CHAPTER TEN

In Their Own Words: Well-Being at Midlife among High School-Educated and College-Educated Adults

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How healthy are we? A national study of well-being at midlife. (2004) Brim, OG, Ryff, CD, & Kessler, RC (eds). Chicago, IL The University of Chicago Press, 273-319

What does it mean to experience well-being at midlife in contemporary America? According to current media accounts, well-being requires being healthy, staying active, looking young, having money, and enjoying oneself. Do these popular claims have it right? Are these the open secrets to well-being? Is the path to life satisfaction and the life well lived the same for everyone, or are there a variety of ways to be well? And does the experience of well-being vary systematically by sociocultural factors such as education or gender?

In this chapter we explore the meanings and sources of well-being with a subsample of respondents from MIDUS, all of whom reported that they were reasonably happy and satisfied with their lives. On the whole, respondents in the MIDUS survey participate in much of the same media and consumer culture and live lives shaped by common legal and political systems. Thus, one would expect to find similarities in how these individuals define and experience the "good life." Although our research indeed revealed several areas of common ground, we were repeatedly struck not by the homogeneity of their lives but by the differences in the worlds we observed. Some of the most striking differences in living environments, daily routines, and typical social interactions among respondents are those associated with educational level.

Relative to the worlds of the college-educated, the worlds of the MIDUS high school–educated respondents are characterized by fewer financial resources, family members with less advanced educations, higher rates of divorce, and earlier death of parents. These respondents also report that they have more health problems, exercise less, and are three times more likely to smoke cigarettes.[1] In contrast, the worlds of the college-educated MIDUS respondents typically include family members with more advanced education, longer lives, lower rates of divorce, and almost twice the total household income than high school–educated respondents. Furthermore, the college-educated report decidedly fewer health problems, lower rates of smoking, and greater levels of participation

in physical exercise. In spite of these apparent contrasts in the lives of the college-educated and the high school–educated MIDUS respondents, both groups report being reasonably well satisfied and happy with their lives. How can people faced with a different set of life circumstances and engaged in comparatively diverse everyday routines claim to experience similar levels of well-being?

We hypothesize that although Americans at midlife are likely to agree on much of what it means to have a good life, the uniqueness of their worlds (indexed here by level of education) affords and requires somewhat different ways of being a person and is associated with different ways of "being" well or experiencing well-being.[2] We suggest that well-being is intimately tied to what people are doing in their lives, that is, to their understandings of their everyday lived experience, including how they make sense of themselves, their actions, and their places in the world—and that their perception of the world is, in part, systematically determined by the opportunities and constraints associated with their level of education.

A Sociocultural Analysis

The gauge of individual well-being entails more than just a summary of previous actions and experiences. It involves an awareness of what is good, what is self, what is moral, and a sense of how one is doing with respect to these dynamic local norms. These standards are often quite diverse and specific to particular communities and periods of time. Images, ideals, and norms of the "proper" way to be, the "right" way to feel, and the "appropriate" way to think are derived primarily from the various sociocultural worlds (delineated by shared meanings and patterns of relationships among families, friends, churches, workplaces, neighborhoods, and regions of the country) in which people engage (Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 1997; Oyserman and Markus 1993; Shweder 1990). Well-being then reflects and requires the sense that one fits in, belongs, or is a member in good standing in some set of communities, and an analysis of well-being may require some assessment of these contexts.

A representative sample of Americans like those in MIDUS can be expected to hold some understandings of the good life in common (see Markus, Plaut, and Lachman, chap. 21, this volume). We expect those understandings to derive from their engagement in institutions such as the national media and a common legal and political culture. In particular, we hypothesized that for nearly all Americans, the definition of a good life would include some concern with commitment to others and opportunity for self-expression (Bellah et al. 1985; Hewitt 1989; Rossi 2001).

