# Eastern and Western Perspectives on Positive Psychology

## *How "ME + WE = US" Might Bridge the Gap*

### Contributions From Phil McKnight Included

## A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Positive psychology scholars aim to define specific strengths and highlight the many paths that lead to better lives (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As Western civilization and European events and values shaped the field of psychology as we know it today in the United States, it is not surprising that the origins of positive psychology have focused more on the values and experiences of Westerners. Constructs such as hope, optimism, and personal self-efficacy, among others, are particularly valued in these cultures and have been prominent throughout Western history. Increasingly, however, scholars are taking the broader historical and cultural contexts into account to understand strengths and the practices associated with living well (see, e.g., Leong & Wong, 2003; Schimmel, 2000; Sue & Constantine, 2003). Today, the previously neglected wisdoms of the Eastern traditions are being consulted in addition to those originating in the West, with the goal of adding different viewpoints about human strengths.

"A good fortune may forebode a bad luck, which may in turn disguise a good fortune." This Chinese proverb exemplifies the Eastern perspective that the world and its inhabitants are in a perpetual state of flux. Thus, just as surely as good times occur, so, too, will bad times visit us. This expectation of and desire for balance distinguishes Easterners' views of optimal functioning from the more linear path taken by Westerners to resolve problems and monitor progress. Ever adaptive and mindful, Easterners move with the cycle of life until the change process becomes natural and enlightenment (i.e., being able to see things clearly for what they are) is achieved. While Westerners might search for rewards in the physical plane, Easterners seek to transcend the human plane and rise to the spiritual one.

In this chapter, we discuss and contrast both Western and Eastern historical and philosophical traditions that demonstrate how these different groups characterize important strengths and life outcomes. Next, we discuss some of the inherent and fundamental differences between Eastern and Western value systems, thought processes, and life outcomes sought. We also articulate the idea of the "good life" from both perspectives and discuss the associated strengths that assist each group in attaining positive life outcomes. We then delve into a discussion of some specific concepts that are deemed to be necessary qualities for achieving the "good life" in each group. It is important to note that what is viewed as the "good life" may be different in each cultural group. Though we will not always enclose this term in quotation marks as we do here, please note that it is always culturally bound. In closing we talk about the ME perspective and the WE perspective and give our thoughts on trying to see things from more than one perspective.

## HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

To summarize thousands of years of Western and Eastern ideology and traditions is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, we highlight the basic tenets of three influential Western traditions: (1) **Athenian**, (2) **Judeo-Christian**, and (3) **Islam**, as well as four influential Eastern disciplines: (1) **Confucianism**, (2) **Taoism** (these two traditions are generally associated with China), (3) **Buddhism** (associated with Japan), and (4) **Hinduism** (rooted in traditions of Southeast Asia). Within both Western and Eastern historical contexts, the concept of the "good life" has existed for many centuries. While Western cultures emphasize optimal functioning as it occurs intrapsychically, Eastern cultures hold that an optimal life experience is a spiritual journey involving others and resulting in transcendence and enlightenment. The Eastern search for spiritual transcendence parallels the Westerner's hopeful pursuits for a better life on Earth.
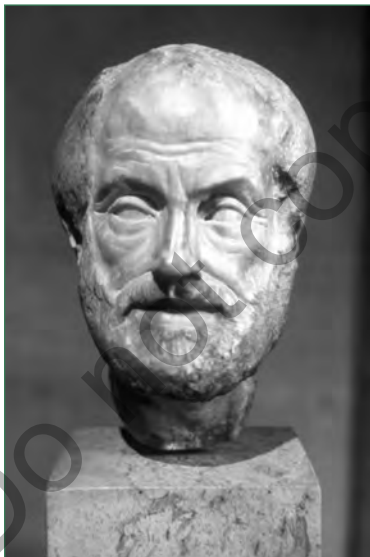


Aristotle
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## WESTERN INFLUENCES: ATHENIAN, JUDEO-CHRISTIAN, AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

### Athenian Views

Discussion of virtue and human strength is something on which both Plato and Aristotle focused heavily in their teachings in Ancient Greece. Aristotle, after expanding on Plato's ideas regarding virtue, detailed 11 moral virtues: *courage, moderation, generosity, munificence* (this relates to money spending at an appropriate level), *magnificence* (described as "greatness of soul"), *even temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wit* (describing an ability to laugh and have fun at an appropriate level), *justice,* and *friendship* (Solomon,

2006). In addition to these moral virtues, Aristotle described intellectual virtues (mainly associated with ideas regarding wisdom) and believed that "strength of character, as inculcated by the political community, would lead to enduring human excellence" (Solomon, 2006, p. 9).

Aristotle and Plato also emphasized the influence the political community, termed *polis,* has on the development and maintenance of these virtues (Euben, Wallach, & Ober, 1994; Solomon, 2006). Aristotle discussed this community as being a necessity in helping the average individual to self-actualize with regard to virtue; he stated it was only within a life of order and sanction that one could rise above hedonistic desire and become truly virtuous (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Solomon, 2006). In this view, people with good human virtue create such a community and then can provide a good model for others so that the masses also develop such human excellence. In addition, Aristotle believed that government should be charged with the development of virtue in a particular society via early education (i.e., in childhood) and training (Solomon, 2006).

## Judeo-Christianity

In thinking about virtue in general, the religious teachings of Judaism and Christianity often come directly to mind. The Bible contains discussions of virtues in many chapters and verses. In the Old Testament, the virtues of *faith, hope,* and *charity* are highlighted and encouraged and were later discussed as part of the "Seven Heavenly Virtues" by Thomas Aquinas (Williams & Houck, 1982). According to historians, Aquinas lists these virtues as *fortitude* (courage), *justice, temperance, wisdom* (these four are often called the cardinal virtues; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), *faith, hope,* and *charity* (Williams & Houck, 1982). Other scholars cite the Ten Commandments given by Moses in the Old Testament as directives toward cultivating certain strengths within the Jewish tradition. Peterson and Seligman (2004) interpret the acts that the commandments prohibit as falling under the category of particular cardinal virtues: "Justice is implied in prohibitions against murder, theft, and lying; temperance in those against adultery and covetousness; and transcendence generally within the divine origin of the commands" (p. 48).

Other mentions are made of various gifts and strengths throughout the New Testament. For example, the Book of Romans describes the "gifts" that are valued by God and includes strengths such as leadership, faith, mercy, love, joy, hope, patience, hospitality, and others (12:3–21). In addition, the Book of Proverbs has many affirmations of specific virtuous behaviors (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the prologue of this book of the Bible, the following words are given as the purpose and theme of Proverbs:

1 *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:*

2 *for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;*

3 *for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;*

4 *for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young-*

5 *let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance-*

6 *for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.*

7 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

(Proverbs 1: 1–7)

These words caution followers to live virtuous lives, giving particular weight to the virtue of wisdom. Finally, the Beatitudes discussed in the Book of Matthew give a series of virtuous traits (e.g., meekness, being a "peacemaker," mercy, righteousness, etc.) that are said to be pleasing to God (Matthew 5: 1–11).

The Talmud also provides instructions about living a virtuous life. In the Pirke Avot, or *Ethics of the Fathers*, directives are given on how to live life as an ethical follower of Judaism (N. Mendel, personal communication, February 3, 2010). The lessons here include being a hospitable host, particularly to the poor, being fair in decision-making and judgments, and seeking peace in everyday life (Bokser, 1989). In addition, the Talmud states, "You shall administer truth, justice and peace within your gates" (Zech 8:16), showing similar value to other religious traditions for these specific virtues (Bokser, 1989).

## Islam

Though we have added Islam to the "Western" heading in this section as is commonly done in texts that discuss both Western and Eastern religions, it is important to note that scholars disagree as to whether Islam should be considered a Western or an Eastern religion (S. Lloyd-Moffet, personal communication, November 21, 2013). Islam is practiced by both Western and Eastern individuals and groups, and thus its virtues and practices may be influenced by more than one context.

Islam incorporates many virtues recognizable in other philosophical traditions and categorizes them as moral obligations. Among others, *gratitude* (e.g., to Allah for His benevolence), *love* (of Allah because of His forgiveness), *kindness* (especially toward parents), *justice* (emphasizing fraternity and equality of all), and *courage* (acts of bravery) are valued (Farah, 1968). In addition, there is a strong component of looking out for one's brother, particularly if one has more than one needs. This emphasis is especially directed toward the wealthy in terms of their support of the poor as "[the wealthy] are obligated . . . to aid the poor as a duty, not 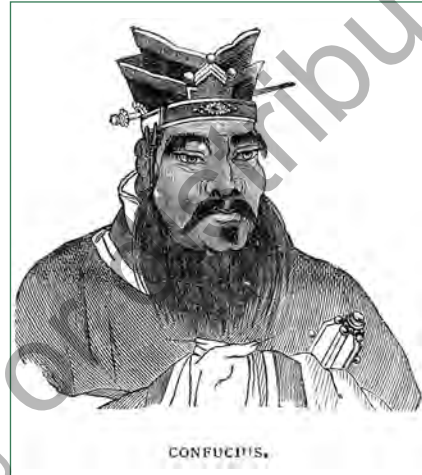a privilege" (Farah, 1968, p. 127). Giving to the poor is a requirement in the Islamic faith reflected in the third pillar, *zakat* (alms), and it is something that is to be done secretly as opposed to directly if possible so that the giver maintains his or her humility and the recipient is not embarrassed by having to accept the gift (Ahmed, 1999). Abiding by these moral obligations and pillars assists the faithful in pleasing Allah in this tradition.

Allah

*Source:* Nevit Dilmen / CC BY-SA 3.0

## EASTERN INFLUENCES: CONFUCIANISM, TAOISM, BUDDHISM, AND HINDUISM

### Confucianism

Confucius, or the Sage, as he is sometimes called, held that leadership and education are central to morality. Born during a time when his Chinese homeland was fraught with strife, Confucius emphasized morality as a potential cure for the evils of that time (Soothill, 1968), and the tenets of Confucianism are laden with quotations that encourage looking out for others. In fact, one of Confucius's most famous sayings is a precursor of the Golden Rule and can be translated as, "You would like others to do for you what you would indeed like for yourself" (Ross, 2003; *Analects* 6:28). In some ways, these teachings are parallel to thoughts put forth by Aristotle and Plato regarding the responsibility of leaders to take *charge* of the group, though there is less emphasis in Western writings on the collectivist ideal of taking *care* of others in the group.

