Visualizing the Good Life: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

Gregory Bonn · Romin W. Tafarodi

Abstract   How can we visualize similarity and difference across cultural conceptions of a good or worthy life? To examine the internal structure of such conceptions, we asked 584 university students from mainland China and Canada to indicate the relative importance of 30 elements or criteria commonly used in defining a good life. Statistical comparison and multidimensional scaling were used to reveal the form and extent of group commonalities and differences on the criteria and their meaning in relation to underlying dimensions of individual and cultural variation. The results suggested that South Asian Canadians were more oriented towards moral, spiritual, and beneficent concerns in envisioning a good life than were the mainland Chinese and Western European Canadians. The Chinese, for their part, tended to emphasize practical, prudential, and socially defined goods. This contrasted with the Western European Canadians, who showed more preference for personally defined, internal goods. East Asian Canadians fell between Chinese and Western European Canadians in overall orientation, reflecting their biculturality. All groups placed heavy emphasis on close and enduring relationships.

Keywords   Good life · Culture · India · China · Multidimensional scaling · Relationships

1 Introduction

How do people understand what makes for a satisfactory or worthwhile life? When assessing the quality of their lives, do individuals refer largely to cultural standards? Across societies, are there universal dimensions which can help us understand these standards?

G. Bonn (✉)
Monash University Sunway Campus, Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences Jalan Lagoon Selatan, Bandar Sunway, 46150 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: gregory.bonn@monash.edu

G. Bonn · R. W. Tafarodi
University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

A substantial amount of scholarship has argued for the importance of ecological and cultural context, including economic structure (Inglehart, 2006; Weber, 1905/2002), the availability of important resources (Erikson 1950), and social surroundings (Bronfenbrenner 1986), in the shaping of core beliefs and priorities regarding the meaning and value of life. Separate evidence also suggests the existence of fundamental human motives and needs (e.g., Buss 2008; Deci and Ryan 2000) that provide shape, direction, and structure to the aspirations of humans everywhere. Arguably, all humans share essential wants which must be reconciled with the exigencies of their surroundings (e.g., Schwartz 2006).

With more than 7 billion people in the world, a vast range of subjectively-held ideal life narratives exist within and across societies. Even so, if universal needs play a part in the imagining of a good life, there should be structural regularities that underlie how people everywhere evaluate their lives. Every society promotes certain conceptions of a worthy life which reflect its unique mix of social, historical, political, and economic traditions. Assuming that cultures endure, at least in part, because they facilitate the satisfaction of basic needs (e.g., Buss 2008; Erikson 1950), such conceptions should, at some level, be consistent with core motives that are common to all societies.

It follows, then, that an individual's beliefs about the good life stem largely from the shared narratives that circulate within their milieu. These beliefs, however, must be organized around the fulfillment of fundamental human needs. With this in mind, we designed the current study to look at the structure of cultural visions of the good life through the use of multidimensional unfolding (Borg and Groenen 1997; Busing et al. 2005). This technique allowed us to visually represent the conceptual relations among specific criteria for a worthy life as judged by participants of several cultural backgrounds. The resulting visual "map" of criteria, it was hoped, would provide insight into aspects of these visions that are transcultural (i.e., potential universals) while also revealing the distinctive commitments of each group.

1.1 Beliefs Versus Determinants

It is important to note here that this study only looked at *beliefs* about a good life, not the relationship of those beliefs to life satisfaction. Although one might expect that individual beliefs and expectations about what makes up a good life would determine the evaluation and interpretation of experience, the evidence on that point is less then clear. Gilbert (2007; Wilson and Gilbert 2005), for example, cites extensive evidence that individuals are fairly incompetent at accurately predicting their future happiness. So, rather than examining what *actually* makes people happy, we focused here on cultural conceptions of a good life, or what people *think* will make their lives worthwhile. Although narratives and expectations influence peoples' experience in many ways (e.g., Cozolino 2006; McAdams 2001), such influence is by no means direct or straightforward (Gilbert 2007).

1.2 Assessing Beliefs

To examine cultural orientations to the good life, we used a future projection task adapted from Tafarodi et al. (2012) and the list of specific good life criteria derived from that study. In Tafarodi et al.'s original study, participants first imagined themselves at 85 years old and then described in their own words how they would judge the quality of the life they had lived. Based upon responses given by participants in Canada, China, India, and Japan, 30 criteria or categories for a good or worthy life were derived from the ∼2,400 statements that participants provided (see Table 1). This set of 30 criteria was derived to encompass

the full range of beliefs about the good life held by the various cultural groups examined. Taking up this list of criteria, our goal in the present study was to better understand the nature of the 30 criteria. Could they be interpreted in relation to underlying dimensions of meaning and experience? Or are they of more limited cultural and theoretical importance? That is, we were interested in the degree to which the beliefs represented by these criteria might have universal import in their organization and structure, as well as in how they might vary within and between cultural groups.

1.3 Looking at the Present Through the Future

Borrowing from Tafarodi et al. (2012), this study used a future projection task to encourage students to imagine their lives as a completed whole. This was done not because we were

Table 1 Indicator categories derived from responses in Canada, China, India, and Japan

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

Column values represent the overall percentage of participants listing one or more criteria in that specific category. (from Tafarodi et al. 2012)

interested in how students believe 85-year-olds think or how they themselves would think at 85, but because we wanted to elicit broader, more inclusive ways of thinking about good life narratives. In our pilot research, we found that asking students to project themselves into the distant future resulted in a more holistic, decontextualized, and thematic representation of beliefs as opposed to the more constrained responses that are invited by questions that address only the present state-of-affairs (see Trope and Liberman 2010). Although our approach might raise concerns about whether the responses reflect participants' true beliefs or some simulation of how they believe a person in their mid-80s ought to think, there are a number of reasons to believe that asking students about a future scenario is a legitimate method for accessing cultural commitments about the good life.