The high school–educated and the college-educated may, however, be expected to diverge in their ideas of well-being because of their participation in *local* worlds in which family, health, employment, and community experiences and expectations are likely to vary. On the basis of studies that have begun to link education with well-being, and education with self-definition (Heise 1990; Herzog et al. 1998; House et al. 1994; Marmot et al. 1997, 1991; Ryff et al. 1999; Ryff and Singer 1998), we hypothesized that well-being for the college-educated would involve elements of personal accomplishment and self-fulfillment. We also anticipated that the different lives and worlds of the high school–educated respondents would be associated with somewhat different ways of being well, ways that focused more on supportive relationships with close others such as family members. We also hypothesized that the two groups would typically approach the world in different ways given their various opportunities and constraints. In other words, they would have different conceptions of how to act in the world, divergent models of agency.

Educational variation in ways of well-being and agency may help explain a set of seemingly contradictory findings that emerge from the MIDUS data. On the one hand, using scales of positive psychological functioning (Ryff and Keyes 1995) that measure six specific components of well-being (environmental mastery, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, purpose, and personal growth), we find that the college-educated MIDUS respondents score higher on nearly every component of well-being than do the high school–educated respondents, and that they seem to have higher levels of well-being. On the other hand, when we examine those MIDUS questions that asked for general assessments of well-being—questions that required ratings of positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction with work, children, sex life, and life overall—we find that the average scores of the high school–educated and the college-educated respondents are high and do not differ significantly from one another. What might explain these different survey data patterns? One important aim of this chapter is to suggest an explanation for this apparent inconsistency.

The Everyday Well-Being Study

This chapter draws on data collected in the Everyday Well-Being Study (EDWB), which gave a subset of MIDUS respondents an opportunity to reflect on what well-being meant to them and to describe their experiences and understandings of well-being in their own words in a relatively unconstrained format. We asked respondents open-ended questions about

their positive experiences and about their ideas of well-being. The respondents' own words were analyzed in two ways. First, we analyzed the content, or explicit meaning, of *what* they said in answers to questions about well-being—for instance, whether they were talking about such topics as children, physical health, faith, or a positive attitude. Second, we analyzed their open-ended narrative responses for *how* they described their own actions and experiences—for instance, whether they described their actions as occurring in reaction to some external event or as a planned manipulation of the external environment. Building on concepts in the control and coping literature (Gurin and Brim 1984; Lachman and Weaver 1998), we developed a code for the type of agency evident in their descriptions of themselves and their lives. We determined, for each sentence in their narratives, whether the respondents described themselves and their actions in terms of adjusting to the world or of taking charge and acting directly on the world.

Unlike most qualitative studies, the EDWB ($N = 83$) was done within the context a national survey sample, MIDUS ($N = 3032$). This study-within-a-study afforded us the unprecedented opportunity to gain substantial insight into the everyday meanings and accounts of well-being as well as to compare, frame, and extend the findings from the open-ended interview with the closed-ended findings from the MIDUS sample for individuals of the same education level, age, gender, and levels of positive psychological functioning ($N = 504$). Embedding the interview study within a large-scale survey meant we had all the background data provided by MIDUS on each respondent and could use these results to amplify the well-being narratives provided by the EDWB. We were also able to select respondents with particular levels of education and well-being, and thereby compare our sample with the larger MIDUS sample of respondents having similar demographic profiles. When we observe differences in responses among our groups of EDWB respondents, we can suggest that these differences will be characteristic of the MIDUS subsample as a whole. As a consequence, we can have greater confidence when generalizing our findings than is the case in most other in-depth interview studies.

The EDWB is also unique in its focus on positive human functioning. Many sociological studies have focused on the links between socioeconomic status (including level of education) and reduced well-being and increased psychological distress (stress, depression, anxiety, etc.) (Dohrenwend et al. 1992; Kessler 1982; Kessler and Cleary 1980; Kubzansky, Kawachi, and Sparrow 1999; Link, Lennon, and Dohrenwend 1993;

Marmot et al. 1997). We chose in this study to concentrate on people (40- to 59-year-old men and women at each of two levels of education) who reported that their lives were going reasonably well, as measured by scales of positive psychological functioning (i.e., they were in the top two-thirds of the distribution), but who were differentially situated in society because of their level of education. We gave them the opportunity to share their own ideas about well-being and how to live a good life in America today. We were interested first in the common American response to what it means to have a good life, and then, how these responses may differ by level of education and gender. Although this study focuses mainly on educational variation in well-being, recent studies suggest that there is considerable cross-national variation in some meanings and practices of well-being (Diener and Suh 2000), and it is useful when theorizing about the sources of well-being to identify those patterns of well-being that are held by a majority of Americans, regardless of gender and education level.