The attainment of virtue is at the core of Confucian teachings. The five virtues deemed central to living a

Confucius

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moral existence are *jen* (humanity, the virtue most exalted by Confucius and said to encompass the other four virtues); *yi* (duty to treat others well); *li* (etiquette and sensitivity for others' feelings); *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (truthfulness). Confucian followers must strive to make wise decisions based on these five virtues; this continual striving leads the Confucian follower to enlightenment, or the good life.

### Taoism

Ancient Taoist beliefs are difficult to discuss with Western audiences partly because of the untranslatable nature of some key concepts in the tradition of Taoism. Lao-Tzu (the creator of the Taoist tradition) states in his works that his followers must live according to the Tao (pronounced "dow" and roughly translated as "the Way"). The Chinese character portraying the concept of the Way is a moving head and "refers simultaneously to direction, movement, method, and thought" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 42; Ross, 2003); Tao is the energy that surrounds everyone and is a power that "envelops, surrounds, and flows through all

The Way

things" (*Western Reform Taoism*, 2003, p. 1). In this regard, Lao-Tzu (1994) described the Way in the following lines:

> *The Way can be spoken of,*
>
> *But it will not be the constant way;*
>
> *The name can be named,*
>
> *But it will not be the constant name.*
>
> *The nameless was the beginning of the myriad creatures;*
>
> *The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.*
>
> *Hence constantly rid yourself of desires in order to observe its subtlety;*
>
> *But constantly allow yourself to have desires in order to observe what it is after.*
>
> *These two have the same origin but differ in name.*
>
> *They are both called dark,*
>
> *Darkness upon darkness*
>
> *The gateway to all is subtle. (p. 47)*

According to Taoist traditions, the difficulty in understanding the Way stems from the fact that one cannot teach another about it. Instead, understanding flows from experiencing the Way for oneself by fully participating in life. In this process, both good and bad experiences can contribute to a greater understanding of the Way. Achieving naturalness and spontaneity in life is the most important goal in Taoist philosophy. Thus, the virtues of *humanity, justice, temperance,* and *propriety* must be practiced by the virtuous individual without effort (Cheng, 2000). One who has achieved transcendence within this philosophy does not have to think about optimal functioning but behaves virtuously naturally.

## Buddhism

Seeking the good of others is woven throughout the teachings of "the Master" or "the Enlightened One" (i.e., the Buddha). In one passage, the Buddha is quoted as saying, "Wander for the gain of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 17). At the same time, the Buddha teaches that suffering is a part of being and that this suffering is brought on by the human emotion of desire. In the Buddhist philosophy, Nirvana is a state in which the self is freed from desire for anything (Schumann, 1974). It should be noted that both premortal and postmortal nirvana states are proposed as possible for the individual. More specifically, the premortal nirvana may be likened to the idea of the ultimate good life in this philosophy. Postmortal nirvana may be similar to the Christian idea of heaven.

Lao-Tzu

*Source:* E. T. C. Werner, Myths and Legends of China, 1922, PD.

Like the other Eastern philosophies, Buddhism gives an important place to virtue, which is described in several catalogs of personal qualities. Buddhists speak of the *Brahma Viharas,* those virtues that are above all others in importance, described by Peterson and Seligman as "universal virtues" (2004, p. 44). These virtues include love (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksa*) (Sangharakshita, 1991). The paths to achieving these virtues within Buddhism require humans to divorce themselves from the human emotion of desire to put an end to suffering.

## Hinduism

The Hindu tradition differs somewhat from the other three philosophies discussed previously in that it does not appear to have a specific founder, and it is not clear when this tradition began in history (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). The main teachings of the Hindu tradition emphasize the interconnectedness of all things. The idea of a harmonious union among all individuals is woven throughout the teachings of Hinduism, which refer to a "single, unifying principle underlying all of Earth" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998, p. 46).

Buddha

*Source:* ©iStockphoto.com/pixonaut

One's goal within this tradition would be to live life so fully and so correctly that one would go directly to the afterlife without having to repeat life's lessons in a reincarnated form (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). Hindu teachings are very clear about the qualities one must embody to avoid reincarnation: "To return to this world is an indication of one's failure to achieve ultimate knowledge of one's self" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998, p. 53). Thus, the quest of one's life is to attain ultimate self-knowledge and to strive for ultimate self-betterment (notably also a Western concept). Individuals are encouraged to be good to others as well as to improve themselves; the *Upanishads* state, "A man turns into something good by good action and something bad by bad action" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998, p. 54). "Good action" is also encouraged in the sense that, if one does not reach ultimate self-knowledge in one's life and thus does have to return to Earth via reincarnation after death, the previous life's good actions correlate directly with better placement in the world in the subsequent life (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). This process is known as *karma.* The good life in the Hindu tradition, therefore, encompasses individuals who are continually achieving knowledge and continually working toward good actions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Stevenson & Haberman, 1998).

## Summary of Eastern and Western Philosophies

Each of the philosophies discussed here incorporates ideas about the importance of virtue, along with human strengths, as people move toward the good life. Similarities also can be drawn among the different ideologies, especially in the types of human qualities and experiences that are valued,

though there are also differences in terms of which traits are particularly valued. Thus, it is important to contrast these Eastern beliefs with Western ideology to understand the differences in positive psychology viewed from each perspective.

## EAST MEETS WEST

Eastern and Western ideologies stem from very different historical events and traditions. We begin this section with a thorough discussion of these different value systems (individualism and collectivism). Next, we explore ways in which differences can be seen explicitly in each cultural approach with regard to orientations toward time, and their respective thought processes. Finally, we discuss various constructs that may be viewed as exemplars of the values held as strengths in these very different traditions. These cultural differences give more information about strengths identified in each culture and ways in which positive life outcomes are pursued and achieved.

## INDIVIDUALISM: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ME

In this section, we touch on the United States' history of rugged individualism, along with the core and secondary emphases that define a person as individualistic. We then discuss two constructs related to individualism—hope and the need for uniqueness—and show how these constructs may be manifested in a variety of activities.



Alexis de Tocqueville
*Source:* © adoc-photos/Corbis

### A Brief History of American Individualism

Since the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's (1835/2003) *Democracy in America,* the United States has been known as the land of the "rugged individualist." The essence of this view is that any person with a good idea can succeed in the pursuit of personal goals through hard work. In the words of de Tocqueville, people in the United States "form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (p. 508). Such individualism was linked to the emphases on equal rights and freedom found in the United States (Lukes, 1973), as well as to the country's capitalistic economy and open frontiers (Curry & Valois, 1991). Since the establishment of American independence in 1776, this rugged individualism has metamorphosed into the "me generation" that held sway from the 1960s through the early 1990s (Myers, 2004).

## Emphases in Individualism

When concern for the individual is greater than concern for the group, then the culture is said to be individualistic; however, when each person is very concerned about the group, then the society is collectivistic. As shown in Figure 2.1, when the average person in a society is disposed toward individual independence, that society is deemed individualistic (see the bell-shaped curve drawn with the dotted line).

### Core Emphases

The three core emphases within individualism involve a sense of independence, a desire to stand out relative to others (a need for uniqueness), and the use of the self or the individual as the unit of analysis in thinking about life. In individualistic societies such as the United States, social patterns resemble a loosely interwoven fabric, and it is the norm for each person to see themselves as independent of the surrounding group of people (Triandis, 1995). On this point, research involving many studies supports the conclusion that individualism in the United States reflects a sense of independence rather than dependence (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

A second core emphasis within individualism is that the person wants to stand out relative to the population as a whole. Within individualistic societies, therefore, people follow their own motives and preferences instead of adjusting their desires to accommodate those of the group (this sometimes is called *conforming*). The individualistic person thus sets personal goals that may not match those of the groups to which he or she belongs (Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1988, 1990). Because of the individualistic propensity to manifest one's specialness, coupled with societal support for actions that show such individuality, it follows that the citizens of individualistic societies such as the United States will have a high need for uniqueness. We explore this fascinating motive in greater detail later in this section.

A third core emphasis of individualism is that the self or person is the unit of analysis in understanding how people think and act in a society. That is, explanations of events are likely to involve

**Figure 2.1**   Norms and Individual Differences for Individualistic and Collectivistic Societies
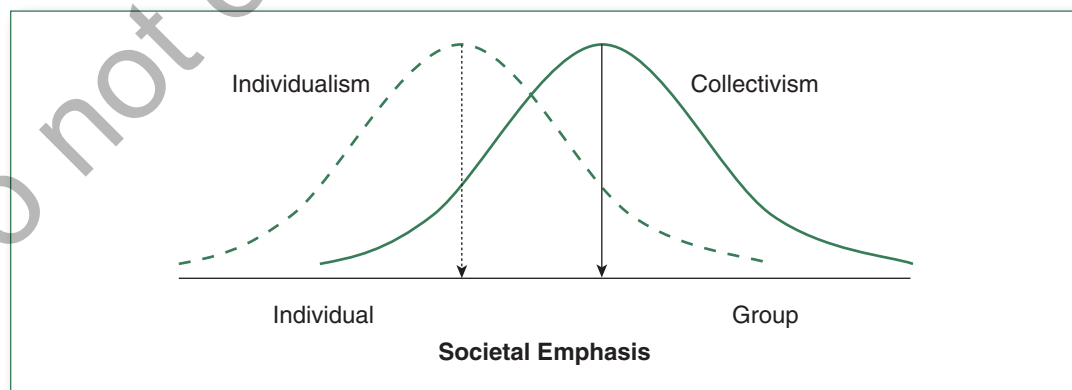
the person rather than the group. Therefore, the various definitions of individualism draw upon worldviews in which personal factors are emphasized over social forces (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Kagitcibasi, 1994; Triandis, 1995).