Gilbert (2007) has written extensively about how current feelings and past experience become conflated with projections of future happiness. Evidence for this can be seen in recent imaging studies that point to a great deal of overlap between brain regions activated when thinking about the past versus predicting the future (Arzy et al. 2009; Schacter et al. 2008). Other evidence (e.g., Trope and Liberman 2010) suggests that as projections reach farther into the future, they tend to become progressively less detailed, focusing instead on broad features or "gist" elements that are constructively created from combinations of memory fragments (Schacter and Addis 2007; Schacter et al. 2008) and current feelings (Wilson and Gilbert 2005). Important for our purposes, such projections also reflect the influence of cultural scripts or "memes" (e.g., Blackmore 2000)—the concepts, customs, and expectations continually reproduced through day-to-day cultural practices and activities. In sum, mental projections into the future, considered as simulations of possible events, seem to combine cultural narrative-based expectations, consolidated fragments of past experience, and current emotional and attitudinal states. Responses to our questions about what makes for a good life, then, can be taken as no more or less than indicators of participants' cultural beliefs and commitments, a distillation of their current conceptions of what makes life worthwhile. As our aim here was cultural portraiture and not response-based prediction of future action, thought, and emotion, we deemed this method to be appropriate.

2 Unfolding Preferences: Bringing the Underlying Structure of a Good Life into Focus

Given our goal of understanding the relations among the 30 derived criteria for a good life, we chose to use multidimensional unfolding (Borg and Groenen 1997; Busing et al. 2005). This is a multidimensional scaling technique specifically designed to allow for the visualization of meaningful structures or patterns within preference data. Unfolding transforms lists of preferences from multiple participants into a spatial map illustrating conceptual proximity. In this case, we used it to create a map of how the different criteria for a good life relate to each other when multiple lists of preferences are combined together into a single matrix. Unfolding places criteria that tend to be preferred by the same people close together and those that tend not to be preferred by the same people far apart. Unfolding locates respondents within this conceptual space, based upon individual preferences. Individuals have, in unfolding terms, an "ideal point," positioning them closest to the criteria that they value most and farthest from the criteria they least prefer. Ideal points for individuals and groups with similar preferences tend to cluster together on the map. These relationships—how various preferences and individual response patterns hang together within the mathematically-derived unfolding space—were used to examine how beliefs about a satisfactory life overlap and diverge within and between several cultural groups.

3 Groups Studied

This study used samples collected in mainland China (PRC) and Canada. A great deal of evidence exists for differing beliefs and practices in these two nations (e.g., Kitayama and Markus 2003; Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002; Tafarodi et al. 2012). By including these two divergent groups, we invited responses that would cover a wider array of approaches to defining a good life, thereby increasing dispersion and the likelihood of an interpretable dimensional structure. We also chose to divide the Canadian sample into three ethnic subgroups: East Asian, South Asian, and Western European Anglophone Canadian. This was done in recognition of the possibility that self-identified non-Western-European Canadians would retain some beliefs and commitments that are characteristic of the heritage culture they identify with, providing insight into those beliefs and their variation within the borders of a multicultural society. Our analysis, then, compared four groups of participants: mainland *Chinese*, and Canadians of *East Asian* ethnicity (Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese), *South Asian* ethnicity (Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis), and *Western European, English-speaking* Canadians.

3.1 East Asian and South Asian Ethnocultural Differences

We chose to divide the Asian Canadian participants into South Asian and East Asian subgroups for several reasons. Although often lumped together as broadly "collectivist" or "Eastern" (e.g., Henrich et al. 2010), the two regions represented have very different histories and religious and philosophical traditions (Nakamura 1997). In general, South Asian society is highly variegated and far from monocultural. It is characterized by a complex diversity, reflecting its rich mix of ethnic and linguistic groups (Palkivala 2002). Many observers, however, have pointed to an underlying spirituality as the defining characteristic of the region. Being the birthplace of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, as well as home to a large number of Muslims (Vyas 1992), the region suggests an underlying inclusiveness and the widespread recognition that there are different truths for different peoples (Jahanbegloo 2008).

East Asian culture, by comparison, is broadly characterized as more secular, being rooted in a practical Confucian tradition (Yao 2000) that emphasizes the importance of effort, hard work, and role fulfillment (Gunde 2002). Strict discipline and conformity to social norms are emphasized from a young age for most Chinese (Miller et al. 1996; Tobin et al. 2009). Similarly, a high degree of concern with reputation, personal connections, and social standing is characteristic of Chinese and other East Asians (Gold et al. 2002; Lim and Bowers 1991). In view of these cultural characteristics and the earlier findings of Tafarodi et al. (2012), we felt that distinguishing between East Asian and South Asian participants was warranted for purposes of structural analysis.

4 Predictions

Although we could not predict the shape or layout of the unfolding results, earlier cross-cultural findings (e.g., Gunde 2002; Henrich et al. 2010) led us to predict that the ideal points for the prototypical "Eastern" and "Western" groups (Chinese and Western European Canadians) would reflect a more sociocentric or interdependent orientation on the part of the Chinese and a more independent orientation on the part of Western European Canadians (Markus and Kitayama 2003). Given their cultural hybridity, we expected

East Asian Canadians to fall somewhere in between mainland Chinese and European Canadians in their preferences. Also, drawing from Tafarodi et al.'s (2012) earlier comparative research on beliefs about the good life, we made the criterion-specific predictions that Western European and South Asian Canadians would be more concerned with *having a positive impact*, Chinese would be more interested in *having a successful career* and *having many friends*, and Western European Canadians would place higher emphasis on *having pleasurable or enjoyable experiences* and *wealth*.

