Who Gets to Live the Good Life?

Master Narratives, Identity, and Well-Being within a Marginalizing Society

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Abstract

The question of what constitutes “the good life” is incomplete without also addressing the question of *who gets to live the good life*. Implicit in many discussions of the good life, particularly in American and Western European contexts, is that it is equally available to all members of society, and attainable via malleable dispositions (e.g., changing attitudes, self-relevant beliefs). In this way, the good life is experienced through a highly agentic process of self-discovery and environmental mastery. What is generally lacking in this work is a serious reckoning of how structural factors constrain access to unbounded agency, particularly for those individuals who are marginalized in society due to race, gender, sexuality, and other factors. Moreover, “the good life” fundamentally indexes individuals’ *well-being*, and thus any claims to the good life will depend on how well-being is defined. Throughout psychology well-being is most commonly defined in terms of positive subjective states (e.g., hedonia, eudaimonia) that again remove any consideration of external criteria or demands. In this paper, we put the preceding together by outlining how a master narrative perspective—which examines the culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors—brings attention to the structural constraints on well-being among individuals in marginalized positions in society. We also propose an alternative conceptualization of the good life, which includes the importance of interpersonal connection between those who share the experience of marginalization.

Keywords: *Good Life, Narrative Identity, Master Narratives, Culture, Well-Being*

The question of what constitutes “the good life” has been of great interest to psychologists and philosophers for many years. The central thrust of the current article is that such a question is incomplete without also addressing the questions of *who gets to live the good life* and *how the good life is defined*. Implicit in many discussions of the good life, particularly in the U.S. context, is that it is equally available to all members of society, and attainable via malleable dispositions (e.g., changing attitudes, self-relevant beliefs). In this way, the good life is experienced through a highly agentic process of self-discovery and environmental mastery. In this paper, we adopt a master narrative perspective, which involves understanding the broader cultural stories that facilitate and constrain peoples’ lives, to bring attention to the societal structures that limit access to mainstream notions of the good life among marginalized populations. Such an approach also creates new opportunities for alternative conceptualizations of the good life, which we argue are in great need. We first briefly discuss the good life and well-being, before introducing the master narrative framework and applying it to research on the good life.

The Good Life, Well-Being, and Psychology Psychologizing, as Usual

The construct of “the good life” has been used as a broad term to encompass nearly any aspect of positive human functioning. Indeed, the Call for Papers for the special issue defined the good life as, “basic need satisfaction, material and social capital, hedonic satisfaction, eudaimonic meaningfulness, moral virtues, wisdom, growth, and other qualities of human flourishing.” Similarly, Tiberius (2006) suggested that the good life, “seems to include moral and prudential value so that a person would not be said to be living a good life, no matter how psychologically happy she was, unless her life met a certain moral standard” (p. 494). Despite this broad framing of the good life, psychologists have primarily examined it in terms of individual *well-being*, thus blurring the definitional lines between the good life and well-being.

Importantly, psychologists tend to define well-being narrowly as one of two forms (DeYoung & Tiberius, 2021). *Hedonic well-being* focuses on subjective states of pleasure and positive emotions, and is frequently measured with scales assessing satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985) and positive and negative emotion (Watson, et al., 1988). In contrast, *eudaimonic well-being* corresponds to the realization of individuals’ potential and attainment of meaning, and is measured with scales pertaining to purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006), and personal growth (Jayawickreme et al., 2021), among others (see Ryff, 1995). In primarily U.S. contexts, eudaimonic well-being tends to be a particularly strong focus of research on narrative identity, which includes processes such as meaning-making, personal growth, and redemption (Adler et al., 2016; Dunlop, 2021; McLean, Syed et al., 2020).

Equating hedonism and eudaimonism with well-being, and well-being with the good life, means that the good life in psychology has largely been defined by these aspects of well-being (Oishi & Westgate, 2021), and has not fully realized the broad definitions of the good life described previously. Recognizing this limitation, Oishi and Westgate (2021) proposed an additional conception of the good life as *psychological richness*, defined as “a life characterized by a variety of interesting and perspective-changing experiences” (p. 1). This addition helps fill a gap in psychological conceptualizations of well-being by aligning with the “idealized desire theories” of well-being discussed in philosophy (Tiberius, 2006), but it nevertheless maintains the focus of the good life on the individual.

