., *I want to join the army*), maintenance-avoidance (e.g., *I do not want to be unemployed*), change-avoidance (e.g., *I worry about losing my way*).

Each of the four aforementioned motivational orientations can, in turn, be combined with the two ways in which good (presence of good and absence of bad) and bad (presence of bad and absence of good) may be conceptualized, and the two reasons why a constituent may be considered good or bad (present reality and future possibility), thus yielding a comprehensive classification of individuals differences in motivational orientation, as presented in Table 3.

**Manifest threat.** Individual differences in manifest threat, embedded in participant descriptions of the various constituents of the good life, were identified and classified as threat-free, threat-contingent, or threat-confined (Winston, 2016), each of which is briefly described in the following section.

**Threat-free.** The presence of the constituent is good but its absence is not (reported as) bad. In other words, although the presence of the constituent contributes to the good life, its absence does not qualify as a constituent of the bad life (e.g., *Romance is missing from my life. It is not absolutely necessary, but it makes life more exciting than it already is.*).

**Threat-contingent.** The presence of the constituent is good and its absence is bad. In other words, the goodness of the presence of the constituent is contingent on the badness

Table 3  
*Individual Differences in Motivational Orientation*

| Present reality  | Future possibility | Orientation           | Characteristic responses                                                                                                                               |
|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Presence of good | Presence of good   | Maintenance-approach  | <i>I dream about spending the rest of my life with my boyfriend because he is the love of my life.</i>                                                 |
|                  | Absence of good    | Change-avoidance      | <i>I worry about losing my parents too soon.</i>                                                                                                       |
| Absence of bad   | Absence of bad     | Maintenance-approach  | <i>I want to remain a bachelor . . . I want freedom from marriage.</i>                                                                                 |
|                  | Presence of bad    | Change-avoidance      | <i>I worry about falling terribly sick. I am paranoid about cancer.</i>                                                                                |
| Absence of good  | Absence of good    | Maintenance-avoidance | <i>I worry about not being able to have children and dying alone.</i>                                                                                  |
|                  | Presence of good   | Change-approach       | <i>I wish for the ability to get excited about everything again. Many things that were once exciting have now lost their charm and I want it back.</i> |
| Presence of bad  | Presence of bad    | Maintenance-avoidance | <i>It upsets me that I will have to live with some bad decisions that I have made.</i>                                                                 |
|                  | Absence of bad     | Change-approach       | <i>I want my friends to stop spreading rumors about me.</i>                                                                                            |

of its absence (e.g., *I am quite dependent on my relationships. They give me maximum happiness and I cannot imagine life without them.*).

**Threat-confined.** The presence of the constituent is not (reported as) good but its absence is bad. These are constituents that individuals regard as something that they cannot live without (e.g., *Unless I know the purpose behind life, I find it meaningless to live.*). Participants considered these constituents to literally be a matter of life and death. As one girl wrote, *I wish to die before my mom, brothers, and friends because I cannot live without them.*

These findings resonate with Cantril's (1977) findings that, while some constituents featured in conceptualizations of both the good and the bad life, other constituents featured only in one of the two. It must be borne in mind, however, that these differences are limited to response styles (manifest or expressed threat) rather than actual experienced threat. In fact, participants may fail to focus on the absence of the constituent because its awareness is extremely threatening. As Eriksen and Lazarus (1998) have observed, "Less explicit in projective theory is the fact that what an individual *does not see* may represent important clues concerning the sources of threat to the individual" (p. 47).

## General Discussion

Universal similarities, developmental progressions, and individual differences in conceptualizations of the good life summarize the findings of the present study. Universal similarities in the constituents of the conceptualized good life are indicative of an essential human motivation to gratify one's needs. Maslow (1987), for instance, strongly endorsed the universality of human needs and contingent conceptualizations of the good life:

Another peculiar characteristic of the human organism when it is dominated by a certain need is that the whole philosophy of the future tends also to change. For our chronically and extremely hungry person, Utopia can be defined simply as a place where there is plenty of

food. He or she tends to think that, if only guaranteed food for the rest of life, he or she will be perfectly happy and will never want anything more. Life itself tends to be defined in terms of eating. Anything else will be defined as unimportant. (p. 59)