Methods

EDWB Sample

The EDWB included a subsample of 83 individuals who (1) participated in the MIDUS national survey, (2) were randomly selected within the specified age, education level, and gender parameters discussed below, and (3) agreed to be audio-recorded during a face-to-face interview. The sample consists of 21 men with a bachelor's degree or further education, 22 women with a bachelor's degree or further education, 20 men with a high school diploma (but no further education), and 20 women with a high school diploma (but no further education). All respondents were between the ages of 40 and 59, and were selected from among those in the top two-thirds of psychological well-being as measured by Ryff's six dimensions of positive psychological functioning (Ryff and Keyes 1995). Within each education group, half of the respondents scored at a "moderate" level of positive psychological functioning and half scored at a "high" level. The subsample includes residents from twenty-one states, representing a wide diversity of geographic regions in the continental United States. The participation rate for our study was 86.5 percent.

Comparability of the EDWB Sample with the MIDUS Sample

Before beginning analyses of the well-being data, we established that our qualitative subsample of 83 respondents was reasonably representative of MIDUS respondents of the same age (40–59), education level,

TABLE 1 Psychological Well-Being

	Everday Well-Being Sample ($N = 83$)				
		High School		College	
	All ($N = 83$)	Men ($N = 20$)	Women ($N = 20$)	Men ($N = 21$)	Women ($N = 22$)
Psychological well-being					
Self-acceptance^{eE}	17.82 (2.54)	17.00 (2.41)	17.00 (2.88)	19.00 (2.10)	18.18 (2.32)
Purpose in life^{eE}	17.93 (2.89)	17.50 (2.93)	16.23 (2.98)	18.26 (2.75)	19.55 (1.97)
Environmental mastery^{eE}	17.36 (2.40)	16.90 (2.27)	16.30 (2.43)	18.60 (1.89)	17.55 (2.50)
Positive relations with others^{EG}	17.54 (3.26)	17.10 (3.88)	18.35 (2.66)	17.14 (3.64)	17.59 (2.81)
Personal growth^{gEX}	19.28 (2.09)	18.10 (2.64)	19.90 (1.17)	18.90 (2.21)	20.14 (1.52)
Autonomy^{X}	17.60 (2.44)	17.75 (2.38)	17.45 (2.78)	17.62 (2.42)	17.59 (2.36)
Total psychological well-being^{eEX}	107.52 (9.14)	104.35 (11.52)	105.23 (8.90)	109.52 (7.09)	110.59 (7.61)

Notes: The superscripts indicate the significant difference within the EDWB sample (e = education effect, g = gender effect, x = interaction effect; $p < .05$) and the significant difference within the MIDUS comparable sample (E = education effect, G = gender effect, X = interaction effect; $p < .05$). The first number in each group is the mean; the second number, in parentheses, is the standard deviation.

gender, and psychological well-being ($N = 504$). Mentions of the MIDUS comparable sample throughout this chapter refer to this larger matched-age subsample. Tables 1–4 show mean scores and population proportions of a variety of sociodemographic factors as well as numerous indicators of physical and psychological well-being. The columns headed "All" represent mean values and percentages for the entire EDWB sample and the MIDUS comparable sample, respectively. Using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare group means, and chi-square tests for population proportions, we found that the EDWB qualitative subsample did not differ significantly from the MIDUS comparable sample, with the exception of one variable. The EDWB subjects were significantly more satisfied with their work situations than were those in the larger MIDUS comparable sample (see table 2).