5 Method

5.1 Participants

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

5.2 Procedure

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

After reading and signing appropriate consent forms, participants were instructed to imagine themselves at 85 years old, near the end of their life. Thinking in terms of a long life already lived, they were asked to read over the list of 30 good life criteria taken from the initial four-nation study. For each criterion, they were asked to indicate its personal importance in defining the life they had lived as satisfactory, good, or worthwhile. Ratings were made on a 1 (*not important at all*) to 9 (*of the utmost importance*) scale. After assigning numeric ratings to each criterion, participants were asked to break ratings ties by ranking the tied criteria against each other, allowing us to construct a complete set of 30 rank-ordered criteria for each participant. Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed. The entire procedure, including informed consent and debriefing, took less than 45 min.

6 Results

6.1 Ratings of Good Life Criteria

Data collected for this study included both absolute 1–9 ratings of all criteria and their 1–30 rankings according to relative preference. The analyses began with a univariate and

multivariate breakdown of relationships among the ratings. This was followed by a multidimensional unfolding analysis of the ranking data, providing a more holistic method of visualizing the structure of the responses.

6.2 Standardization of Ratings

All ratings were standardized within-subject for two reasons. First, the usefulness of the ratings was primarily relative rather than absolute. Presumably, individuals would find most of the criteria desirable to some degree (they were all generated by multiple participants in the original study as important indicators of a good life). Practically, however, natural limits of time, energy, and resources require all individuals to prioritize some goods above others (see Schwartz 2006; Schwartz and Sagiv 1995). Thus, an absolute numeric rating was not as important for our purposes as the importance of each criterion relative to the others. The second justification for within-subject standardization of ratings was the considerable evidence for sizable cross-cultural and inter-individual differences in scale response tendencies (e.g., Fischer 2004; Lee and Jones 2002; Yeh et al. 1998). Standardizing ratings within-subject preserves the relative magnitude of the ratings while controlling for differences between groups and individuals in overall scale use tendencies.

Standardized ratings or z scores for the 30 criteria averaged across groups are shown in overall order of preference in Table 2. It is noteworthy that all four groups assigned greatest relative importance to the same five criteria, suggesting high levels of agreement as to the most important or central criteria for determining a good life. These criteria, in order of importance, were *having a happy family, having a good marriage or romantic partnership, good relations with family, raising children well,* and *having close friends.*

6.3 Multivariate Analyses

To examine whether the groups varied significantly in their overall conception of a good life (as would be expected given the deliberate inclusion of dissimilar cultural groups), we conducted a MANOVA with cultural group, gender, and their interaction as predictors. Results revealed only a significant main effect for cultural group, Wilks' lambda = .41, $F(3, 579) = 6.34$, $p < .0001$, indicating the presence of significant differences across two or more of the groups for one or more of the criteria. Roy-Bargmann step-down analysis (Stevens 1996; Tabachnick and Fidell 2007) was then performed to identify the pattern of univariate differences that accounted for the overall multivariate effect. ANOVAs revealed significant group differences for 12 of the 30 criteria (see Table 3). To identify all independent contributions by individual criteria, each of these 12 criteria was inserted into an ANCOVA that included any higher-priority criteria (according to original ANOVA F values) as covariates. Using a Bonferroni-corrected alpha level of .002, this step-down procedure revealed that 11 of the criteria contributed *independently* and significantly to the overall multivariate group effect. The adjusted group means for these criteria are given in Table 4. The pattern of group differences for each is described below.

Travel was rated significantly higher by Western European Canadians than all other groups and lower by Chinese than all other groups. *Status* was rated higher by East Asian Canadians and Chinese than by Western European Canadians and South Asian Canadians. *Being remembered* was rated higher by all groups than by Chinese, and higher by South Asian Canadians than East Asian Canadians. *Having many friends* was rated higher by Chinese than by all others. *Having a positive impact* was rated higher by Western European

Table 2 Overall rated importance of good life criteria

Criterion	Mean z score
Happy family	.80
Good marriage	.72
Good relationships with family	.69
Raise children well	.64
Close friends	.61
Well-being	.52
Pleasurable experiences	.45
Fulfilling career	.43
Living a moral life	.35
Wisdom	.34
Meeting potential	.27
Overcoming challenges	.23
Having a positive impact	.20
Successful career	.20
Being respected	.15
Hobbies	.12
Successful children	.09
Financial security	.06
Educational attainment	−.01
Independence	−.03
Achieving great things	−.10
Being remembered	−.25
Having many friends	−.36
Travel	−.38
Involved in community	−.73
Wealth	−.74
Harmony with nature or god	−.91
Power	−.95
Religion	−1.14
Status	−1.34

Z scores were calculated within-subject. Criteria appear in descending order of relative importance

Canadians than by East Asian Canadians. *Power* was rated higher by East Asian Canadians than by Western European Canadians and South Asian Canadians. *Well-being* was rated higher by Chinese than by South Asian Canadians and East Asian Canadians. *Meeting potential* was rated higher by Western European Canadians and East Asian Canadians than by Chinese. *Wealth* was rated higher by all groups than by Chinese. *Doing great things* was rated higher by Western European Canadians than by Chinese. Finally, *religion* was rated higher by South Asian Canadians than by Western European Canadians.