### Secondary Emphases

Several secondary emphases flow from the individualistic focus upon the self rather than the group. Goals set by citizens of an individualistic society typically are for the self; moreover, success and related satisfactions also operate at the level of the self. Simply put, the payoffs are at the personal level rather than the group level. The individualistic person pursues what is enjoyable to him or her, in contrast to collectivistic people, who derive their pleasures from things that promote the welfare of the group. Of course, the individualist at times may follow group norms, but this usually happens when she or he has deduced that it is personally advantageous to do so.

As may be obvious by now, individualists are focused upon pleasure and their own self-esteem in interpersonal relationships and beyond. Individualists also weigh the disadvantages and advantages of relationships before deciding whether to pursue them (Kim, Sharkey, & Singelis, 1994). Thus, individualistic persons engage in benefit analyses to determine what may profit them, whereas collectivists are more likely to give their unconditional support to their group and think first and foremost in terms of their duties to the group. Individualists tend to be rather short term in their thinking, whereas collectivists are more long term in their thought patterns. Last, people in individualistic societies often are somewhat informal in their interactions with others, whereas people in collectivistic societies are more formal in their interactions, as they attend to the expected and important norms that determine such behaviors. (For a thorough discussion of all these secondary emphases, we recommend the review articles by Oyserman et al., 2002, and Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013.)



Roy F. Baumeister

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## COLLECTIVISM: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WE

In this section, we comment on the history of collectivism and then describe its core and secondary emphases.

### A Historical Comment on Collectivism: We Came Together Out of Necessity

Thousands of years ago, our hunter–gatherer ancestors realized that there were survival advantages to be derived from banding together into groups with shared goals and interests (Chency, Seyforth, & Smuts, 1986; Panter-Brick, Rowley-Conwy, & Layton, 2001). These groups contributed to a sense of belonging, fostered personal identities and roles for their members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and offered shared emotional bonds (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002). Moreover, the resources of the people in groups helped them fend off threats from other humans and animals.

Simply stated, groups offered power to their members (Heller, 1989). The people in such groups protected and cared for each other, and they formed social units that were effective contexts for the propagation and raising of offspring. Gathered into groups, humans reaped the benefits of community (Sarason, 1974).

By today's standards, our hunter–gatherer relatives were more primitive in their needs and aspirations. But were they really that much different from people today in the satisfactions and bene-fits they derived from their group memberships? We think not, because human beings always have had the shared characteris-tics of what social psychologist Elliot Aronson (2003) has called "social animals." In this regard, one of our strongest human motives is to belong—to feel as if we are connected in meaningful ways with other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social psy-chologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) and Donelson Forsyth (1999; Forsyth & Corazzini, 2000) have argued that peo-ple prosper when they join together into social units to pursue shared goals.

Mark Leary

*Source:* Reprinted with permis-sion of Mark Leary.

## Emphases in Collectivism

Now, let's return to Figure 2.1 on p. 27. As shown there, when the average person in a society is disposed toward group interdepen-dence, then that society is labeled collectivist (see the bell-shaped curve drawn with the solid line). At this point, you may be curious as to which country most markedly adheres to collectivistic values. In response to this question, research suggests that China is the most collectivistic of the various nations around the globe (see Oyserman et al., 2002).

### Core Emphases

The three core emphases of collectivism are dependence; confor-mity, or the desire to fit in; and perception of the group as the fun-damental unit of analysis. First, the dependency within collectivism reflects a genuine tendency to draw one's very meaning and exis-tence from being part of an important group of people. In collectiv-

Donelson Forsyth

*Source:* Reprinted with permis-sion of Donelson Forsyth.

ism, the person goes along with the expectations of the group, is highly concerned about the welfare of the group, and is very dependent upon the other members of the group to which he or she belongs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Reykowski, 1994).

Regarding the desire to fit in, Oyserman et al. (2002, p. 5) wrote, "The core element of collectivism is the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals." As such, collectivism is an inherently social approach in which the movement is toward in-groups and away from out-groups.

Turning to the third core emphasis, the group as the perceived unit of analysis, the social patterns in collectivist societies reflect close linkages in which people see themselves as part of a larger, more

important whole. In brief, the collectivist concern is for the group as a whole rather than its constituents (Hofstede, 1980).

## Secondary Emphases

The collectivist is defined in terms of the characteristics of the groups to which he or she belongs. Thus, collectivist-oriented people pay close attention to the rules and goals of the group and often may subjugate their personal needs to those of the group. Moreover, success and satisfaction stem from the group's reaching its desired goals and from feeling that one has fulfilled the socially prescribed duties as a member of that effective, goal-directed, group effort (Kim, 1994).

Collectivist people obviously become very involved in the ongoing activities and goals of their group, and they think carefully about the obligations and duties of the groups to which they belong (Davidson, Jaccard, Triandis, Morales, & Diaz-Guerrero, 1976; Miller, 1994). Furthermore, the interchanges between people within the collectivist perspective are characterized by mutual generosity and equity (Sayle, 1998). For such people, interpersonal relationships may be pursued even when there are no obvious benefits to be attained (see Triandis, 1995). In fact, given the great emphasis that collectivists place on relationships, they may pursue such relationships even when such interactions are counterproductive.

Because of their attentions to the guidelines as defined by the group, the individual members with a collectivist perspective may be rather formal in their interactions. That is, there are carefully followed, role-defined ways of behaving. Additionally, the person within the collectivistic perspective monitors the social context carefully to form impressions of others and to make decisions (Morris & Peng, 1994).

Recall our earlier discussion of the need for uniqueness as reflecting individualism. In this regard, Kim and Markus (1999) have reasoned that advertisements in Korea should accentuate collectivist themes related to conformity, whereas ads in the United States should be based more on themes of uniqueness. Consistent with this proposal, Kim and Markus's research shows that the need for uniqueness is lower in collectivistic societies than in individualistic ones (Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995).

Collectivist societies appear to have core elements of dependency, conformity (low need for uniqueness), and definition of existence in terms of the important group to which one belongs. The research also corroborates the fact that collectivism rests on a core sense of dependency, as well as an obligation or duty to the in-group and a desire to maintain harmony between people (Oyserman et al., 2002). Before leaving this section, we salute Daphne Oyserman and her colleagues at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research for their seminal scholarly review of the characteristics of individualism and collectivism.

## Demographics Related to Collectivism

Positive psychologists must consider what the future will bring in regard to collectivism. For example, related research suggests that the gulf between the wealthy and the poor in societies throughout the world is widening as we move farther into the twenty-first century (see Ceci & Papierno, 2005). Research reveals that people in the lower social classes, as compared to the upper ones, are more likely to be collectivist in their perspectives (Daab, 1991; Kohn, 1969; Marjoribanks, 1991). Turning to

the role of aging as yet another demographic issue pertaining to collectivism, it appears that people become more collectivist as they grow older (Gudykunst, 1993; Noricks et al., 1987).

## The Stories We Tell

Cultural value systems have significant effects on the determination of strengths versus weaknesses (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2014; Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2009). Whereas most Western cultures have *individualist* perspectives, most Eastern cultures are guided by *collectivist* viewpoints. Commonly told stories often give examples of valued traits, and so we would like to share some for with you here. The Japanese story "*Momotaro*" ("Peach Boy," Sakade, 1958) gives an excellent example of the cultural importance of the traits of interdependence, the ability to avoid conflict, and duty to the group within Eastern traditions. The story begins with an elderly couple who have always wished for a child, although they are not able to conceive. One day, as the woman is washing her clothes in a stream, a giant peach floats to where she is standing and, upon reaching the woman, splits open to reveal a baby! The woman takes Momotaro home, and she and her husband raise him. At the age of 15, to the great pride of his parents, he decides to go to fight the ogres who have been tormenting the village and to bring back their treasure to his community. Along the way, Momotaro befriends many animals one by one. The animals want to fight each new animal they meet, but at Momotaro's urging, "The spotted dog and the monkey and the pheasant, who usually hated each other, all became good friends and followed Momotaro faithfully" (Sakade, 1958, p. 6). At the end of the story, Momotaro and his animal friends defeat the ogres by working together and bring the treasure back to the village, where all who live there share in the bounty. As the hero, Momotaro portrays the strengths valued in Japanese and other Asian cultures: (1) He sets out for the good of the group, although in doing so risks individual harm (collectivism); (2) along the way, he stops others from petty squabbling (promoting harmony); (3) he works with these others to achieve his goal (interdependence and collaboration); and (4) he brings back a treasure to share with the group (interdependence and sharing).

This story highlights important Eastern values and differs sharply from common Western stories. First, in most Western fairy tales the hero is fighting alone and takes dangers on single-handedly, as is the case with the princes in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rapunzel* and the title character in *The Valiant Little Tailor* (Grimm & Grimm, as cited in Tatar, 2002), showing that individual independence is often valued over needing others' assistance. In instances where the hero does accept help from another, there is often a price involved where the "helper" makes sure that he or she also personally benefits from the transaction. Such examples can be found in the classic Western tale of *Rumplestiltskin* (Grimm & Grimm), where the title character offers to help the maiden only if he can be promised her firstborn in return, or *The Little Mermaid* (Andersen, as cited in Tatar), where the Sea Witch will only help the Little Mermaid to gain legs to meet her love if she surrenders her beautiful voice to the witch. This more closely follows the Western value on personal gain despite potential loss to another. Finally, many stories emphasize seeking personal fortune (or payment for service in the form of a bride or kingdom), but few discuss seeking fortune for the community (without any payment) as occurs in many Eastern stories.

A discussion of fairy tales is not often included in a scholarly publication such as this; however, these stories tell the tale of our cultural values, and they have been used throughout the ages to promote some behaviors and to decry others. Here it is clear that cultural orientation determines which characteristics are transmitted as the valued strengths to its members.

## Orientation to Time

Differences also exist between East and West in terms of their orientations to time. In Western cultures such as the United States, individuals (particularly within the majority culture) often look to the future. Indeed, some of the strengths that are valued most (e.g., hope, optimism, self-efficacy; see Chapter 8) reflect future-oriented thinking. In Eastern cultures, however, there is a greater focus on and respect for the past. This past-oriented focus is revealed in the ancient Chinese proverb, "To know the road ahead, ask those coming back." Thus, Eastern cultures value the strength of "looking backward" and recognizing the wisdom of their elders, whereas Western cultures are more firmly focused on the future.