Well-Being, Sociodemographic, and Health Profiles by Education Level and Gender for the MIDUS Comparable Sample

As shown in tables 1–4 (superscript E), there are significant education-related differences within the MIDUS comparable sample. The

in EDWB and MIDUS Samples

MIDUS Comparable Sample ($N = 504$)				
	High School		College	
All ($N = 504$)	Men ($N = 102$)	Women ($N = 132$)	Men ($N = 151$)	Women ($N = 119$)
17.98	17.57	16.98	18.68	18.54
(2.67)	(2.51)	(3.17)	(2.30)	(2.22)
18.02	17.56	17.55	18.53	18.38
(2.82)	(3.34)	(2.30)	(2.31)	(2.59)
17.20	17.15	16.66	17.66	17.27
(2.86)	(2.85)	(2.90)	(2.83)	(2.81)
17.53	16.92	17.42	17.33	18.43
(3.36)	(3.60)	(3.38)	(3.54)	(2.68)
19.25	19.01	18.58	19.38	20.04
(2.15)	(2.15)	(2.72)	(1.85)	(1.41)
17.44	17.87	17.24	17.20	17.61
(2.78)	(2.65)	(3.04)	(2.67)	(2.71)
107.42	105.98	104.43	108.78	110.26
(8.62)	(9.52)	(9.43)	(7.79)	(6.39)

college-educated MIDUS comparable respondents scored higher than did their high school–educated counterparts on every aspect of positive psychological functioning (positive relations with others, self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose, environmental mastery) except one (autonomy) (table 1). Nonetheless, high school–educated and college-educated respondents did not differ in scores on a number of MIDUS questions that probe for more general assessments of well-being (i.e., ratings of positive affect, negative affect, general life satisfaction, and satisfaction with work, children, and sex life) (table 2). We found, however, that the college-educated respondents were more satisfied with their financial situations and that those with a high school education reported higher levels of satisfaction with their marriage/close relationship.

Using the MIDUS data, we also examined a set of indicators typically assumed to gauge quality of life, including income, marital status, parental education, and physical health symptoms and behaviors. As evident from tables 3 and 4, there were striking differences between high school–educated and college-educated respondents: namely, high school–educated respondents earned less money, had spouses who earned less, were more likely to be divorced, had more children, had less-educated parents, and had poorer health (i.e., they reported worse physical health, more chronic conditions, more symptoms such as headaches and back pain, more smoking, higher waist–hip ratios, and

TABLE 2 Affect and Satisfaction in

	EDWB Sample ($N = 83$)				
		High School		College	
	All ($N = 83$)	Men ($N = 20$)	Women ($N = 20$)	Men ($N = 21$)	Women ($N = 22$)
Affect indicators					
Positive affect	21.76 (3.66)	22.60 (3.46)	21.50 (2.93)	21.48 (3.56)	21.50 (4.56)
Negative affect^{G}	7.63 (2.02)	7.55 (2.06)	8.05 (1.51)	7.19 (1.40)	7.76 (2.81)
Satisfaction indicators					
Satisfaction with finances^{E}	6.93 (1.45)	6.65 (1.09)	6.65 (2.01)	7.14 (1.15)	7.24 (1.37)
Satisfaction with work*	8.30 (1.71)	8.00 (2.50)	8.78 (1.56)	8.10 (1.04)	8.36 (1.36)
Satisfaction with relationship w/children^{G}	8.75 (1.45)	8.83 (1.42)	8.79 (1.87)	8.59 (1.33)	8.76 (1.22)
Satisfaction w/marriage/ close relatives^{E}	8.70 (1.21)	9.00 (1.24)	8.87 (1.41)	8.53 (1.31)	8.36 (1.74)
Satisfaction with sex life^{G}	6.30 (2.82)	6.80 (2.50)	6.05 (3.26)	5.90 (2.95)	6.43 (2.66)
Satisfaction with life	8.37 (0.94)	8.55 (0.83)	8.30 (1.30)	8.29 (0.78)	8.33 (0.80)

Notes: The superscripts indicate the significant difference within the EDWB sample (e = education effect, g = gender effect, x = interaction effect; $p < .05$) and the significant difference within the MIDUS comparable sample (E = education effect, G = gender effect, X = interaction effect; $p < .05$). The first number in each group is the mean; the second number, in parentheses, is the standard deviation.