Sometimes well-being in psychology is implied, but not labeled as such. For example, personality trait research often includes “life outcomes” as a dependent variable, which includes a grab bag of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, physical health, positive relationships, occupational indicators, civic participation, and much more (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Soto, 2021). Other times this grab bag of constructs is referred to as “adjustment,” which is often a mix of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, psychopathological symptoms, and academic outcomes (e.g., Rivas-Drake et al. 2014). All of these indicators of life outcomes and adjustment could be reasonably thought of as markers of well-being, or the good life, as they correspond to positive conditions of one’s life. Indeed, Oishi and Westgate (2021) defined the good life as, “a life well lived from the perspective of the person living it, as opposed to a purely objectivist perspective” (p. 1), which clearly could be understood beyond the limited views of happiness, meaning, or richness.

What has differentiated research specifically on the good life from research that is arguably about the good life but not labeled as such, is that the former has devoted scant attention to what limits access to the good life. Although the roots of the phrase “the good life” are in the philosophy of well-being, within psychology it is primarily used within positive psychology, which is not exactly known for its attention to the barriers that people face in their lives or the conditions that might limit their ability to achieve happiness and meaning (Wong, 2011). Of course, that is not to say that there has been *no* attention to these issues at all. For example, the relation between income and happiness has been debated ad nauseam (see Tay et al., 2018). Additionally, whereas the Sustainable Happiness Model once suggested wide capacity for individuals to increase their happiness of their volition (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), following methodological and conceptual critiques (e.g., Brown & Rohrer, 2020), the authors have walked back their claims considerably and conceded that, “Happiness *can* be successfully pursued, but it is not ‘easy.’” (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2021, p. 153, emphasis in original).

, the attention to barriers to the good life in psychological research still has a decidedly individualistic flavor to it. For example, in presenting the Balanced Interactive Model of the Good Life, Wong (2011) argued strongly for the need for positive psychology to consider negative conditions and outcomes. The focus, however, remains on individual-level traits and adaptations (e.g., arrogance, despair), and how positive adaptive processes (e.g., via transformation or acceptance) can deliver individuals to the same ideal good life (e.g., happiness and meaning). Like psychology as a whole, a consideration of societal structures--beyond individual dispositions or immediate context--has been almost completely absent. As we describe subsequently, a structural-psychological perspective questions the very notion of the good life, and what such a life looks like for people occupying structurally marginalized positions in society.

Shifting Focus to a Structural-Psychological Perspective via Master Narratives

A structural-psychological perspective is one that prioritizes focus on societal systems of power, oppression, and privilege, while maintaining an emphasis on individual-level psychological phenomenon (Syed & McLean, 2021). This perspective moves beyond widespread attention to “context” in psychology, which tends to treat supra-individual factors (e.g.,

neighborhoods, racism) as distinct and separable from the individual, rather than these factors being embedded and evident in individual psychological phenomena (see Fish & Syed, 2018), as described in Syed and McLean (2021, p. 2):

...structural factors must not only be considered when examining individual psychological phenomena, but that human psychological phenomenon are fully intertwined with the structures, which can be “seen” even at the individual level. In other words, structural systems that uphold White supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and Christianity, to name a few, are not just “contexts” in which individuals develop, but rather are part of the fabric of their everyday lives.

Although there are many different models that can adopt a structural-psychological perspective (e.g., Fish et al., 2020; Rogers et al., in press), we have been particularly enamored with *master narratives*, which are culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (McLean & Syed, 2015). According to our master narrative framework, individuals’ *personal narratives*--their identities and representations of their lives--are constructed in relation to culturally available master narratives that provide templates for what it means to be a healthy, positive participant in a given society. These master narrative templates are certainly not neutral, but rather are imbued with social power and are a major engine for stability of cultural power dynamics. Master narratives are informative of how one ought to structure their lives, and reflect the default cultural model of personhood.