The manner in which specific combinations of criteria for a good life are endorsed differently across cultural groups lies at the heart of this study. Differences represent divergences in the idealized vision of a good life that is reproduced within cultures. The predictable ways that these patterns differ, in turn, can provide a window onto more fundamental features that underlie these visions. Examining the pattern of group differences

Table 3 MANOVA results showing adjusted mean ratings for cultural groups controlling for gender

	EC	SA	AC	Chinese
Remembered	−.085[b]	.147[b]	−.195[b]	−.896[a]
Status	−1.647[a]	−1.626[a]	−1.120[b]	−.876[b]
Travel	−.089[b]	−.609[a]	−.371[b]	−1.068[a]
Many friends	−.572[a]	−.588[a]	−.328[a]	.188[b]
Power	−1.198[a]	−1.265[a]	−.683[b]	−.723[b]
Well-being	.600[ab]	.335[a]	.460[a]	.894[b]
Positive impact	.421[b]	.465[b]	.018[a]	.018[a]
Met potential	.423[b]	.264[ab]	.268[b]	−.090[a]
Greatness	.072[b]	.029[b]	−.047[b]	−.517[a]
Wealth	−.843[ab]	−.834[ab]	−.471[b]	−1.043[a]
Religion	−1.347[a]	−.446[b]	−1.216[a]	−1.130[ab]
Family relationships	.573[a]	.627[ab]	.714[ab]	.897[b]

Values represent within-subject-standardized z scores. *EC* Western European Canadian, *SA* South Asian Canadian, *AC* East Asian Canadian, *Chinese* mainland Chinese

Tukey HSD ($p < .001$) results indicated by superscripts: a is significantly smaller than b; ab does not differ significantly from other groups

Table 4 ANCOVA results showing adjusted mean ratings for cultural groups controlling for gender and higher-priority group differences

	EC	SA	AC	Chinese
Remembered	−.100[a,b]	.147[a]	−.186[b]	−.946[c]
Status	−1.687[b]	−1.723[b]	−1.131[a]	−.746[a]
Travel	−.088[a]	−.587[b]	−.347[b]	−1.084[c]
Many friends	−.568[b]	−.565[b]	−.334[b]	.244[a]
Power	−1.108[b]	−1.253[b]	−.740[a]	−.859[a,b]
Well-being	.602[a,b]	.344[b]	.469[b]	.831[a]
Positive impact	.332[a]	.322[a,b]	.068[b]	.221[a,b]
Met potential	.387[a]	.230[a,b]	.303[a]	−.050[b]
Greatness	.156[a]	.035[a,b]	−.087[a,b]	−.370[b]
Wealth	−.655[a]	−.628[a]	−.589[a]	−1.358[b]
Religion	−1.361[b]	−.693[a]	−1.117[a,b]	−1.075[a,b]

Values represent within-subject-standardized z scores. *EC* Western European Canadian, *SA* South Asian Canadian, *AC* East Asian Canadian, *Chinese* mainland Chinese

Tukey HSD ($p < .001$) indicated by superscripts: a is significantly larger than b, and b is significantly larger than c. Values marked a,b do not differ significantly from a or b, but are significantly larger than c

just described with this in mind, it is possible to describe what is distinctive about each group's vision of a good life. European Canadians, in particular, appear to desire to live up to their potential by accomplishing noteworthy things, having a positive impact on their surroundings, and being able to travel the world. East Asian Canadians also place a high value on living up to their potential, but this is reflected more in the attainment of status and power. Mainland Chinese also hold status in high regard, but associate it with a broad social

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

It is important when discussing structural patterns to bear in mind that there was considerable similarity in the preferences expressed by all four groups. In the following section, multidimensional scaling analysis provides a means of visualizing the high degree of similarity as well as the differences among the groups. It can also reveal underlying dimensions along which cultural visions of a good life vary or mirror each other.

7 Multidimensional Scaling Analysis: Unfolding Preference Rankings

Preference rankings were analyzed using multidimensional unfolding. Specifically, we used PREFSCAL (Busing et al. 2005), which implements a penalized majorization algorithm (assigning increasing distance penalties as proximities approach zero) to avoid the collapsed or trivial solutions that sometimes occur in unfolding analyses. This method has proven to be especially effective at avoiding trivial solutions while retaining a high degree of goodness-of-fit to the data (Borg and Groenen 2005). The two-dimensional spatial arrangement of data seen in Fig. 1 remained consistent throughout analyses starting from multiple different initial configurations and transformation types, supporting the sufficiency of this basic dimensional and spatial arrangement. Stress was minimized ($\sigma_n = .112$, $\sigma_1 = .348$) using a classical Spearman scaling solution and ordinal transformation. The spatial map of 30 criteria and group ideal points shown in Fig. 1 reflects results from this model.

Referring to the unfolding map (Fig. 1), ideal points for Chinese, South Asian Canadian, Western European Canadian, and East Asian Canadian samples can be seen towards the center, both combined and by gender. Overall, ideal point placements show clear separation by cultural group, suggesting meaningful differences among groups in their priorities regarding how a good or satisfying life is understood. The relative proximity of all ideal points to the center of the map, however, suggests a good degree of overall similarity in their rankings.