*Significant difference between the EDWB sample and the MIDUS comparable sample ($p < .05$).

less exercise). We hypothesized that an analysis of respondents' narratives about well-being would help clarify (1) the high school–educated respondents' equally high scores on general assessments of well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect), in spite of their significantly lower quality-of-life indicators, and (2) the discrepancy between the general assessments of well-being results (i.e., the absence of education-level differences) and positive psychological-functioning results (i.e., the presence of education-level differences).

Although the primary focus of the present analysis is on differences associated with level of education, we also explored gender differences in well-being (whose significance is also designated in tables 1–4, superscript G). Analyses revealed that relative to women, men from the MIDUS comparable sample reported higher positive affect and greater satisfaction with their sex lives. They hade higher total household and

EDWB and MIDUS Samples

MIDUS Comparable Sample ($N = 504$)				
	High School		College	
All ($N = 504$)	Men ($N = 102$)	Women ($N = 132$)	Men ($N = 151$)	Women ($N = 119$)
21.33	21.60	20.80	21.36	21.21
(3.73)	(4.12)	(4.01)	(3.19)	(3.70)
8.18	8.05	8.76	7.80	8.12
(2.56)	(2.71)	(2.91)	(2.25)	(2.30)
6.58	6.20	6.34	6.94	6.73
(1.90)	(1.77)	(2.12)	(1.62)	(2.01)
7.75	7.57	7.61	7.90	7.90
(1.85)	(1.84)	(2.21)	(1.72)	(1.56)
8.70	8.39	9.02	8.53	8.84
(1.37)	(1.75)	(1.27)	(1.27)	(1.09)
8.50	8.84	8.54	8.40	8.24
(1.72)	(1.43)	(1.75)	(1.77)	(1.85)
6.27	6.91	5.94	6.56	5.69
(2.81)	(2.51)	(3.23)	(2.51)	(2.82)
8.13	8.25	8.02	8.13	8.15
(1.26)	(1.10)	(1.52)	(1.07)	(1.29)

personal incomes, were more likely to be married, and were more likely to exercise vigorously. Men also reported having experienced greater levels of family abuse during childhood relative to women. Women from the MIDUS comparable sample scored higher than men on positive relations with others and reported greater satisfaction with relationships with their children. Their spouses earned more income and had higher levels of education. In addition, women reported higher levels of negative affect, more chronic health conditions, more daily symptoms of illness, more headaches, and more use of prescription medications and vitamins.

Finally, our analyses of the MIDUS comparable sample revealed a number of education by gender interaction effects on measures of psychological well-being (table 1, superscript X). Although men with a high school education scored higher than their female counterparts on personal growth, college-educated women scored higher than college men. A similar interaction was found in our measure of autonomy, with high school–educated men and college-educated women both scoring higher than high school–educated women and college-educated men, respectively. Furthermore, an interaction effect was noted in the positive psychological functioning scores in the same education by gender direction.

TABLE 3 Sociodemographics and Early Life

	EDWB Sample ($N = 83$)				
		High School		College	
	All ($N = 83$)	Men ($N = 20$)	Women ($N = 20$)	Men ($N = 21$)	Women ($N = 22$)
Sociodemographics					
Total household income, past year[egEG]	\$83,395 (65,403)	\$79,700 (69,738)	\$38,550 (19,490)	\$127,429 (74,325)	\$85,489 (57,596)
Personal earnings[egEG]	\$39,650 (39,956)	\$47,800 (45,570)	\$7,025 (9.264)	\$73,962 (35,855)	\$29,840 (26,489)
Spouse's earnings[egxEGX]	\$33,547 (27,501)	\$19,333 (17,010)	\$30,933 (17,026)	\$26,158 (19,777)	\$67,042 (32,946)
Married[gG]	78%	90%	75%	90%	59%
Ever divorced[E]	35%	45%	40%	19%	36%
Spouse's education[eEG]	3.00 (0.92)	2.47 (0.72)	2.27 (0.80)	3.42 (0.69)	3.85 (0.36)
Number of children[eE]	2.36 (1.44)	2.50 (1.54)	2.95 (1.54)	1.76 (1.34)	2.27 (1.20)
Early life and family background					
Mother's education[eE]	2.06	1.68 (0.75)	1.6 (0.75)	2.38 (1.02)	2.68 (0.95)
Father's education[eE]	1.99 (1.02)	1.58 (0.94)	1.32 (0.58)	2.29 (1.06)	2.68 (0.97)
Biological mother still alive	67%	59%	56%	71%	79%
Biological father still alive[E]	41%	44%	17%	45%	58%
Total abuse[G]	1.69 (0.569)	1.98 (0.57)	1.64 (0.47)	1.62 (0.45)	1.64 (0.74)