This emphasis on power dynamics means that individuals are constrained in their own development by these storied cultural expectations. Such constraint serves to keep people in line in order to maintain the status quo. However, we have argued that aligning with master narratives is usually not a conscious process. When individuals align with master narratives, they do not think they are taking the path of least resistance, preferring to think that they have the agency to develop their own stories with volition and choice. This is represented in the ways that narrative researchers have examined personal narratives and the good life, centering the idea that individuals can make sense of their past in ways that make them healthier by focusing on stories of personal growth, redemption, meaning, and integration, all of which are associated with well-being (Adler et al., 2016; McLean, Syed et al., 2020). In short, although it is not explicit, and perhaps not even intended, the message is often that the person is in charge of her own story and can construct it in a way that gets her to the good life. However, examining this research from a structural lens suggests another story: such narratives are not inherently related to well-being by virtue of their focus on growth or redemption; they represent culturally valued stories about how to be happy. Happiness may thus come from the sense of belonging, of fitting in, and of finding a valued place within the structure of society.

However, master narratives are not the only possibility for developing personal narratives. There are always some number of *alternative narratives*, stories that push back against the socially-sanctioned master narratives and provide alternative developmental templates. These narratives are most likely to be developed by those at the structural margins of society and who cannot fit into master narrative expectations by virtue of their life experiences, identity characteristics, or other rather unmalleable aspects of self, and who are more likely to have an active, conscious process of negotiation between the master and alternative narratives

(McLean et al., 2017). Thus, personal narratives do not develop only in relation to master narratives, but in relation to master and alternative narratives, although the relative balance of influence will vary across groups and individuals. As we discuss subsequently, thinking about the good life from a master narrative perspective raises new questions that have heretofore received minimal attention.

Master Narratives and The Good Life™

A master narrative perspective brings to light how cultural notions of the good life can be both facilitating and constraining. Conceptualization of the good life as some form of individual fulfillment--be it happiness, meaning, or richness--provides a clear signal that the route to the good life lies in dispositional factors that are free of context or structure. Yet there is increasing recognition that this type of account is incomplete. Indeed, there have been at least two previous applications of a master narrative perspective to understanding the good life, both of which provide a useful starting point for illustrating what can be achieved by adopting such an approach.

Bauer (2021) provided an in-depth conceptual analysis of the master narrative of living a good life via personal growth, focusing on the narrative of the *transformative self*, which he defined as “a growth-oriented personal identity” (p. 7) that seeks to cultivate the good life. In discussing marginalization, Bauer made a distinction between hard margins (i.e., those due to structures of power such as race and class) and soft margins (i.e., those due to feeling different from societal expectations, such as some artists and writers). He argued that access to the transformative self narrative is restricted for individuals at the hard margins, because society denies access to their ability to fully realize their growth potential. In contrast, those at the soft margins actively seek out the transformative self that is valued by society, but do not feel that the mainstream route is the path they want to follow. Thus, they realize the transformative self by constructing an alternative path.

Schwab (2020) conducted a qualitative study of emerging adults’ conception of the good life, with an emphasis on how they integrate their values and morals therein. Converging with existing approaches to the good life, Schwab found that participants emphasized subjective and idiosyncratic criteria for achieving the good life and strongly focused on themes consistent with happiness, meaning, and richness (as well as personal growth, connecting to Bauer (2021)). Schwab also found, however, that some participants emphasized interdependence and connection to others, including family, friends, and the world at large, criteria that have mostly been lacking from mainstream research on the good life (see also Booker et al., 2022; but see Cooper et al., 2005; Tafarodi et al., 2011; Twenge & King, 2005). Importantly, Schwab highlighted how elements of independence existed *within* the discussion of interdependence, a reminder of how the two are not easily separable (see Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2007 for an excellent discussion on this issue).