## Thought Processes

When considering the unique aspects of Western and Eastern thought, we often focus on the nature of specific ideas, but we do not as commonly reflect on the process of linking and integrating ideas. Indeed, as researchers (e.g., Nisbett, 2003) have noted, stark differences exist in the very thought processes used by Westerners and Easterners, and this results in markedly divergent worldviews and approaches to meaning making. Richard Nisbett, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies social psychology and cognition and who comes from a Western cultural background, illustrates how he became aware of some of these differences in thinking during a conversation he had with a student from China. Nisbett recalls,

> A few years back, a brilliant student from China began to work with me on questions of social psychology and reasoning. One day early in our acquaintance, he said, "You know, the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it is a line." The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger pictures; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behavior of objects. (p. xiii)

As Nisbett's story shows, the thinking style used by the Chinese student, and not just the ideas themselves, was vastly different from Nisbett's. This more circular thinking style is best exemplified by the Taoist figure of the *yin* and the *yang*. Most people are familiar with the *yin* and *yang* symbol. This figure represents the circular, constantly changing nature of the world as viewed by Eastern thought. The dark part of the symbol represents the feminine and passive, and the light side represents the masculine and active. Each part exists because of the other, and neither could exist alone, according to Taoist beliefs. As one state is experienced, the other is not far to follow; if hard times are occurring, easier times are on the way. This more circular thinking pattern affects the way in which the Eastern thinker maps out his or her life and therefore may influence the decisions a person makes in the search for peace.

An example of the effects of such different ways of thinking may be found in the life pursuits of the Westerner as compared with those of the Easterner. Whereas in the United States we give high priority to the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the goals of the Easterner

might have a different focus. Take, for instance, the positive psychological construct of happiness (see Chapter 6). Researchers have posited that happiness (whether group or individual) is a state commonly sought by Easterners and Westerners alike (Diener & Diener, 1995). The difference in the philosophical approaches to life, however, may make the searches look very different. For example, a Westerner whose goal is happiness draws a straight line to that goal, looking carefully for obstacles and finding possible ways around them. His or her goal is to achieve this eternal happiness and the strength of hope is used to achieve this. For the Easterner who follows the *yin* and the *yang*, however, this goal of happiness may not make sense. If one were to seek happiness and then achieve it, in the Eastern way of



Yin Yang

thinking, this would only mean that unhappiness was close on its heels. Instead, the Easterner might have the goal of balance (perhaps based more on using the strength of endurance), trusting in the fact that, although great unhappiness or suffering may occur in one's life, it would be equally balanced by great happiness. These two different types of thinking obviously create very different ways of forming goals to achieve the good life.

## East and West: Is One Best?

There are substantial differences in the types of ideas and the ways in which those ideas are put together that emerge from Eastern and Western traditions. It is important to remember, however, that neither is "better" than the other. This is especially relevant for discussions regarding strengths. Therefore, we must use culture as a lens for evaluating whether a particular characteristic might be considered a strength or a weakness within a particular group.

## PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENTS

### Getting and Giving Help

In this chapter, we explore how the sense of community can promote optimal human functioning. The following exercises encourage you to think about how your relationships to others and the broader community can make a positive difference in your life.

**Asking for Help.** A primary way in which individualists and collectivists differ is in the cultural messages they receive regarding asking for help. If you are more on the individualist side, and thus a person who finds it difficult to ask for the help of another, this exercise

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

offers you a chance to break that habit. Select some activity for which you are especially unlikely to ask for help, and the next time you are in this situation, instead of trying to struggle through it by yourself, go ahead and ask another person for a hand. Here are some questions to ask yourself about a recent situation in which you could have asked for help:

1. Describe the circumstance, including all your thoughts and feelings. What did you imagine people would say if you asked for help? What would you have thought about yourself if you had asked for help?

2. Did you ask for help? If not, why not? If so, how did you overcome your rule of not asking for help?

3. How did the situation turn out when you did ask for help? What were the reactions of the person you asked for help? Did you get the needed help? If you did, how did you feel? Do you think you could ask for help in a future, similar situation?

Part of being in a community is being able to call upon the people in that community for assistance. Contrary to what you have been taught about not asking for help, it is not a weakness to ask for help. Indeed, it is a strength. You are human. You do need other people to get things accomplished. This is not a bad thing, but a wonderful reality that is part of being a member of a community. As we have suggested in this exercise, give it a try. Once people do, they rarely turn back.

**Volunteering Your Help.** Remember the last time you offered your assistance to someone else? It probably took very little of your time, and you made a small improvement in your community. The other beautiful aspect of offering help is that it feels absolutely wonderful. (See the Personal Mini-Experiments in Chapter 11, pp. 296–297.) Helping thus provides two benefits: one to the recipient and one to the giver. To implement this exercise, just look around your local community and watch your neighbors. Part of this may be a simple wave or greeting. At other times, it may be obvious that someone really could use a helping hand. There are many flat tires needing to be fixed, people who need assistance carrying packages, tourists needing directions, and so on. To see how you have fared in this exercise, answer the following questions:

1. Describe the last circumstance in which you noticed that a person needed help, and include all your thoughts and feelings. What did you imagine people would say if you offered help? What did you think about yourself after offering help?

2. Did you offer help? If not, why not? If you did, how were you able to overcome any rule to the contrary (such as "Don't bother others")?

3. How did the situation turn out when you offered help? How did the person to whom you offered help react? Did you give the needed help? If you did, how did you feel? Do you think you could do this again in a future, similar situation?

**Being Alone or With Others.** To complete this exercise, merely think about the goal-related activity listed in the left column and place a check mark in the column to the right that reflects your preferences about doing this alone or with others. Under each general life category, briefly write your desired goal. If you have more than one goal under each category, write each of these goals. Likewise, if you do not have a goal in a given category, then ignore it. Go through each of the goal categories and write a goal (or goals) on the blank line below each one. Then, go back to each goal category and, if you would prefer to seek the goal totally alone, place a check mark under the "Alone" column. If you would prefer to seek the goal with another person, place a check mark under the "Another" column. Finally, if you would prefer to seek the goal with two or more other people, place a check mark under the "Others" column.

| Goal Category | Alone | Another | Others |
|---|---|---|---|
| Religious/Spiritual goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Sport goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Academic goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Physical health goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Psychological health goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Work goal(s) | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

Now that you have completed this inventory, simply count the life goals you want to pursue alone, those you want to do with another person, and those you want to do with two or more other people. Are you a person who wants to go it alone? If so, you truly may be prone to the individualistic perspective. Did you find that most of your goals involved one or more other people? If so, you probably have a more collectivistic perspective. This should give you a rough idea of the importance of other people to you as you seek the major goals in your life.

For some of your goals, you may prefer going it alone, whereas for other goals, you may want to be with one or more others. This is useful information, and it is part of our general belief that a balanced life entails some things done alone and others done in concert. Stated another way, you can determine the areas of your life in which you are an individualist and those in which you are a collectivist.

## DIFFERENT WAYS TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES

So far, we have discussed how thinking styles influence the development of goals in the lives of both Westerners and Easterners. Differences also exist, however, in the routes that each group uses to move toward its goals. Western-oriented thinking focuses on the individual's goal, whereas Eastern philosophers suggest a different focus, one in which the group is highlighted. Here, we detail constructs that may have particular value to the different groups. For Western cultures, the construct of hope is a key component mentioned throughout time. For Eastern cultures, the constructs of compassion and harmony are highly valued.

### The "Rugged Individualist," the Construct of Hope, and the Need for Uniqueness

Hope has been a powerful underlying force in Western civilization. Indeed, looking back through the recorded history of Western civilization and religion, hope—the agentic, goal-focused thinking that gets one from here to there—has been so interwoven into the fabric of our civilization's eras and events that it can be hard to detect. In this regard, the belief in a positive future is reflected in many of our everyday ideas and words.

During the Dark Ages, intellectual and social immobility pervaded and a paralysis of curiosity and initiative existed. From the years of the Middle Ages (500–1500), such paralysis precluded the purposeful, sustained planning and action required by a hopeful, advancing society. The fires of advancement were reduced to embers during this dark millennium and kept glowing only by a few institutions such as the monasteries and their schools. Eventually, as the Dark Ages were ended by the brightness of the Renaissance and its economic growth and prosperity, hope was seen as more relevant to present life on Earth than to the afterlife (i.e., a better life on Earth became possible, even probable).

With the advent of the Renaissance, these active and hopeful thoughts began to be coupled with goal-directed actions. The period following the Renaissance, from approximately 1700 to the late 1700s, is known as the Age of Enlightenment. In a cultural atmosphere conducive to exploration and change, the Enlightenment reflected the nature of hope because of its emphases on rational agencies and rational abilities. These qualities were interwoven in the dominant belief of the age, that reason brought to life with the scientific method led to the achievements in science and philosophy. These latter perspectives are in direct contrast to the prevalence of ignorance, superstition, and the acceptance of authority that characterized the Middle Ages. Education, free speech, and the acceptance of new ideas burgeoned during the Enlightenment. Indeed, the consequences of such enlightened thinking were long lasting and reflective of the power of hope.

Beginning approximately in the late 1700s and continuing to the end of the 1800s was the period known as the Industrial Revolution (or the Age of Industrialization). The movement of production from homes and small workshops to large factories vastly increased material benefits for individual citizens and made hope for the future seem more attainable.

Western civilization has been defined by its critical mass of hopeful events and beliefs. Before the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, and even during the Middle Ages, hopeful thinking was a critical part of humankind's belief system. If some historical eras do not reveal major signs, there nonetheless have been implicit markers of hope. The idea of hope has served as an underpinning for thinking in Western civilization. Personal and individual goals, as exemplified by the construct of hope, seem to be the primary tool of the "rugged individualist" (i.e., Westerner) in moving toward the good life.