Notes: The superscripts indicate the significant difference within the EDWB sample (e = education effect, g = gender effect, x = interaction effect; $p < .05$) and the significant difference within the MIDUS comparable sample (E = education effect, G = gender effect, X = interaction effect; $p < .05$). The first number in each group is the mean; the second number, in parentheses, is the standard deviation.

Interviews and Procedures

In the course of the EDWB interviews, we explored the meaning of well-being and positive life events across several dimensions of time (e.g., past, present, future) and life domains (e.g., family, work, home, community) through thirty open-ended questions. Three experienced and trained interviewers conducted the interviews at either the respondents' home or a public location of their choice nearby. All interviews followed a strict protocol, and additional probes were used only to clarify meanings of terms, to elicit varied examples, or to bring the focus of the interview back to the question at hand.

Background in EDWB and MIDUS Samples

MIDUS Comparable Sample ($N = 504$)				
	High School		College	
All ($N = 504$)	Men ($N = 102$)	Women ($N = 132$)	Men ($N = 151$)	Women ($N = 119$)
$72,853	$55,228	$48,707	$98,839	$81,772
(57,180)	(37,766)	(37,925)	(67,802)	(58,405)
$36,595	$32,666	$14,639	$58,682	$36,290
(33,514)	(19,226)	(13,895)	(42,252)	(29,033)
$30,001	$15,171	$33,497	$21,217	$57,412
(31,011)	(16,459)	(27,505)	(21,827)	(41,542)
72%	78%	70%	79%	59%
38%	47%	45%	27%	39%
2.93	2.32	2.44	3.28	3.64
(0.95)	(0.75)	(0.90)	(0.81)	(0.63)
2.58	2.89	2.98	2.31	2.20
(1.58)	(1.58)	(1.56)	(1.40)	(1.69)
1.96	1.64	1.54	2.21	2.35
(9.91)	(0.69)	(0.69)	(0.93)	(0.99)
1.98	1.45	1.43	2.39	2.44
(1.10)	(0.74)	(0.66)	(1.16)	(1.28)
64%	63%	66%	68%	65%
42%	34%	36%	46%	49%
1.66	1.72	1.65	1.70	1.57
(0.47)	(0.47)	(0.50)	(0.43)	(0.49)

This chapter focuses specifically on respondents' answers to the following questions: (1) "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" and the follow-up probe, "Do you have anything to add about what's important for well-being?"; (2) "What do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?"; and (3) "What are your hopes for the future?" These three questions were selected from the original thirty questions because they were the most general probes about well-being and made reference to the past, present, and future.