The master narrative of personal growth, central to much of Bauer’s and Schwab’s reasoning, is particularly interesting from a structural perspective, which emphasizes the value-laden messages in master narratives as well as their constraints. The narrative defined by Bauer and Schwab dictates that we are *supposed* to grow, and that growing is *good*. Moreover, Bauer

highlights how those who are marginalized face constraints on the ability to actually tell a story of growth, to change one's story of stagnation or negativity to the valued growth story, or to change one's life circumstances in ways that might promote growth. This means that there is a double-edged sword, in which people may understand that they should experience personal growth, but are unable to do so. Tragically, if they buy into this narrative, they may feel that they are at fault for their failure to construct such a story, as the agency to do so is supposed to lie with the individual.

Although both Bauer (2021) and Schwab (2020) provided informative analyses, they were limited in several important ways. First, both focused on understanding individuals' conceptions of the good life--what they believed made for a good life and what the cultural expectations are--without a strong consideration for how those conceptions could be constraining for *all* individuals as they pursued the good life. Bauer, in particular, highlights how the master narrative of personal growth can be constraining for those in the margins of society, but pays less attention to how it is also constraining for *those who do align with it*. This is a key component of the master narrative framework, and how master narratives restrict the agency of those who align with them. Understanding this part of the framework illuminates how systems of oppressive power impact everyone in them – obviously to different degrees and in different ways, but understanding this may inspire motivation to dismantle those systems.

Second, neither places a strong emphasis on how individuals draw from available alternative narratives to guide their lives. For Bauer (2021), those at the soft margins take an alternative path to personal growth, but doing so does not push back on the master narrative of personal growth and transformation itself; the endpoint still being happiness, psychological richness, and meaning. Additionally, Bauer describes how individuals from marginalized groups, those at the hard margins, have reduced access to the master narrative of personal growth for structural reasons, but not how the experience of being in lesser positions of power can create new alternative narratives that push back on the master narratives and *deviate* from cultural expectations. Schwab (2020) did not discuss alternative narratives at all. And yet, the concept of alternative narratives is core to the master narrative framework. Understanding 1) how aligning with master narratives maintains inequitable systems of power, and 2) how individuals resist or otherwise oppose mainstream expectations is critical for understanding how personal identities are constructed as part of a marginalizing society.

Finally, as Schwab (2020) noted, the participants “were relatively educated, affluent, and all White” (p. 116), so it was not possible to examine how individuals in structurally disadvantaged positions conceptualize and negotiate the good life. Although Bauer's (2021) analysis involved extensive discussion of marginalized people, the emphasis was on how they were unable to construct the mainstream master narrative of the transformative self rather than on the narratives that they *do* draw upon to guide their lives.

In sum, if we truly conceptualize the good life via personal growth as a master narrative, then it is essential to understand a) how that master narrative serves to maintain current power structures, b) how the master narrative can be constraining both for those who do not align with it *and* those who do, and c) what alternative narratives people draw upon to develop personal identities that do not prioritize personal growth. We elaborate on each of these arguments in the

following section to provide some initial evidence to suggest that the good life via personal connections to others and a sense of belonging might serve as a key alternative narrative.

Power and Constraint in Master Narratives

Two central components of the master narrative framework are attention to societal power and constraints on agency (McLean & Syed, 2015), so much so that failure to attend to these dynamics in an analysis of master narratives raises questions as to whether it is a master narrative analysis at all (Syed, 2016). That is, master narratives are not only about cultural stories or scripts that individuals draw from to guide their lives, which have long been studied (e.g., Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008), but also about how these stories serve the interests of those who hold societal power, and have the potential to be stifling for those who do not align with them *and* for those who do. These two components are deeply interconnected, but we will briefly discuss them, in turn, with respect to mainstream conceptualizations of the good life.