## The Need for Uniqueness

Let's take another look at Figure 2.1. Although it is true that the norms in individualistic societies emphasize the person (see the dotted line with an arrow at the bottom), you will notice that some people belong toward the group end of the continuum and others toward the individual end. In this latter regard, we now explore the desire to manifest specialness relative to other people.

The pursuit of individualistic goals to produce a sense of specialness has been termed the need for uniqueness (see Lynn & Snyder, 2002; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980; Vignoles, 2009). This need is posited to have a strong appeal to many, as people often seek to maintain some degree of difference from others (as well as to maintain a bond to other people). In the 1970s, researchers Howard Fromkin and C. R. Snyder (see Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980) embarked on a program of research based on the premise that most people have some desire to be special relative to others. They called this human motive the *need for uniqueness*; others have termed it the *motive for distinctiveness* (Vignoles). Beyond establishing that some specialness was desirable for most of the people in their samples from the United States, these researchers also reasoned that some people have a very high need for uniqueness, or distinctiveness, whereas others have a very low need for uniqueness.

### Encoding of Similarity Information

People define themselves along a variety of identity dimensions. An identity dimension is defined as "a set of person attributes which have a common core of meaning" (Miller, 1963, p. 676). In their theory of uniqueness, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) proposed that people think about their perceived similarity to others and use a dimension (in their minds) on which they evaluate how

correct any given feedback seems about their degree of similarity to other people (technically, this is encoded on a uniqueness identity schema). In brief, people evaluate the acceptability of their having varying degrees of similarity to other people. These hypothetical encodings on the uniqueness identity dimension are shown in Figure 2.2.

As can be seen in Figure 2.2, the similarity information is encoded as increasingly higher in acceptability, from very slight, to slight, to moderate, to high levels of perceived similarity to others, with a drop to low acceptability for very high similarity. Thus, the moderate-to-high sense of similarity is rated as the most comfortable, most accurate one for people—the reasons being that people realize that most others are somewhat similar to them (see Brown, 1991) and that people desire some specialness. In other words, in terms of *reality as people actually have perceived it* and *how they want it to be,* people prefer the moderate-to-high range of similarity (points C and D in Figure 2.2). Finally, people are not comfortable with either of the extremes of low similarity (point A in Figure 2.2) or high similarity (point E in Figure 2.2).

## Emotional and Behavioral Reactions to Similarity Information

When confronted with the varying degrees of perceived similarity that produce the acceptability encodings of Figure 2.2, people then should have the most positive emotional reactions when they perceive that they are highly similar to others (point D in Figure 2.2). Consistent with this hypothesis, people's emotional reactions become more positive as levels of similarity increase from the very slight, to slight, to moderate, to high, becoming negative as the level of similarity enters the

**Figure 2.2** Acceptability Encoding as a Function of Perceived Similarity to Other People
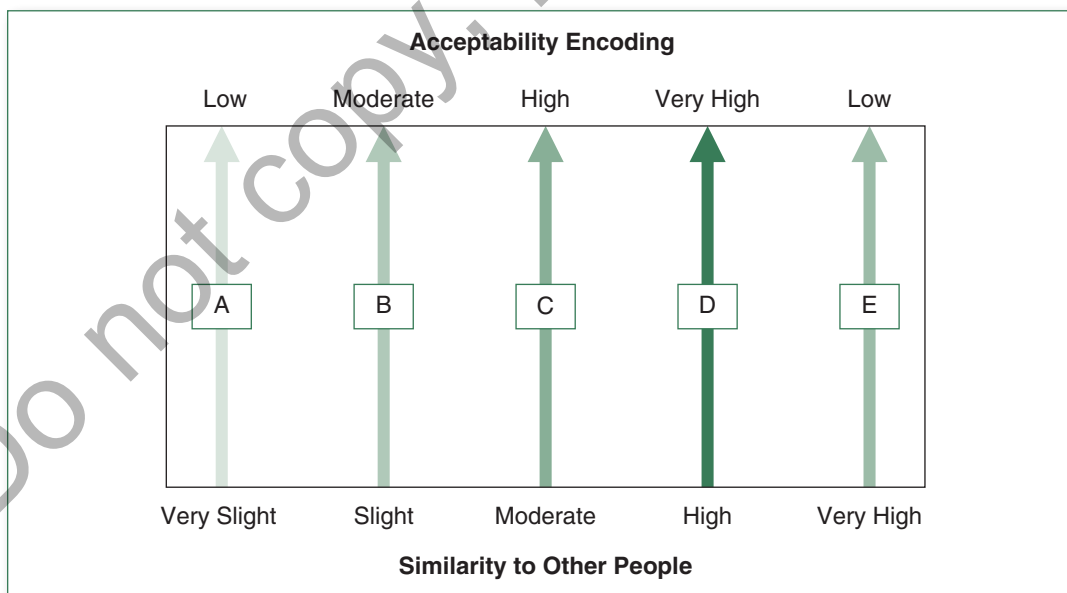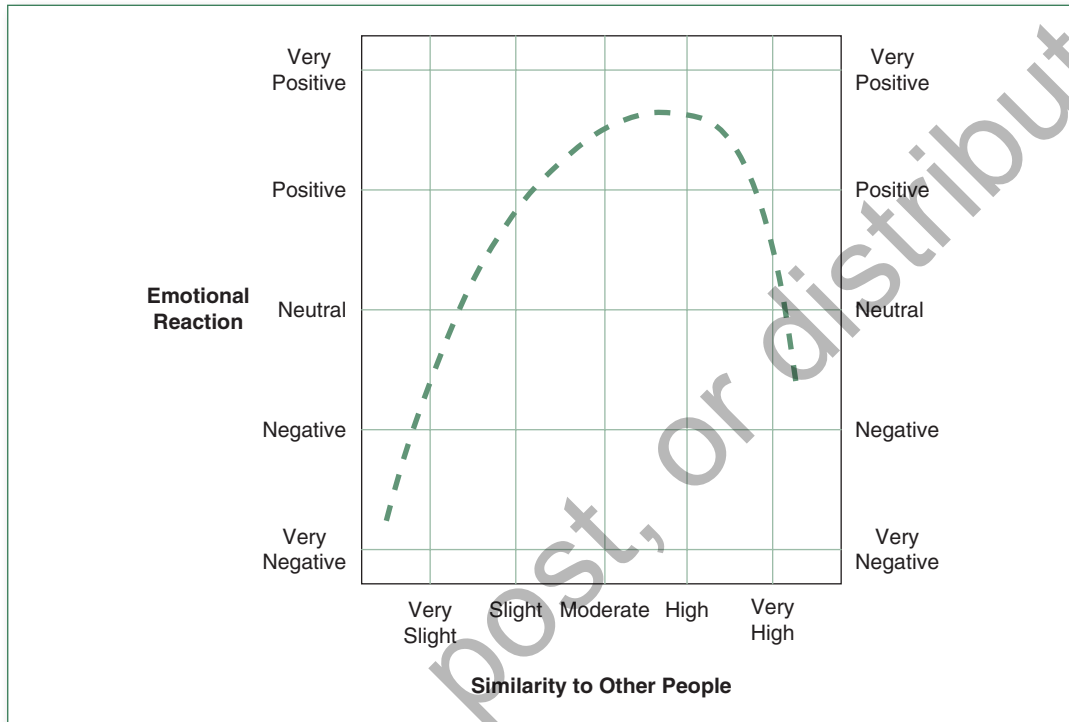
**Figure 2.3**   Emotional Reactions as a Function of Perceived Similarity to Other People



very high range (Figure 2.3). Note that the very highest positive emotional reactions occur when people perceive that they have a relatively moderate to high degree of similarity, thereby showing the maximal pleasure derived from human bonds.

It may help here to give an example of how moderate similarity to another person is emotionally satisfying. I (JTP) reflect upon my initial reaction at moving from California to the Midwest for graduate school as a good example of the desire for moderate similarity. At first, I was a bit taken aback at being one of very few individuals of racial minority background on my new campus. Feeling very different was a challenge at first, and looking for some similarity in fellow students became a goal of mine. It was a stroke of good luck that another student in my cohort shared this circumstance and was having a similar experience. We soon discovered that we were also both of biracial descent, though of different racial groups. This moderate similarity provided us with some shared experiences and understandings, while still allowing for our own individual differences. Our friendship has now lasted more than 15 years, and, as we have moved through other experiences in life (parenthood, professional development, etc.), we continue to enjoy the emotional satisfaction that comes from having these moderate similarities.

The acceptability reactions that result from a degree of perceived similarity to others (see Figure 2.2) also can cause people to change their actual behaviors to become more or less

similar to another person. More specifically, the most positive acceptability (i.e., high similarity) not only produces the highest positive emotional reactions, but it also should result in no need to make any behavioral changes relative to other people. On the other hand, a very slight level of similarity to others yields low acceptability; therefore, people should change to become more similar to others. Moreover, a very high level of similarity to other people is low in acceptability, and therefore people should change to become less similar to others. In this latter sense, because people's need for uniqueness is not being satisfied, they should strive to reestablish their differences. Consistent with these predicted behavioral reactions, the results of several studies (see Figure 2.4) have supported this proposed pattern (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980).

To illustrate how people actually may change because of feedback that they are extremely similar to others, consider the reactions of a young woman named Shandra. After joining a sorority at the beginning of college, she was required to wear the same outfits as her sorority sisters whenever they went on group trips. From the beginning, Shandra reacted negatively to what she saw as "uniform requirements" that were being placed on her. In a bold attempt to break away and assert her uniqueness, Shandra started wearing outfits that differed from those of her sorority sisters. Her "sisters" tried to get her to conform, but Shandra stood fast in her desire to dress differently. In fact, she later resigned from this sorority because of their reaction to her desire to be unique.

Taken together, these findings suggest that people are drawn to moderate-to-high levels of perceived similarity to their fellow humans but that there are upper limits to this desire for the human bond. Furthermore, there appears to be a desire for balance in this area, such that people are motivated by a need for uniqueness when they feel too much similarity and that they will strive for similarity when they feel too different. Based on the previously discussed theoretical predictions and findings on uniqueness-related behaviors, Snyder and Fromkin (1977) proposed that there should be individual differences in self-reported need for uniqueness. Accordingly, they developed and validated the Need for Uniqueness Scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). This self-report scale appears in the Appendix. If you would like to get a sense of your own desire for specialness by completing the scale, refer to this Appendix.