Multiple members of the research team read and re-read a subset of transcript excerpts representing four respondent subgroups (high school–educated women, high school–educated men, college-educated women, and college-educated men) to develop inductive coding schemes. After several iterations, a consensus of codes was developed, and the transcripts were downloaded to create a database in a qualitative software package (QSR NUD*IST). Researchers analyzed the data on a

TABLE 4 Physical Health and Health

	EDWB Sample ($N = 83$)				
		High School		College	
	All ($N = 83$)	Men ($N = 20$)	Women ($N = 20$)	Men ($N = 21$)	Women ($N = 22$)
Physical health and health behavior					
Subjective physical health[eE]	3.65 (1.01)	3.35 (0.93)	3.25	3.95	4.00
Chronic conditions[egEG]	2.16 (2.26)	2.10 (1.25)	3.50 (3.33)	1.24 (1.00)	1.95 (2.21)
Total symptoms in the past 30 days[egEG]	7.58 (6.92)	7.00 (5.78)	12.49 (8.51)	4.91 (4.85)	6.14 (5.99)
Headaches[EG]	1.23 (1.18)	0.90 (0.97)	1.65 (1.34)	1.19 (1.21)	1.19 (1.33)
Lower back pain[E]	0.96 (1.38)	1.35 (1.57)	1.05 (1.23)	0.86 (1.46)	0.60 (1.23)
No. of prescription medications[gG]	0.80 (1.13)	0.37 (0.50)	1.65 (1.69)	0.48 (0.68)	0.71 (0.85)
Waist–hip ratio[eE]	0.94 (.06)	0.96 (.05)	0.98 (.05)	0.92 (.05)	0.91 (.05)
Regularly smokes cigarettes now[eE]	13%	30%	20%	5%	0%
Takes vitamins 2+ times/week[G]	52%	55%	70%	43%	41%
Moderate exercise (times/month)[E]	9.48 (4.85)	8.14 (5.19)	9.00 (4.81)	9.31 (4.81)	11.20 (4.36)
Vigorous exercise (times/month)[eG]	6.35 (5.40)	5.00 (4.88)	5.28 (5.58)	7.86 (5.39)	7.23 (5.54)

Notes: The superscripts indicate the significant difference within the EDWB sample (e = education effect, g = gender effect, x = interaction effect; $p < .05$) and the significant difference within the MIDUS comparable sample (E = education effect, G = gender effect, X = interaction effect; $p < .05$). The first number in each group is the mean; the second number, in parentheses, is the standard deviation.

question-by-question basis and, where appropriate, grouped questions together. The analyses began by applying the inductive consensus codes to all the data and combining or eliminating categories that did not produce high-enough frequencies (at least 10 percent of the total population). This process resulted in a number of major categories (designated in this chapter by the words in small capital letters). A number of the major categories were fairly general (e.g., FAMILY), and thus several subcategories could be identified within them, which are designated in this chapter by italic typeface (e.g., *Spouse, Offspring*). The percentages recorded here for the various subcategories represent the percentage of respondents within the major category that mentioned the subcategory.

Behavior in EDWB and MIDUS Samples

MIDUS Comparable Sample ($N = 504$)				
	High School		College	
All ($N = 504$)	Men ($N = 102$)	Women ($N = 132$)	Men ($N = 151$)	Women ($N = 119$)
3.62	3.31	3.43	3.83	3.84
(0.94)	(0.90)	(1.01)	(0.86)	(0.89)
2.05	2.13	2.79	1.45	1.94
(2.28)	(2.36)	(2.83)	(1.56)	(2.10)
8.21	7.67	11.03	6.38	7.88
(6.72)	(6.91)	(7.94)	(5.04)	(5.97)
1.27	1.16	1.63	1.03	1.30
(1.26)	(1.27)	(1.40)	(1.08)	(1.21)
1.27	1.48	1.48	1.09	1.07
(1.58)	(1.66)	(1.71)	(1.46)	(1.46)
0.73	0.57	1.10	0.37	0.93
(1.14)	(1.16)	(1.36)	(0.66)	(1.17)
0.95	0.98	0.97	0.94	0.94
(.08)	(.08)	(.09)	(.05)	(.07)
21%	34%	29%	13%	10%
50%	37%	55%	47%	59%
9.19	8.67	8.79	9.30	9.95
(4.66)	(5.03)	(4.63)	(4.61)	(4.35)
6.26	7.20	4.42	7.37	6.02
(5.20)	(5.09)	(4.61)	(5.44)	(5.05)