7.1 Clustering of Criteria

In looking at the distribution of criteria across the horizontal and vertical dimensions, several meaningful clusters can be identified (Fig. 2). Towards the center of the map, a number of criteria having to do with close relationships can be found: *having a happy family, having close friends, close relationships with family members*, and *close friendships*. All fall in close proximity to each other as well as to the group ideal points. The central positioning of these items as well as their proximity to the group ideal points indicates that they were seen as high in importance by all groups. Towards the bottom of the map, a further distance away from the ideal points, are criteria such as *power, status, wealth,* and *many friends*. A bit further up and closer to the ideal points is another group of criteria relating to career, including criteria such as *successful career, fulfilling career, educational attainment*, and *having successful children*. Towards the top of the map, we see several additional clusters of criteria. Moving from left to right there are clusters containing the items *travelling, hobbies*, and *independence*, then *overcoming challenges, meeting potential*, and *gaining wisdom*, and finally, *leading a moral life*, and *having a positive impact*. Finally, on the far right of the map *religion* and *achieving harmony with nature or god* fall close together in conceptual space.
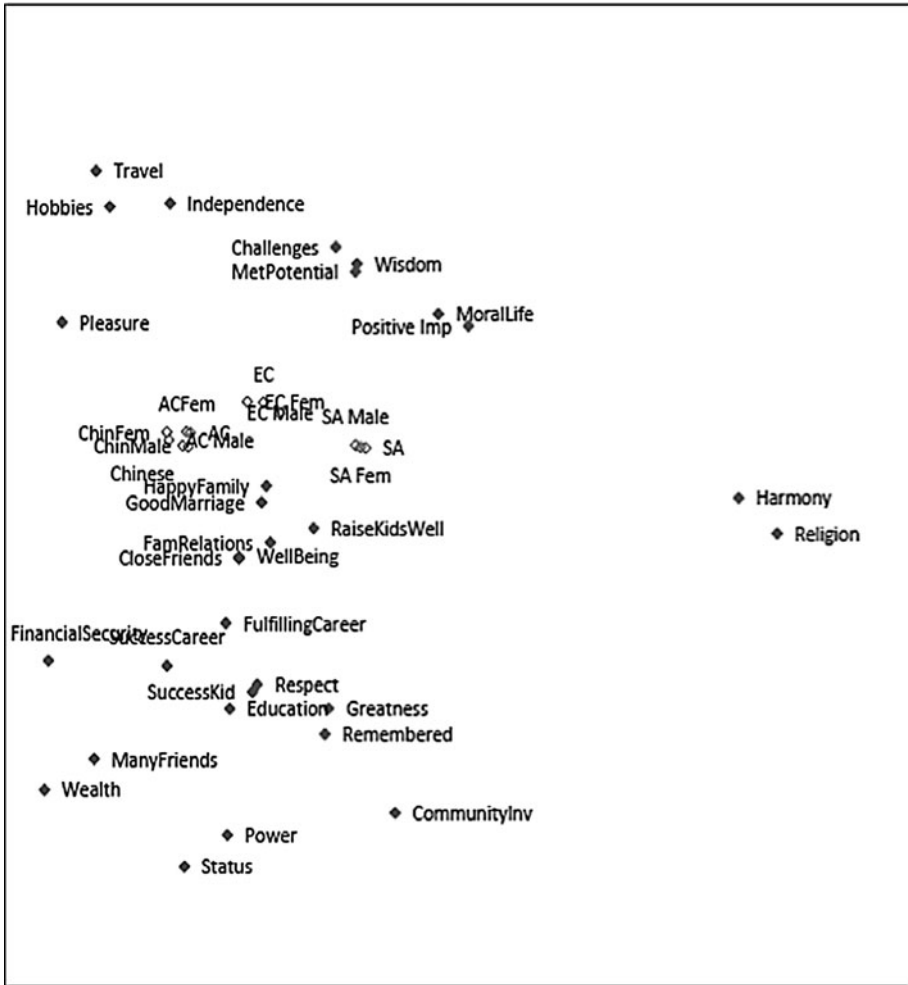
Fig. 1 Unfolding map illustrating criteria for a good life and group ideal points. *AC* Asian Canadian, *EC* European Canadian, *SA* South Asian Canadian, *Chinese* Chinese

7.2 Interpreting the Dimensions

The overall structure or dimensionality of the map is a matter of speculative appraisal and thus open to multiple interpretations. As a basis for future inferences and predictions, we offer one tentative interpretation here (see Fig. 3). The vertical axis appears to represent the *focus* of participant concerns, ranging from external, objective, and social goods such as power, status, and community involvement at the bottom to subjective, personal, and internal goods such as independence, overcoming challenges, and attaining wisdom at the top. The horizontal axis appears to represent different orientations towards *activity*, ranging from practical or prudential activities such as pursuing pleasure, travel, financial security, and wealth (on the left side of the figure) to activities of a moral, spiritual, or beneficent
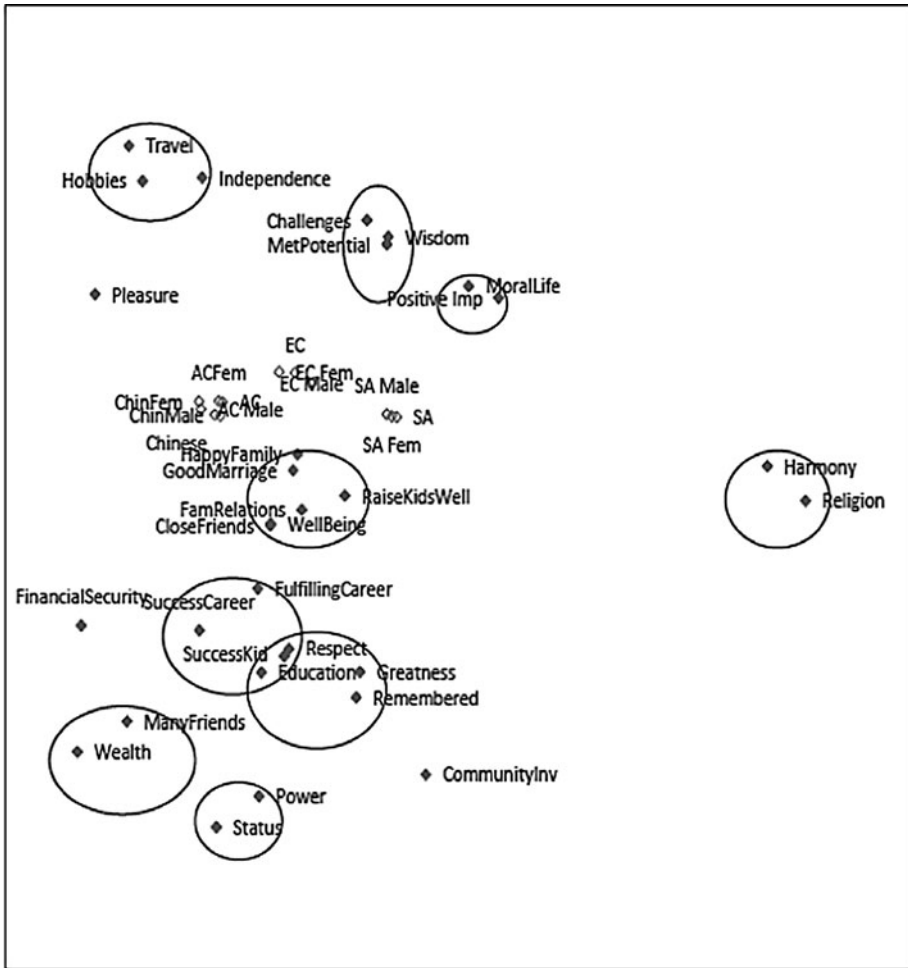
Fig. 2 Unfolding map with conceptual cluster. *AC* Asian Canadian, *EC* European Canadian, *SA* South Asian Canadian, *Chinese* Chinese