### Uniqueness Attributes

Having explored the personal need for uniqueness, at this point we describe the acceptable societal processes by which our uniqueness needs are met. People are punished when they deviate from normal or expected behaviors in a society (Goffman, 1963; Schachter, 1951). Thus, unusual behaviors quickly may elicit societal disapprovals and rejections (see Becker, 1963; Freedman & Doob, 1968; Goffman, 1963; Palmer, 1970; Schur, 1969). On the other hand, the following of rules (normal behaviors) typically does not elicit much reaction from other people.

How, then, are people to show their specialness? Fortunately, each society has some acceptable attributes whereby its citizens can show their differences, and these are called *uniqueness attributes.* On this point, Snyder and Fromkin (1980, p. 107) have written, "There are a number of attributes (physical, material, informational, experiential, etc.) that are valued because they define the person as different from members of his or her reference group and that, at the same time, will not call down the forces of rejection and isolation for deviancy."

One example may be found in the attractiveness to "scarce commodities" in our society. Salespeople know this is a desire and often use a "Hurry on down while the supply lasts" pitch

**Figure 2.4**   Direction and Amount of Change as a Function of Perceived Similarity to Other People
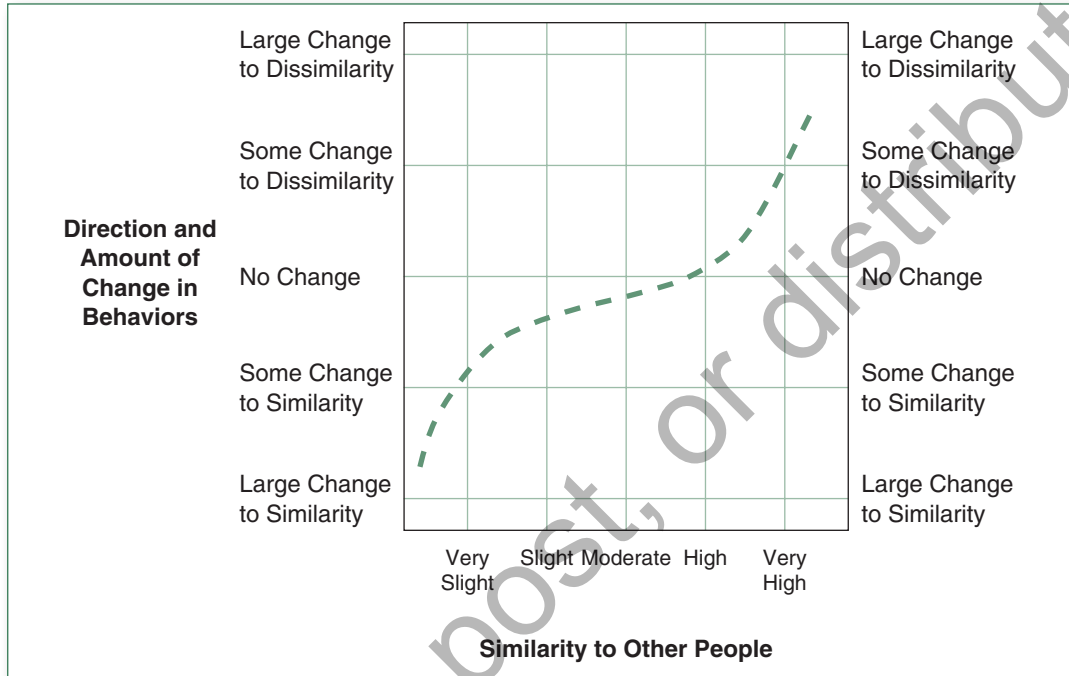


to draw in potential buyers. In what has been called a "catch-22 carousel" (Snyder, 1992), advertisers use uniqueness appeals to persuade people to buy products, and then, by making yearly changes in their products (styles of clothes, cars, etc.), motivate customers to purchase the latest version. The irony is that, after the latest uniqueness-based advertisement has persuaded people to buy, they notice that what they have bought is now quite common—many other people also have it. Of course, the yearly change of styles keeps people on the consumer "catch-22 carousel."

We have reviewed the theory and measurement of hope and the need for uniqueness, which are perhaps two of the quintessential Western constructs. We now turn to the Eastern side, for a closer look at two more collectivist constructs: compassion and harmony.

## Eastern Values: Compassion and Harmony

In the main Eastern philosophical branches of learning (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), repeated mention is made of the two constructs of compassion for others and the search for harmony or life balance. Thus, each has a clear place in the study of positive psychology from an Eastern perspective.

The idea of compassion has origins in both Western and Eastern philosophies. Within the Western tradition, Aristotle often is noted for early writings on the concept of compassion. Likewise, compassion can be traced in the Eastern traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In Confucian teachings, compassion is discussed within the concept of *jen* (humanity) and is said to encapsulate all other virtues. Within the Taoist belief system, humanity also reflects behaviors that must occur naturally, without premeditation. Finally, the Buddha often is described as "perfectly enlightened, and boundlessly compassionate" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 3). As such, the idea of compassion, or *karuna,* also is woven throughout Buddhism as a virtue on the path toward transcendence. Finally, within the Hindu tradition, compassion is called for in good actions toward others, which will direct followers upon the path that will not require them to return to Earth after death.

In recent writings in positive psychology, physician Eric Cassell (2009) proposes the three following requirements for compassion: (1) the difficulties of the recipient must be serious, (2) the recipient's difficulties cannot be self-inflicted, and (3) we, as observers, must be able to identify with the recipient's suffering. Compassion is described as a "unilateral emotion" (Cassell, p. 394) that is directed outward from oneself. In Buddhist teachings, the attainment of compassion means being able to "transcend preoccupation with the centrality of self" (Cassell, p. 397)—to focus on others rather than merely on ourselves. The ability to possess feelings for something completely separate from our own suffering allows us to transcend the self and, in this way, to be closer to the achievement of the "good life." In fact, transcendental compassion is said to be the most significant of the four universal virtues, and it often is called Great Compassion (*mahakaruna*) to distinguish it from the more applied *karuna* (Sangharakshita, 1991). Similarly, although discussed in somewhat different ways as Confucian, Taoist, and Hindu principles, the capacities to feel and to do for others are central to achieving the "good life" for each of these traditions as well.

Possessing compassion helps the person to succeed in life and is viewed as a major strength within the Eastern tradition. Feeling for fellow group members may allow identification with others and development of group cohesion. Furthermore, acting compassionately fosters group, rather than personal, happiness.

Compassion also may come more naturally to a person from a collectivist culture than to someone from an individualist culture. On this point, researchers have argued that a collectivist culture may breed a sense of compassion in the form of its members' prosocial behaviors (Batson, 1991; Batson, Ahmad, & Lishner, 2009). When a group identity has been formed, therefore, the natural choice may be group benefits over individual ones. More information from qualitative and quantitative studies in this area would be helpful in defining the mechanisms used to foster such compassion.

Within Eastern traditions, in particular, it is taught that the ability to feel for others is a necessary part of the search for the good life. Compassion, an aspect of humanity, involves looking outside ourselves and thinking about others as we care for and identify with them. This other-than-self focus is needed to transcend one's physical body, according to Eastern traditions. Thus, nirvana can be attained only when one's independent identity and the self-motivated desires that accompany it are eradicated completely.

In moving toward the good life, therefore, compassion is essential for dealing with daily life tasks. As one walks along the path toward this good life, the continual goal is to transcend the human plane and to become enlightened through experiences with others and the world. Compassion asks

people to think outside themselves and to connect with others. Additionally, as the person comes to understand others, she or he comes closer to self-understanding. This is yet another key component in attaining transcendence.

In Western history, the Greeks are said to have viewed happiness as the ability "to exercise powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints" (Nisbett, 2003, pp. 2–3). Thus, the good life was viewed as a life with no ties to duty and the freedom to pursue individual goals. There are clear distinctions in comparing this idea of happiness to Confucian teachings, for example, in which duty (*yi*) is a primary virtue. In Eastern philosophy, happiness is described as having the "satisfactions of a plain country life, shared within a *harmonious* social network" (Nisbett, pp. 5–6, emphasis added). In this tradition, harmony is viewed as central to achieving happiness.

In Buddhist teachings, when people reach a state of nirvana, they have reached a peacefulness entailing "complete harmony, balance, and equilibrium" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 135). Similarly, in Confucian teachings, harmony is viewed as crucial for happiness. Confucius had high praise for individuals who were able to harmonize; he compared this capacity to "a good cook blending the flavors and creat[ing] something harmonious and delicious" (Nisbett, 2003, p. 7). Getting along with others allows the person to be freed from individual pursuits and, in so doing, to gain "collective agency" (Nisbett, 2003, p. 6) in working out what is good for the group. Thus, the harmonizing principle is a central tenet of the Eastern way of life. The balance and harmony that one achieves as part of an enlightened life often are thought to represent the ultimate end of the good life. In Hindu teachings, one also can see that, as all humans are interconnected by a "single unifying principle" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998, p. 46), harmony must be pursued. If an individual walks through life without thought of others as connected to him or her, the effects may be far-reaching for both the individual and the group (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998).

The concept of harmony has received minimal attention in the field of positive psychology to date, although some attention has been given to the idea of appreciating balance in one's life in reference to certain other constructs (e.g., wisdom; see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, and Chapter 9). Moreover, Clifton and colleagues (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005) include a harmony theme in the Clifton StrengthsFinder (see Chapter 3); they describe this construct as a desire to find consensus among the group, as opposed to putting forth conflicting ideas. Little more scholarly attention has been paid to harmony in American psychological literature. Given the central role of harmony as a strength in Eastern cultures, more research may be warranted on this topic in the future. First, the concept of harmony often is mistakenly equated with the notion of conformity. Studies to ferret out the differences between these two constructs could be beneficial in defining each more clearly. Because the term *conformity* has somewhat negative connotations in our independence-oriented culture, it is possible that some of these same negative characterizations have been extended to the concept of harmony.