It is not surprising at all to us that research on the good life has heavily focused on happiness, meaning, and richness, all of which are about individual dispositions. Such an emphasis is well-aligned with the values of individualism and personal agency within U.S. culture, which is where most of the researchers and participants come from in this literature. Indeed, as we have highlighted in the past (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed, 2016; Syed et al., 2020), the master narrative of the American Dream communicates that success is achieved via hard work, determination, and resilience in the face of adversity. Not experiencing success within this master narrative is due to personal dispositions such as lack of effort, motivation, or intelligence (Bullock & Reppond, 2018). Although these individualistic beliefs are widespread, they do not square with the reality that success hinges heavily on connections, intergenerational wealth, and being a part of a group that has traditionally enjoyed--and set the terms of--success within a cultural context (i.e., White men in the U.S.). Similarly, social psychological work on the myth of racial progress has highlighted how Americans buying into this myth is associated with misperceptions of the degree of racial economic inequality and inaction around structural change that they believe will unfold naturally over time through individual effort (Kraus et al., 2019, 2021). Those who are in structurally privileged positions are motivated to maintain this narrative of individual effort, because it masks--by downplaying or even denying--the structural factors that restrict traditional success for those in marginalized positions, and it also promotes their own success. With this background in mind, it becomes clear how notions of the good life, especially defined in terms of personal growth, converge with master narratives that prioritize individualism over context and connection.

That master narratives can constrain the agency of both those who do not align *and* for those who do seems to be an oft-missed focus on the master narrative framework. When individuals' personal narratives align with the cultural master narratives, they do so largely unconsciously. This makes good sense, as exploring all possibilities for understanding one's identities would be emotionally and cognitively taxing, so society provides the "menu" of acceptable, mainstream options. This is how master narratives both keep society functioning and make cultural change difficult to enact (Kraus et al., 2021). Accordingly, we have argued that aligning oneself with master narratives reflects a lack of agency, as it consists of a largely unexamined, passive internalization of societal norms. This has a particularly ironic flavor in the

U.S. context because the master narrative is one that emphasizes personal choice and agency, and yet aligning with this narrative is a rather unagentic move. Although the process of internalization of master narratives is mostly unconscious, and society is structured in a way to facilitate the process for those in the majority, deviating from the master narrative in one's personal narratives can bring about some major tension.

Given the power and ubiquity of a particular narrative associated with the good life in the U.S.—redemption—we have been investigating the kinds of tensions and challenges that arise when people's experiences do not align with it. In a large-scale experimental vignette study, we found, not surprisingly, that participants liked stories of redeemed traumas of varying types (e.g., natural disaster, cancer diagnosis, sexual assault) better than un-redeemed stories (those with negative endings) (McLean, Delker et al., 2020). Notably, participants also evaluated the *storytellers* more positively when they redeemed their traumas, judging them to be more likeable and have more positive personality traits (e.g., less neurotic, more agreeable) than those who did not redeem their traumas.

However, even though the results were robust across multiple types of trauma, a disturbing finding concerned those stories about sexual violence (Delker et al., 2020). Even though stories and storytellers were judged more positively if the sexual violence story was redeemed compared to those that were not redeemed, redeemed stories and storytellers of sexual violence were judged less positively than those about other types of trauma (see related results by Jordan & Kouchaki, in press). That is, even when survivors of sexual assault told a story of strength and resilience, meeting the cultural demand for redemption, they were still judged as less likeable and less well-adjusted, than those who told a story of redemption from a cancer diagnosis or natural disaster.

There are several implications relevant to the current discussion. First, these results show the strong press for people to redeem their traumas to meet cultural expectations and to belong and be viewed as a valued member of the group. Second, these results highlight the ways in which particular people and stories are excluded from the mainstream cultural discourse. One implication of these results is that there are stories that may challenge the cultural status quo, but do not get enough airtime to do so. In the context of sexual assault, the negative evaluation of these storytellers provides a mechanism to avoid consideration of the systemic root causes of such violence, perpetuating a 'blame the victim' narrative and avoiding collective responsibility for systemic change. In a recent example, we can't help but ask, if these stories were heard, might there have been systemic change in the U.S.A. gymnastics organization in response to the Larry Nassar case? A case that showcased how the system (actually multiple systems, including the FBI, see Jenkins, 2021), enabled the perpetration of sexual violence.