nature such as achieving harmony with God/nature, religious devotion, living a moral life, and having a positive impact (on the right side of the figure).

Considering the placement of cultural group ideal points in relation to these conceptual dimensions, some interesting observations can be made. Specifically, all groups gravitate towards the highly-ranked relationship criteria, but with regard to the dimensions outlined, they show a marked spread between them. Chinese and East Asian Canadians are similar in leaning towards the practical-prudential side of the activity dimension. South Asian Canadians, in contrast, lean more towards the right side of this same dimension, showing greater concern with spirituality and beneficence. Western European Canadians, while falling in between South and East Asian Canadians on the activity dimension, lean more than the other groups toward the subjective-internal side of the focus dimension.
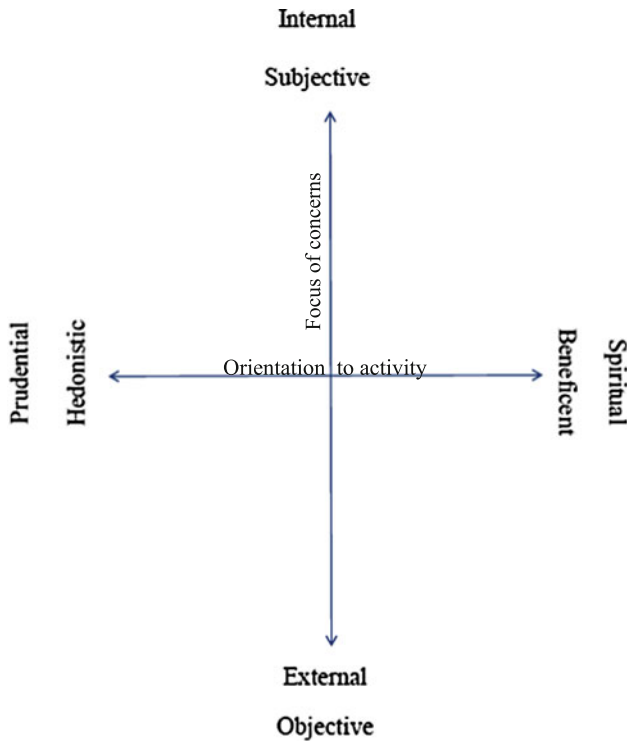
Fig. 3 Theoretical interpretation of dimensions

8 Discussion

The results of this study lend some support to the often discussed contrast between Eastern and Western cultures (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002) in that Western European Canadian participants were more personal, or internally oriented, in the *focus* of their concerns than were their Chinese, East Asian, and South Asian peers. Also, as predicted, East Asian Canadians fell in between Western European Canadians and Mainland Chinese in their orientation toward the criteria, suggesting a degree of cultural blending. Furthermore, consistent with our earlier findings (Tafarodi et al. 2012), Western European and South Asian Canadians were more concerned with *having a positive impact,* and Chinese with *having many friends* and *status.* On the other hand, the predicted differences with regard to *wealth* and *having pleasurable or enjoyable experiences* were not supported by the data.

Based on these findings, a picture begins to emerge of mainland Chinese participants being more oriented towards social capital and prudential concerns than are Canadians of Western European and South Asian descent. Generally, these findings are consistent with the traditional Confucian emphasis on social standing and security (Nakamura 1997; Yao 2000), and the emphasis on *guanxi* or "social connections" (e.g., Gold et al. 2002; Gunde 2002). The general orientation of the Chinese and East Asian samples also reflects the heavy emphasis on prudent future planning, or "future orientation," that is often attributed to Chinese and other Confucian cultures (e.g., Hofstede 2001). The strong pull of South Asian participants towards the dimensional pole reflecting spiritual, moral, and beneficent

concerns, on the other hand, is consistent with the portrayal of South Asian culture (e.g., Palkivala 2002; Vyas 1992) as emphasizing spirituality, tolerance, and inclusiveness.

The more general, exploratory, purpose of this study was to examine the internal relationships among commonly cited criteria for a good life, with an eye to revealing any interpretable structure in their arrangement. Such structure, it was hoped, would provide clues to the basic forces that shape and direct cultural conceptions of what makes for a worthy or satisfying life. Systematic variation in how different societies define a good life could indirectly point to aspects of culture such as socialization practices, traditions, means of production, and institutional forms that shape conceptions of what is differentially valued in life as well as hint at tendencies that lead people everywhere to look for satisfaction in similar things. Considered in this light, the study was informative. The analysis revealed a striking degree of commonality in how the different groups envision a good life while also revealing broad dimensions along which they vary.

9 The Structure of a Good Life: Relationships, Focus of Concern, and Orientation to Activity

The results permit two main inferences regarding the structure of beliefs about a good life among the cultural groups examined. First, being connected to other people in desirable ways is of primary importance for all the groups. Second, visions of a good life were shown to vary along two major dimensions, the first being the focus of concerns, and the second the orientation to activity. With regard to the first, concerns in life appear to be structured along an axis that contrasts internal, highly subjective, and personal goods from those that are external, objective, and social in nature. With regard to the second, activities that are oriented towards helping others and spiritual and moral pursuits are contrasted with those that involve the pursuit of material comfort, security, and practical ends.