Second, qualitative research methods could be used to develop a better definition of harmony. At present, the concept of harmony is reflected in the virtue of justice as discussed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) in their classification of strengths. These authors note that the ability to "work well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share" (p. 30) may be a subset of the idea of civic strength. Although this may be one way to classify this strength, it might be argued that the idea of harmony is broader than this particular definition and may be thought of separately from loyalty and "pitching in." Furthermore, the phenomenon of harmony may be both an interpersonal strength (as described in the previous paragraphs) and an intrapersonal strength.

Finally, after more conceptual work is completed, positive psychology scholars interested in harmony would benefit greatly from the development of reliable and valid measuring devices. Such tools would help researchers to uncover the primary contributors and correlates of harmony.

## WHERE WE ARE GOING: FROM ME TO WE TO US

In this chapter, we have discussed two important human frameworks—individualist and collectivist—and the historical traditions derived from them that are relevant to positive psychology. In closing this chapter, we propose that being able to utilize a blend of the one and the many—the WE/ME, or, more simply, US—may enhance our ability to interact with a variety of others and spur our multicultural competence. This approach represents an intermingling in which both the individual and the group are able to be considered for satisfying and productive lives. As we see it, the US perspective reflects a viable positive psychology resolution for a more multiculturally competent world.

## ME/WE BALANCE: THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF US

### Both the Individualistic and the Collectivistic Perspectives Are Viable

Social scientists often have conceptualized individualism and collectivism as opposites (Hui, 1988; Oyserman et al., 2002), and this polarity typically has been applied when contrasting the individualism of European Americans with the collectivism of East Asians (Chan, 1994; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). This polarity approach strikes us as being neither good science nor necessarily a productive strategy for fostering healthy interactions among people from varying ethnicities within and across societies.

Viewing individualism and collectivism as opposites also has the potential to provoke disputes in which the members of each camp attempt to demonstrate the superiority of their approach. Such acrimony between these two perspectives seems especially problematic given that the distinctions between individualism and collectivism have not been found to be clear cut. For example, Vandello and Cohen (1999) found that, even within individualistic societies such as the United States, the form of the individualism differs in the Northeast, the Midwest, the Deep South, and the West. Moreover, cultures are extremely diverse; each has dynamic and changing social systems that are far from the monolithic simplicities suggested by the labels "individualist" and "collectivist" (Bandura, 2000; Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013). Likewise, there may be generational differences in the degree to which individualism and collectivism are manifested (e.g., Matsumoto, Kudoh, & Takeuchi, 1996). And when different reference groups become more salient, propensities toward individualism and collectivism vary (Freeman & Bordia, 2001). Furthermore, a seemingly individualistic propensity in actuality may contribute to collectivism; for example, consider the fact that a robust personal sense of efficacy may contribute to the collective efficacy of a society (Fernandez-Ballesteros, Diez-Nicolas, Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Bandura, 2002).

The United States has always been thought of as a very individualistic nation. Current reports, however, suggest that this may have had more to do with the fact that the majority of individuals living in the United States were originally of European (Western) origin. Interestingly, today, as more

and more non-Europeans reside in the United States, changes are beginning to emerge with regard to the individualist orientation of the country as a whole (Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013). Today, there is preliminary "evidence of convergence of cultural orientations" (Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013, p. 195). In this way, perhaps due to its unique diversity of cultural influences, the United States is becoming more of an "US" nation. That said, there are still verifiable differences between cultural groups (e.g., African American, Latino, Asian American, and Caucasian) that appear to be related to systematic socioeconomic differences between these groups (Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013). These distinct differences are most marked between European Americans/Asian Americans versus their African American/Latino counterparts. The fact that these economically disadvantaged groups are lower in competitiveness is a finding that might suggest a sense of hopelessness at being able to compete in the first place due to their disadvantages. It is also a possibility that cooperation is more necessary at a lower socioeconomic status. If our goal is to see more of an understanding of both individualistic and collectivistic mindsets, and a potential convergence toward each other to some extent, we may need to work harder to extend economic equality across cultural groups.

Based on findings such as these and others, researchers in the field have suggested that we should move beyond the rather static view of individualism and collectivism as separate categories and instead take more dynamic approaches to culture to find when, where, and why these mental sets operate (Oyserman et al, 2002; Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013). They argue for an understanding of how individualism and collectivism can operate together to benefit people. We, too, believe that both the individualist and collectivistic perspectives have advantages for people and that the best resolution is to learn to embrace aspects of each.

One characteristic of a happy and productive life is a sense of balance in one's views and actions. We believe that a positive psychology approach to this issue would equate the ME and the WE emphases. As shown in Figure 2.5, the ME/WE perspective allows a person to attend to both the person and the group. Indeed, this is what has been found to characterize the perspectives of high-hope people about their lives and their interactions with others (Snyder, 1994/2000, 2000b).

**Figure 2.5** The Balanced Perspective: ME/WE
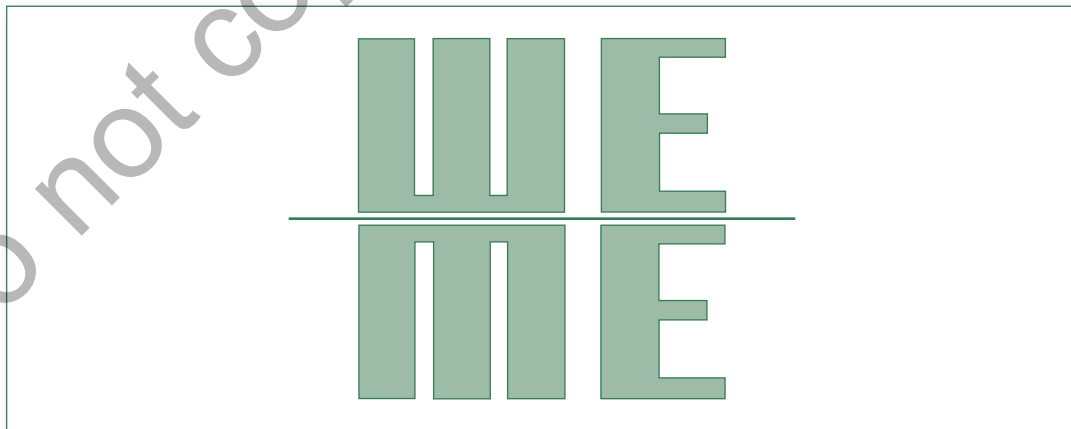
That is to say, in their upbringings, the high-hope children learned about the importance of other people and their perspectives and the role that consideration for others plays in the effective pursuit of personal goals. Just as the high-hopers think of ME goals, then, they simultaneously can envision the WE goals of other people. Thus, ME and WE become reflections of each other (see Figure 2.5). The high-hope people thereby think automatically of both the ME goals and the WE goals. Remember, too, that it is the high-hopers who seem to reap the greatest rewards in terms of successful performances and life satisfactions. In addition, being able to see things from a ME perspective and a WE perspective allows us all to interact with a larger group of individuals, even those who come from different perspectives than our own: "As the heterogeneity of American culture continues to expand, more opportunities for meaningful interaction between differing ethnic/racial groups have emerged than ever before" (Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2013, p. 198). Being rigidly ME or WE may be problematic for these types of interactions.

## Thinking About Your Own Life

Now that you have explored various issues related to the individualist and collectivist perspectives, it also may be informative to take a closer look at your own life. Have you ever thought about all the activities you undertake with an eye toward whether you would prefer to do them alone or with other people? We sometimes go about our lives on "automatic pilot" and do not give much thought to how we want to spend our time. Our point here is to help you get a better sense of your preferences for doing things alone or with others. Accordingly, we have developed a short exercise to help you to gain insights about your own desires to pursue goals alone or with others. If you have not done so already, complete the exercise "Being Alone or With Others" in the Personal Mini-Experiments (pp. 35–36).

Most people who have undertaken this exercise have been somewhat surprised at how important other people are to them as they try to reach desired goals. In fact, other people may be quite helpful when it comes to the goals we deem most important. Many of us, especially if we are individualists, see ourselves as being fairly independent as we go about our lives. But is this really so? As we pursue our goals, we also may be explicitly and implicitly intertwined with other people who help us reach them. Thus, our collectivist tendencies may be far stronger than we may have thought. A typical insight reached by people after completing this Personal Mini-Experiment is that they are *both* individualists and collectivists. Likewise, such individualistic and collectivistic thoughts and actions may vary according to the surrounding circumstances and people.

## Suggestions for ME People (Individualists)

You now should have better ideas about your individualist and collectivist tendencies. In this section and the next, therefore, we offer some suggestions to help you navigate more effectively in environments in which people hold perspectives that differ from the individualistic or collectivistic ones that you typically hold. In this section, we offer advice for collectivists who will at times interact with individualists. (For an in-depth analysis of how individualists and collectivists can interact more effectively, we recommend the 1988 article by Triandis, Brislin, and Hui, "Cross-Cultural Training Across the Individualism-Collectivism Divide.")

To begin, individualists often perceive collectivists as being far too "laid back" and lacking in competitiveness. In this regard, it helps to realize that collectivists derive their sense of status from their group memberships and not from their personal accomplishments.

Individualists must take into account the collectivist norms in conducting business. That is to say, whereas the individualist may want to immediately get down to business when negotiating, the collectivists often expect some initial warm-up banter to set the stage. In this regard, collectivists want respect and patience between people (Cohen, 1991). When problem solving is needed, collectivists prefer that it be done at the group level, whereas individualists desire more one-on-one negotiating. Obviously, there are subtle differences, including important nonverbal gestures and cues, that must be honored when individualists and collectivists interact. Diversity can assist in productivity in a business due to the increase of ideas and thinking strategies (Cunningham, 2009), but if leaders are not cognizant of the differences in how collectivists and individualists interact, this gain could be lost.