Accordingly, the five constituents of the good life that have emerged in the present study are rooted in universal human needs, such as the need for food, safety, love, and esteem, that are invariant across time and space. What may vary, however, is how each of these constituents is conceptualized. "Food," for instance, has a universal meaning (i.e., "appeaser of hunger;" Maslow, 1987, p. 118) as well as group-specific meanings (e.g., As a South Indian, I imagine rice and curry when I think of food) and person-specific meanings (e.g., I associate food with watching my favorite TV program). Similarly, although fulfilling relationships hint at the fundamental need for love and belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the specific relationships from which one derives love and belongingness vary across people of different cultures and different ages. For instance, dating and romantic relationships did not feature in the responses of our adolescent participants but did feature in the responses of their older counterparts. This suggests that cultural norms and practices interact with other demographic parameters such as age and gender in influencing how one conceptualizes the good life. For instance, young adults may be more willing to pursue (and more importantly, report) romantic relationships as a constituent of the good life, when compared with adolescents, because Indian society, in the recent past, has opened up to dating among college students; however, a large section of the society still frowns upon dating among school students. In fact, Varma and Mathur (2015) have reported that, when asked openly, 30% of Indian adolescents report being in a relationship; however, when asked "discreetly," 75% of Indian adolescents report being in a relationship (p. 25). These findings hint at the restrictive forces that confine one's conceptualizations and approximations of the good life. Taken together, cross-comparison of the findings of the present study with those sourced from other cultures indicates that although cultures may differ in the specific manner in which a constituent is conceptualized, the psychological process (e.g., the needs that motivate the pursuit of a particular constituent) that account for these good life conceptualizations are universal.

Similar to cross-cultural similarities in the overarching constituents of the good life, we also identified five overlapping developmental progressions which are largely in accordance with Armon and Dawson's (2003) model of value reasoning which they developed based on their work with American samples:

It begins in early childhood with an egocentric conception of the Good Life derived primarily from pleasure-seeking fantasy (e.g., "The Good Life is having my birthday party every day") and culminates with a complex conception of the good that encompasses complex criteria, including a preeminent societal dimension (. . . To be good, it must move the society forward in some way). (p. 283)

Piagetian models of cognitive development (Piaget, 1972) and Kohlbergian (Kohlberg, 1984) understandings of moral development suggest that the evolution of a mature and sophisticated conceptualization of the good life is contingent on cognitive development, especially formal operations, which is fundamental to the successful resolution of conflicting needs and wants and confrontation of the realities of existence (Armon & Dawson, 2003). Furthermore, the broader repertoire of experiences that adults possess allows them to conceptualize the good life in terms of that which is *actually* good rather

than that which *appears* to be good. Accordingly, Armon (1984) found that, at the lowest stages of values reasoning, “there is no distinction . . . between the ‘desired’ and the ‘desirable’ (that which is worthy of being desired)” (p. 43). Support for this contention also comes from research findings that suggest that age is correlated with accuracy in affective forecasting (Nielsen, Knutson, & Carstensen, 2008), which is defined as “predictions about . . . emotional reactions to future events” (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005, p. 131). Furthermore, the inverse relationship between age and the number of years that are yet to be lived does not afford older individuals the possibility of conceptualizing the good life as a fantastical future possibility; conceptualizations of the good life therefore ought to be realistic and readily-operational. Indirect support for this contention comes from findings that individuals, who have faced Near-Death Experiences, irrespective of age, make radical lifestyle changes with an intention to “really start living” or *live more fully* (Sartori, 2014).

In addition to cross-cultural similarities and developmental variations, we also identified individual differences in motivational orientations that extend existing literature. Researchers who study goals have found that individuals differ in how a goal is stated (e.g., approach vs. avoidant) and that these differences have differential implications for different groups of people (Emmons, 2003). For instance, studies have found that avoidant motivation is associated with lower levels of functioning when compared with approach motivation in individualistic cultures but not in collectivistic cultures (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001). Similarly, maintenance goals have been found to be associated with lower levels of functioning among young adults but not among older adults (Ebner et al., 2006). Past researchers have also identified overwhelmingly similar constituents of the good life that Emmons (2003) has aggregated into “a consensual taxonomy of life meaning” (p. 108) consisting of personal achievements, interpersonal relationships, self-transcendence, and spirituality. Our findings not only offer support to such distinctions in “what” constitutes the good life (“goal content,” Emmons, 2003, p. 110) and “how” the good life may be approximated (“goal orientation,” p. 115), but also extends existing literature by identifying further nuances and individual differences in conceptualizations of the good life as well as the reasons “why” (goal justification) individuals consider a particular constituent to be good or bad. The comprehensive model that we have developed, based on the findings of the present study, therefore, takes into account the “What?” (good vs. bad), the “Why?” (present reality vs. future possibility), and the “How?” (approach vs. avoidance and change vs. maintenance) of individuals’ conceptualizations of the good life. Finally, implicit to our findings on individual differences in responses styles, lies the answer to the question posed in the title of the manuscript, “Are conceptualizations of the good life and the bad life two sides of the same coin?” In the case of threat-contingent constituents, yes, conceptualizations of the good life and the bad life are mirror-images of each other; however, the same does not hold true for threat-free and threat-confined constituents.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the objectives of the present study was to qualitatively explore Indians’ conceptualizations of the good life and to compare and contrast our findings with those from studies conducted on sample from other cultures. However, because our sample consisted solely of English-speaking urban school and college students and adults, the findings are by no means representative of all Indians; indeed our sample is comparable to those from WEIRD cultures. As Tafarodi et al. (2012) have