As we have been arguing, when using a master narrative framework we can see that there is an exclusion and denial of particular kinds of stories, those that do not uphold the status quo, and those that challenge the idea of individual agency to lead the good life. Indeed, in our studies, survivors of sexual assault were doing what was expected--agentially telling a story of redemption--but that was not enough to get them towards some kind of good life that involves being accepted. Achieving the good life is not all in the hands of the storyteller.

In short, conceptualizations of the good life that are rooted in an individualistic and agentic master narrative are limited for both those who do and do not align with it. So, what are the alternative narratives of the good life? And is there a role for agency anywhere??

Connecting with Others: An Alternative Narrative for the Good Life

A critical feature of alternative narratives is that they are constructed in relation, often in opposition, to master narratives. They are direct responses to a cultural narrative that simply does not fit individuals' experiences and goals for their lives. Thus, whereas the master narrative of the good life is happiness, meaning, and richness derived from one's own pursuits, successes, and self-actualization, a major alternative narrative of the good life is conceptualizing that life as one that consists of meaningful connections to a group or groups, especially among individuals from marginalized groups (McLean et al., 2017). That group connection, then, serves as the foundation for how one's life is subjectively viewed as "good."

The idea that connecting to others serves a positive function vis-a-vis well-being is certainly nothing new. There is substantial evidence indicating that feeling a sense of belongingness in different contexts is associated with well-being. Social identity theory has highlighted how identifying with salient group membership, especially under conditions of threat, can bolster self-esteem (Hogg et al., 2017). Similarly, the whole premise of collective self-esteem is that group memberships can be a source of well-being (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Ryff's (1995) conceptualization of psychological well-being consists of six dimensions, one of which is positive relationships with others. Both agency *and* communion have long been investigated as fundamental sources of motivation in personality psychology (Frimer et al., 2011), and the core components of self-determination theory consists of autonomy, competence, *and* relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Similarly, establishing both individuality *and* connectedness have been identified as central developmental tasks of adolescence (e.g., Allen et al., 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985) and more generally central to all aspects of development (Tamis LeMonda et al., 2007). Indeed, Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of development emphasizes intimate relationships as a route to positive functioning, followed by a focus on generativity--giving back to others in meaningful ways, which has been picked up by narrative researchers seeking to understand how achieving the good life is linked to developing a redemptive narrative (McAdams, 2006). Thus, there is really no question at all that connection and relationships have been identified as crucial to well-being among numerous distinct research traditions.¹

So, if the importance of connection is well-trod ground, what exactly are we proposing? Our key point of departure from nearly all of the aforementioned approaches is that there is no analysis or consideration of societal power. Connection with others largely serves as a means for developing a positive self-evaluation, within the standard psychological focus on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and there is scant attention paid to how the connection becomes both necessary in the context of marginalization, and can be thought of as a form of well-being itself.

¹ One research tradition that we do not see as part of this general approach is that which focuses on independent/interdependent selves and individualistic/collectivistic cultures. These models are quite different because they take a mutually exclusive approach to individuals' orientations, rather than acknowledging that both individuality and relatedness coexist in all peoples and cultures.

That is, when identifying with a marginalized group, connection to others who share one's experience of marginalization is not just a route to the good life as typically assessed, but rather *is the way* the good life is understood.

Our argument here thus leads to a different understanding of what connection is and how it functions. If the marginalizing societal structures restrict access to mainstream conceptions of the good life, as nicely described by Bauer (2021), those who deviate from that master narrative are at risk for isolation, as they will not feel like they fit in or belong with mainstream culture. The solution for isolation is *connection*, but not a forced connection with a group perpetrating the marginalizing force, but rather a communal connection with others who share one's experiences. Accordingly, those who deviate from the master narrative of the good life have the opportunity to deviate into communion with an existing group, thereby achieving that belonging that was initially denied.