9.1 Universality of Relations

Perhaps most striking and telling about these results was the degree of similarity or consistency across groups in their preference for criteria pertaining to close and enduring relationships such as *having close friends, having a good marriage or romantic partnership* and *having a happy family*. Each of these criteria was rated highly by all groups, suggesting a level of universality in the perception that communion, in the form of close connections to others, is key to the constitution of a satisfying, good, or worthy life.

Interestingly, this claim converges with a number of different theoretical conceptions of a good or fulfilling life (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000; Erikson 1950; Ryff and Singer 1998). It should be remembered, however, that the present results represent only what people *believe*, or at least claim to believe, about what makes for a good life. They do not speak directly to what actually makes people happy or brings about satisfaction in life. Thus, the present findings should not be taken as revealing the determinants of human happiness. Our only purpose was to better understand people's *beliefs* in this regard, and how those beliefs are shaped by culture.

The results do provide compelling evidence that close and enduring relationships are considered central to life satisfaction by all four groups studied. Some might argue that this is indirect evidence that need for companionship is a biologically-controlled imperative (e.g., Bakan 1966; Bowlby 1980; Main 1999). Although these data alone do not warrant such a conclusion, they do fall in line with what such a theoretical stance would predict. If being connected to others is indeed a universal need, then enduring cultures can be

expected to promote and guide the satisfaction of that need through the social reproduction of beliefs and commitments. Consistent with this, every group studied here viewed close and enduring relationships as central to their vision of a good life.

9.2 Separation of Groups

Beyond the similarity across cultures in their preference for relationship-oriented criteria, there were also significant differences among groups. These differences are evident in the relative dispersion of ethnic group ideal points across the two dimensions of the unfolding map. A group's ideal position on the map can be conceived of as its orientation to defining a good life. Does the group emphasize ends that are immediate, pleasurable, or practical in nature? Does it concern itself mostly with things that others can see and appreciate? Does it focus on material welfare, comfort, and security? Or moral, and perhaps spiritual, concerns? The Chinese, the findings suggest, are invested more than the other groups in security, wealth, and social success. This defines a particular kind of ambition. South Asian Canadians, on the other hand, appear to lean more towards goods that are less concrete and practical, and defined more for their moral significance. Western European Canadians appear as more oriented than the other groups to internally calibrated goods, suggesting that the private concerns of the self are more important for them.

The overall similarity in position between the Mainland Chinese and East Asian Canadian participants is also noteworthy. Participants who identified themselves as East Asian Canadian were quite similar to Chinese participants in the positioning of their ideal points. They appeared more similar to Chinese than to other Canadian groups in their valuative priorities. This finding specifically highlights the diversity in conceptions of the good life that exist within Canada's multicultural liberal democracy, illustrating that the priorities expressed by any individual or group are not simply reflections of some dominant and nationally binding master narrative. Rather, the priorities that an individual expresses will more closely reflect the local stories and conversations that she is immersed in on a day-to-day basis and which likely differ significantly across ethnocultural communities living within the same pluralistic society. The people that one interacts with regularly, such as parents, peers, co-workers, and neighbors, are likely to have a much stronger influence on how one interprets one's own life than does any broad national or "Western" narrative (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1986; Harris 1998). (This is one important reason why studies on this topic should include non-university populations, a desideratum that should be realized in future studies.)

The criteria on which East Asian Canadians differed significantly from the Chinese were *being remembered, meeting potential,* and *travel*—all very typical "Canadian" or "North American" ideals. Also, East Asian Canadians, though significantly different than the Chinese in their preference for these criteria, fell between the Chinese and Western European Canadians in how highly they rated them, suggesting perhaps a shift away from what might be assumed to be the traditional East Asian commitments of their parents. Quite possibly, there are generational shifts occurring within all the cultural groups examined, whether toward some future multicultural center or toward distinct constellations of priorities yet to be seen.

Arnett (2002) has suggested that higher education may exert a homogenizing effect where, by virtue of greater exposure to shared global knowledge and popular culture, university-educated and other knowledge-advantaged individuals will tend to be highly similar across societies. This suggests that there would be greater separation in beliefs about the good life between samples of less-educated individuals from the societies represented here. Similarly, those with more life experience, who have lived in the world

longer than the average university student, may formulate the good life in different ways. A wider and more inclusive sampling of different age groups and social and educational backgrounds would be needed to examine this. Future studies should also look at conceptions of a good life in African and South American nations as well as developed and less-developed nations in other regions, to get a better sense of indigenous cultural understandings of the good life worldwide. In any case, the pace and power of globalization suggests that the various cultural narratives that define people's priorities are changing everywhere. The present data, due to their cross-sectional nature and sampling limitations, can only hint statically at existing variation and how it might be evolving.

10 Future Directions

To summarize, this study provides some insight into the cultural patterning of conceptions of a good life. The findings suggest that beliefs about what makes up an ideal life are closely connected to the form and quality of social relationships everywhere. Beyond this commonality, however, there is evidence for considerable cultural variation. This variation, the findings suggest, can be organized along two dimensional axes: one which we provisionally interpreted as relating to the *focus* of concerns (i.e., tending towards inner/personal versus socially defined goods) and the other reflecting orientation towards *activity* (i.e., practical or prudential activities versus moral/spiritual and beneficent ones). The position that individuals occupy between the poles of these dimensions can be assumed to depend on both personal characteristics and the affordances, beliefs, and practices emphasized in their cultural surroundings.