Individualists should understand that collectivists want interpersonal harmony and therefore try very hard to avoid situations involving conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1994). In such circumstances, the individualists may view conflicts as a useful means of clearing the air so that people can move on to other matters, but they should realize that collectivists are quite concerned with saving face after such conflicts. Thus, individualists can help by solving problems before they escalate into huge confrontations. Similarly, the individualist should not push the collectivist into a corner by repeatedly asking confrontational "Why?" questions in response to which the collectivist must defend his or her position. Moreover, if conflict is necessary, the individualist should try, whenever possible, to help the collectivist maintain his or her pride (what sociologists call *face*).

## Suggestions for WE People (Collectivists)

In this section, we offer advice for collectivists to interact more effectively with individualists. Collectivists often see individualists as too competitive. One useful lesson here is to understand that individualists see their status as based on their personal accomplishments rather than on their memberships in groups. Moreover, the more recent the accomplishments, the more power they wield in terms of status. Thus, collectivists should not be shocked when individualists do not seem impressed with group successes that are based in large part on lineage, family name, age, or gender (males may have more status in some collectivistic societies). It may help the collectivist to use recent accomplishments to attain status in the eyes of individualists with whom they interact.

Collectivists' dependence on cooperative solutions to dilemmas may not work when they are dealing with individualists. Instead, the collectivist must be able to take into account the "What's in it for me" perspective of the individualist in order to understand the latter's reactions during negotiations. Likewise, the normal arguing of individualists should not be interpreted by collectivists as intentionally hurtful behavior; this is just how the individualist conducts business. Thus, whereas a collectivist interacting with another collectivist may interpret "Let's have lunch" as a genuine invitation, it is often merely social talk when uttered by the individualist. Recognizing these cultural differences may help to diminish hurt feelings and misunderstandings, both of which can be detrimental to meaningful interactions between groups.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

It is important to recognize that, in discussing Western and Eastern thoughts in this chapter, a central tenet of Eastern ways of life is broken in the decidedly Western, didactic teaching method used to bring this information to students of positive psychology. The traditional Easterner would object to the notion that the concepts here could be learned from mere words and would argue that only life experience would suffice. As part of Eastern teachings, self-exploration and actual hands-on experience are essential for true understanding of the concepts that are presented in only an introductory fashion in this chapter. Thus, we encourage students to seek out more experience of these ideas in everyday life and to attempt to discover the relevance of strengths such as hope, compassion, and harmony in your own lives, regardless of your cultural background. Ideas that stem from Eastern ideology can be relevant for Westerners who want to discover new ways of thinking about human functioning, and vice versa. Challenge yourself to be open minded about the types of characteristics to which you assign the label "strength" and about different perspectives, and remember that different traditions bring with them different values.

Stepping back and taking a "big-picture" view of how the people from various parts of our planet get along with each other, it is obvious that we do not have a very good record. Think of the irony in the fact that historians tend to view peace as anomalous periods between major conflicts of cultures. We wonder to what degree the previous warring of nations has reflected the difficulties of individualists and collectivists in understanding and getting along with each other (see Huntington, 1993).

There is an exceedingly important lesson here for individuals residing in the United States. Namely, those with individualist perspectives must realize that their views are not widely shared around the world. It has been estimated that 70% of the present 6 and a half billion or so people on Earth take a collectivist view of people and their interactions (Triandis, 1995). Let's do the math here: *That is about 4 and a half billion collectivists and 2 billion individualists.* As cherished as the individualist perspective held by many United States citizens may be, *individualists are the minority in a world populated by collectivists.*

The realization that all people are part of a larger whole may grow in the twenty-first century. We are becoming increasingly interdependent, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the operation of global markets that influence many countries (Keohane, 1993). The rapid change in our telecommunication technologies also has led to a globalization that has raised our consciousness about other peoples around the globe (Friedman, 2005; Holton, 2000; Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000).

In thinking about our relationships with each other, our futures will rest upon a willingness to cooperate and come together. Although the pursuit of specialness certainly can and has produced benefits for humankind, if too many people act in pursuit of their own individuality, we will miss our chance to work together to build shared cultures.

Considering the increased global access we have to one another as technology shrinks the distance between us, and the ever-increasing diversity occurring in the United States in particular, we are poised on the cusp of a major change in the balancing of individualism and collectivism—the needs of the "one" and the "many" (Newbrough, 1995; Snyder & Feldman, 2000). As such, the positive psychology of US may be just around the corner.

## APPENDIX: THE NEED FOR UNIQUENESS SCALE

*Directions:* The following statements concern your perceptions about yourself in several situations. Rate your agreement with each statement by using a scale in which 1 denotes strong disagreement, 5 denotes strong agreement, and 2, 3, and 4 represent intermediate judgments. In the blanks before each statement, place a number from 1 to 5 from the following scale:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Strongest Disagreement** | | | | **Strongest Agreement** |
| There are no right or wrong answers, so select the number that most closely reflects you on each statement. Take your time, and consider each statement carefully. | | | | |
| _____ 1. When I am in a group of strangers, I am not reluctant to express my opinion publicly. | | | | |
| _____ 2. I find that criticism affects my self-esteem. | | | | |
| _____ 3. I sometimes hesitate to use my own ideas for fear that they might be impractical. | | | | |
| _____ 4. I think society should let reason lead it to new customs and throw aside old habits or mere traditions. | | | | |
| _____ 5. People frequently succeed in changing my mind. | | | | |
| _____ 6. I find it sometimes amusing to upset the dignity of teachers, judges, and "cultured" people. | | | | |
| _____ 7. I like wearing a uniform because it makes me proud to be a member of the organization it represents. | | | | |
| _____ 8. People have sometimes called me "stuck-up." | | | | |
| _____ 9. Others' disagreements make me uncomfortable. | | | | |
| _____10. I do not always need to live by the rules and standards of society. | | | | |
| _____11. I am unable to express my feelings if they result in undesirable consequences. | | | | |
| _____12. Being a success in one's career means making a contribution that no one else has made. | | | | |
| _____13. It bothers me if people think I am being too unconventional. | | | | |
| _____14. I always try to follow rules. | | | | |
| _____15. If I disagree with a superior on his or her views, I usually do not keep it to myself. | | | | |
| _____16. I speak up in meetings in order to oppose those whom I feel are wrong. | | | | |
| _____17. Feeling "different" in a crowd of people makes me feel uncomfortable. | | | | |
| _____18. If I must die, let it be an unusual death rather than an ordinary death in bed. | | | | |

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Strongest Disagreement** | | | | **Strongest Agreement** |
| _____19. I would rather be just like everyone else than be called a "freak." | | | | |
| _____20. I must admit I find it hard to work under strict rules and regulations. | | | | |
| _____21. I would rather be known for always trying new ideas than for employing well-trusted methods. | | | | |
| _____22. It is better to agree with the opinions of others than to be considered a disagreeable person. | | | | |
| _____23. I do not like to say unusual things to people. | | | | |
| _____24. I tend to express my opinions publicly, regardless of what others say. | | | | |
| _____25. As a rule, I strongly defend my own opinions. | | | | |
| _____26. I do not like to go my own way. | | | | |
| _____27. When I am with a group of people, I agree with their ideas so that no arguments will arise. | | | | |
| _____28. I tend to keep quiet in the presence of persons of higher ranks, experience, etc. | | | | |
| _____29. I have been quite independent and free from family rule. | | | | |
| _____30. Whenever I take part in group activities, I am somewhat of a nonconformist. | | | | |
| _____31. In most things in life, I believe in playing it safe rather than taking a gamble. | | | | |
| _____32. It is better to break rules than always to conform with an impersonal society. | | | | |
| To calculate the total Need for Uniqueness Scale score, first reverse each of the scores on items 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, and 31. That is, on these items only, perform the following reversals: 1—> 5; 2—> 4; 3—> 3; 4—> 2; 5—> 1. Then, add the scores on all 32 items, using the reversed scores for the aforementioned items. Higher scores reflect a higher need for uniqueness. | | | | |

## KEY TERMS

**Athenian tradition:** Western philosophical tradition focused on the writings and teachings of Plato and Aristotle.

**Buddhism:** A philosophical and religious system based on the teachings of Buddha: Life is dominated by suffering caused by desire; suffering ends when we end

desire; and enlightenment obtained through right conduct, wisdom, and meditation releases one from desire, suffering, and rebirth.

**Collectivism:** A cultural value that prizes the concepts of sharing, cooperation, interdependence, and duty to the group.

A perspective in which the needs of the group are placed above the needs of the individual.

**Compassion:** An aspect of humanity that involves looking outside oneself and thinking about others as we care for and identify with them. In positive psychology, compassion requires (1) that the difficulty of the recipient be serious; (2) that the recipient's difficulties are not self-inflicted; and (3) that we, as observers, are able to identify with the recipient's suffering.

**Confucianism:** A philosophical and religious system developed from the teachings of Confucius. Confucianism values love for humanity, duty, etiquette, and truthfulness. Devotion to family, including ancestors, is also emphasized.

**Enlightenment:** A human's capacity to transcend desire and suffering and to see things clearly for what they are.

**Harmony:** A state of consensus or balance. Eastern traditions view harmony as essential to happiness.

**Hinduism:** A diverse body of religion, philosophy, and cultural practice native to and predominant in India. Hinduism is characterized by a belief in the interconnectedness of all things and emphasizes personal improvement with the goal of transcending the cycle of reincarnation.

**Hope:** As defined by Snyder, goal-directed thinking in which a person has the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals (pathway thinking) and the requisite motivations to use those routes (agency thinking). Snyder believes that hope is not genetically based but an entirely learned and deliberate way of thinking. (See Chapter 8.)

**Individualism:** A cultural value that emphasizes individual achievement, competition, personal freedom, and autonomy. A perspective in which the needs of the individual are placed above the needs of the group.

**Islam:** A philosophical and religious tradition based on the teachings of Muhammad that emphasizes duty to one's fellow man. Followers believe in Allah as the creator and benefactor in all things.

**Judeo-Christian tradition:** Western religious tradition emphasizing Christianity and Judaism.

**Need for uniqueness:** The pursuit of individualistic goals to produce a sense of specialness.

**Nirvana:** A state in which the self is freed from desire. This is the final destination in the Buddhist philosophy.

**Taoism:** A philosophical and religious system developed by Lao-Tzu that advocates a simple, honest life and noninterference in the course of natural events.