This idea is admittedly speculative at this point, but there are some data that provide initial support. Studies of master narrative deviation--stories of when people do not feel that they fit in with societal expectations--have highlighted how such deviations are accompanied by finding a sense of belonging with others who have similarly deviated. This has been found in the context of immigration to the U.S. (Svensson & Syed, 2019; Syed et al., 2021) and transnormativity (Bradford & Syed, 2019). More generally, resisting master narratives through the elaboration of alternative narratives is reflective of greater identity work and is more common among those in structurally marginalized positions (McLean et al., 2017; McLean, Boggs et al., 2020; see also Rogers, 2020a). So, when people feel they do not align with mainstream expectations, they are more likely to try to do something about it and find others who are doing the same.

Some initial findings also suggest that deviating from master narratives without having a group to commune with can pose challenges to identity development. Our research on this topic has focused on immigrant identities in Europe, for which there are generally not well-defined ethnic/racial groups that provide a sense of belonging as there are in the U.S. (Juang et al., 2021; Juggert et al., 2021). For example, a comparative study of ethnic identity among immigrants in Sweden and the U.S. showed stark differences in how master narrative deviations played out; whereas the U.S. participants found belonging in their deviations, this was quite uncommon for Swedish participants. Rather, deviations and lack of belonging tend to lead to confusion and lack of clarity on how to integrate their race/ethnicity within a society that does not use racial/ethnic group categories (see also Gyberg et al., 2018). Similarly, a study of Turkish German young adults highlighted how the only model of ethnicity available in German culture is one of ethnically White-German homogeneity, creating major threats to developing a sense of belonging (Moffit et al., 2018). These findings are based on small qualitative studies, so the evidence base is early and descriptive, but nevertheless they point to our core argument: that the good life among structurally marginalized groups is likely to come about via connection with others.

There are a variety of reasons for why this would be the case. Identifying with marginalized groups can bring understanding of the self and sense of meaning, and can lead to feelings of the good life lived, even in the absence of correlations with traditional measures of

hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. This is because identifying with a marginalized group is a double-edge sword: it provides a context for belonging and meaning, but is also associated with heightened awareness of structural racism and personal discrimination (Syed, 2015).

Accordingly, identifying with marginalized groups consists of both benefits and liabilities with respect to traditional conceptualizations of well-being. Moreover, identifying with a marginalized group is associated with engaging in collective action that seeks to improve the conditions of that group (Fish et al., 2021; French et al., 2020; Pender et al., 2019). This link indicates that there is a conscious understanding that *things are not ok*, and thus it is reasonable that we might observe lower self-ratings of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being among these populations.

Additionally, this observation highlights the core site of individual agency within the master narrative model of the good life: finding belonging with a communal group and working to improve the situation of that group requires agency and can foster a sense of personal power. Indeed, engaging in resistance against master narratives can be a source of liberation and personal growth (Rogers, 2020a, 2020b; Toolis & Hammack, 2015), and in some cases could be seen as an imperative in order to live one's life to the fullest (French et al., 2020; Rogers & Way, 2018). This alternative route to the good life—or more specifically, alternative criteria for what constitutes a good life—is not recognized as such by mainstream society (including psychological researchers) because it does not fit the master narrative of the good life. So, the status quo is maintained with the good life only available to those with structural privilege when we define the good life in the way that privileged sorts do. Expanding our conceptualization of the good life within a structural-psychological framework opens up new possibilities for how a wider array of people find their way in the world.

Conclusion

Conceptualizations of the good life in psychology have over-emphasized the individual, agentic criteria of happiness, meaning, and richness, ignoring structural barriers to achieving the good life, the harm that such a master narrative perpetuates, and alternative conceptualizations of the good life. That is, it is not that the individualistic master narrative of the good life is unavailable to those in structurally marginalized positions, because that suggests that such individuals lack living in their full humanity. Rather, the process of achieving the good life is necessarily different and more complex for such populations. Reading the existing body of work on the good life in psychology gives the impression that marginalized individuals cannot live a full life, cannot live the good life. But maybe the real problem is how the good life is defined, and the unacknowledged benefits of maintaining that definition for those who perpetuate it?

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