To what degree do the cultural orientations revealed in this study actually influence a person's experience of specific situations and events? If society teaches the individual to believe that a good life depends upon one set of criteria as opposed to another, say practical concerns over moral ones, do such beliefs direct attention and guide decisions in the flow of actual life events? Research on life stories (e.g., McAdams 2001) and therapeutic process (Cozolino 2006) suggest that they do. In a forthcoming study, we used narrative methods to begin exploring this connection.

Finally, the classificatory significance of the separation of South Asian Canadian and Chinese participants on the *activity* dimension deserves some mention. These two groups diverged most clearly in their ratings of *status* and *power* (more important for the Chinese), and *having a positive impact* and *religion* (more important for South Asian Canadians). Minimally, this pattern underscores the importance of distinguishing between ethnocultural groups that have at times been conflated within a cruder "Asian" category in the context of East–West comparisons. The present findings suggest that such conflation leads to considerable loss of information and potentially misleading characterizations of both South Asian and Chinese cultural orientations.

References

Arnett, J. J. (2002). The psychology of globalization. *American Psychologist, 57*, 774–783.
Arzy, S., Collette, S., Ionta, S., Fornari, E., & Blanke, O. (2009). Subjective mental time line: The functional architecture of projecting the self to past and future. *Cognitive Neuroscience, 30*, 2009–2017.

Bakan, D. (1966). *The duality of human existence: Isolation and communion in western man*. Boston: Beacon.

Blackmore, S. (2000). *The meme machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Borg, I., & Groenen, P. J. F. (1997). *Modern multidimensional scaling theory*. New York: Springer.

Borg, I., & Groenen, P. J. F. (2005). *Modern multidimensional scaling theory and applications*. New York: Springer.

Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss. vol 3: Loss*. New York: Basic Books.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology, 21*, 723–742.

Busing, F. M. T. A., Groenen, P. J. F., & Heiser, W. J. (2005). Avoiding degeneracy in multidimensional unfolding by penalizing on the coefficient of variation. *Psychometrika, 70*, 49–76.

Buss, D. M. (2008). *Evolutionary psychology: The new science of the mind*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Cozolino, L. (2006). *The neuroscience of human relationships: Attachment and the developing social brain*. New York: Norton.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 4*, 227–268.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.

Fischer, R. (2004). Standardization to account for cross-cultural response bias: A classification of score adjustment procedures and review of research in JCCP. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 35*, 263–282.

Gilbert, D. (2007). *Stumbling on happiness*. London: Harpercollins.

Gold, T., Guthrie, D., & Wank, D. (2002). *Social connections in China: Institutions, culture and the changing nature of guanxi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gunde, R. (2002). *Culture and customs of China*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Harris, J. R. (1998). *The nurture assumption*. New York: Touchstone.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 33*, 61–135.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Inglehart, R. (2006). Mapping global values. *Comparative Sociology, 5*, 115–136.

Jahanbegloo, R. (2008). *The spirit of India*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Kitayama, S., & Markus, H. (2003). The pursuit of happiness and the realization of sympathy: Cultural patterns of self, social relations, and well-being. In E. Diener & E. M. Suh (Eds.), *Culture and subjective well-being* (pp. 113–161). Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Lee, J. W., & Jones, P. S. (2002). Cultural differences in response to a Likert scale. *Research in Nursing and Health, 25*, 295–306.

Lim, T. S., & Bowers, J. W. (1991). Facework: solidarity, approbation, and tact. *Human Communication Research, 17*, 415–450.

Main, M. (1999). Epilogue: Attachment theory: Eighteen points with suggestions for future studies. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment theory: Research and clinical applications* (pp. 845–857). New York: Guilford Press.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224–253.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Culture, self, and the reality of the social. *Psychological Inquiry, 14*, 277–283.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 100–122.

Miller, P. J., Fung, H., & Mintz, J. (1996). Self-construction through narrative practices: A Chinese and American comparison of early socialization. *Ethos, 24*, 237–280.

Nakamura, H. (1997). *Ways of thinking of eastern peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan revised (ed)*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Nisbett, R. E., & Norenzayan, A. (2002). Culture and cognition. In D. L. Medina (Ed.), *Stevens handbook of experimental psychology*. Wiley Online. doi: 10.1002/0471214426.

Palkivala, N. (2002). *We, the people*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers and Distributors.

Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. (1998). The contours of positive human health. *Psychological Inquiry, 9*, 1–28.

Schacter, D. L., & Addis, D. R. (2007). The cognitive neuroscience of constructive memory: Remembering the past and imagining the future. *Philosophical Transcripts of the Royal Society of London, B, Biological Sciences, 362*, 773–786.

Schacter, D. L., Addis, D. R., & Buckner, R. L. (2008). Episodic simulation of future events: Concepts, data, and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science, 1124*, 39–60.

Schwartz, S. H. (2006). A theory of cultural value orientations: Explication and applications. *Comparative Sociology, 5*, 137–182.

Schwartz, S. H., & Sagiv, L. (1995). Identifying culture-specifics in the content and structure of values. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 26*, 92–116.

Stevens, J. P. (1996). *Applied multivariate statistics for the social sciences*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2007). *Using multivariate statistics* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Tafarodi, R. W., Bonn, G., Liang, H., Takai, J., Moriizumi, S., Belhekar, V., et al. (2012). What makes for a good life? A four-nation study. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 13*, 783–800.

Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.

Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review, 117*, 440–463.

Vyas, R. N. (1992). *Nature of Indian culture*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Weber, M. (2002). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. P. Baehr & G. C. Wells, Trans. London: Penguin. (Original work published 1905).

Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2005). Affective forecasting: Knowing what to want. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 14*, 131–134.

Yao, X. (2000). *An introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yeh, L. L., Kim, K. O., Chompreeda, P., Rimkeeree, H., Yau, N. J. N., & Lundahl, D. S. (1998). Comparison in use of the 9-point hedonic scale between Americans, Chinese, Koreans, and Thai. *Food Quality and Preference, 9*, 416–419.