contended, “studying university students to examine cultural diversity is a bit like exploring ethnic cuisine by dining at different McDonald’s outlets around the world.” Nevertheless, our findings inform us that, like the burgers being served at different McDonald’s outlets around the world, conceptualizations of the good life are both expectedly consistent as well as refreshingly unique. In a culture as diverse as India, there is always scope for researchers to explore, compare, and contrast good life conceptualizations across different subcultures.

Another limitation of the present study that can be addressed by future researchers is with respect to gender comparisons. Although past researchers have found no gender differences in good life conceptualizations (Tafarodi et al., 2012), and it is because of this that gender comparisons were not undertaken in the present study, we did find a few concerns that were unique to women (e.g., infertility) and men (e.g., excelling at sports); furthermore, some constituents were conceptualized differently by men and women (e.g., attractiveness entailed a muscular body for boys and men and a slim body for girls and women). Indeed, a complex research design, with key demographics as independent variables (e.g., Age [adolescents, adults]  $\times$  Culture [individualistic, collectivistic]  $\times$  Sex [male, female]) and good life conceptualizations as the dependent variable, will allow for the circumspect hypotheses generated in the present study to be empirically verified.

Another interesting line of research would be to study discrepancies between one’s real life and the idealized good life and its implications for psychological health. Lynch, La Guardia, and Ryan (2009), for instance, found that discrepancies between one’s real self and ideal self is negatively associated with well-being. The same, however, might not be true for discrepancies between the real life and the idealized life because ascribing value to certain “extrinsic goals,” such as physical appearance and money are not adaptive (Emmons, 2003, p. 113); however, as past findings indicate, good life conceptualizations may mediate the relationship between constituents of one’s real life and indicators of psychological health (Diener & Fujita, 1995). Future researchers can seek to clarify these ambivalences in literature.

## Conclusions and Implications

Psychological inquiry into people’s conceptualizations of the good life has primarily been pursued through quantitative routes. As a result, nuances have been overlooked or eliminated as “error variance in search of what is common to all . . . [but] true of no one in particular” (Josselson, 1995, p. 32). Our present study has been an attempt to identify “what is common to all” by preserving what is true of each respondent “in particular.” As our findings indicate, individual and group differences are not merely quantitative (e.g., importance ratings or frequency counts; Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013; Tafarodi et al., 2012), but also qualitative. The findings of the present study concur with past findings on cross-cultural similarities in what are considered to be the constituents of the good life, extend existing literature by explicating developmental progressions in how the good life is conceptualized, and systematize individual differences in good life conceptualizations within a framework of motivational orientation. The study also implicitly affirms the integration of humanistic and positive psychology’s traditions in understanding, articulating, and promoting the good life.

Life involves a constant and circular process of conceptualizing, approximating, evaluating, and reconceptualizing the good life; lived experiences help refine and consolidate one’s conceptualization of the good life. However, irrespective of whether an

individual is able to approximate and actualize one's conceptualized good life, as the participant-author of the epigraph has so insightfully surmised, an articulate awareness of one's idiosyncratically constructed conceptualization of the good life, in itself, paradoxically, makes life "99%" ideal.

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### Author Note

Christine N. Winston is a doctoral student at the Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai, India. Her doctoral research, grounded in Maslow's theory of human motivation, explores the role that needs play in individuals' conceptualizations of the good life. Her research interests include existential–humanistic perspectives on health and pathology, and psychometry.

Hemali Maher is a doctoral student at the Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai, India. She adopts a psychodynamic approach to study developmental patterns among young adults, such as identity processes, interpersonal dynamics, and attachment patterns.

Veena Easvaradoss is an associate professor and head of the Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai, India. Her areas of interest include developmental psychology, test construction and standardization, and formulation of evidence-based intervention programs.

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