We devoted a great deal of effort to developing reliable coding categories that would consistently capture the ideas and meanings generated in the well-being narratives. Low-frequency and low-reliability categories were eliminated or merged with other categories unless they were small subcategories that held particular theoretical interest (e.g., the subcategory *Friends*). Kappa coefficients, used to assess interrater reliability, were calculated for seventy-seven categories (the total number of major categories and subcategories). For the question "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" and the follow-up probe, "Do you have anything to add about what's important for well-being?" the average reliability for the thirty-three categories (including agency categories) was .83 (range = .38–1.00), with 76 percent of categories showing reliability greater than .70 and 88 percent of categories greater than .65. For the question "What do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?" the average reliability for twenty-eight categories was .72 (range = .40–.92), with 61

percent of categories greater than .70 and 75 percent of categories greater than .65. For the question "What are your hopes for the future?" the average reliability for sixteen categories was .78 (range = .51–.95), with 56 percent of categories greater than .70 and 88 percent of categories greater than .65.

In reporting the results of our analyses, we first discuss the percentage of respondents who answered in each of the major categories. We then probe more deeply into the meanings of these frequent responses by examining subcategories within the major coding categories as well as the actual text of the responses. The overarching aim is to summarize respondents' interview responses both quantitatively (e.g., how many respondents mentioned a particular category) and qualitatively (e.g., what were the exact words and examples used by individuals within particular categories). Chi-square tests were used on our binary data to determine significant differences between gender and education subgroups. In reports of statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences in parentheses throughout the text, M stands for men, W for women, HS for high school–educated, and BA for college-educated.

Throughout this analysis we compare the narratives of the EDWB respondents with survey data from the MIDUS comparable sample. It is the premise of our study that the interview data illuminate, via respondents' self-generated thoughts, aspects of well-being not captured by current questionnaire measures.

Results

Consensus in Well-Being American Style

What Does It Mean to Have a Good Life?

> *High school–educated woman:* A good life is having the things you need. Bein' happy and content. Having your health. You know, with the things you need. I mean, we always want more than what we have. I guess that's human nature. But I'm talkin' about havin' a roof over your head, a job, some kind of security. That would be to me—it's havin' a good life. Friends and family. Without them, maybe I'd be a little lonely.
>
> *College-educated woman:* I think a life should be challenging. So if everything goes too easily it's not a good life. So you should have some challenges, and you should be able to have to push yourself a little bit to reach some goals. I think

> having a strong family and a loving relationship with your family is important. And I think that leads toward a good life. I feel having work that you enjoy leads toward a good life. And I believe in having outside activities that you find either relaxing or comforting or challenging, whether they be hobbies or sports or something you can involve yourself in. [They] all kind of blend together. Going back to that initial perception of mine that everything should be balanced in order to have a good overall feeling about yourself and what you're doing.

We began our analysis of well-being by examining EDWB respondents' answers to the question "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" as well as answers to a follow-up probe, "Do you have anything to add about what's important for well-being?" We noted the percentage of respondents who gave a particular type of answer at least once in their answers. There were no education-level or gender differences in the number of sentences used to answer the questions. In this section we report the percentage of respondents who mentioned a given category for all eighty-three respondents; differences within categories (by education and gender) are reported in the section on diversity in well-being.

In their own words, what matters most to the EDWB respondents is relationships with other people (especially family), good physical health, the opportunity to enjoy oneself, financial security, self-development, and satisfactory jobs. Figure 1 displays the most frequently mentioned categories in respondents' answers to these two questions (all major categories reported were mentioned by at least 25 percent of the respondents). Major categories and their corresponding subcategories, along with a representative example of responses, can be found in table 5. Throughout the chapter we include verbatim examples in the tables to demonstrate the breadth of the categories (the span of content each category encompasses) and to reveal that despite the seemingly personal and individual nature of well-being, there is considerable overlap among respondents in how they answer a given question, and a strong consensus is often evident even with the very words used to answer.

The highest-frequency categories that emerged in response to thinking about a good life reflected the social nature of well-being. This idea was elaborated in multiple ways. As one respondent summarized his sentiment, "You can't live in a vacuum . . . you have to build friendships

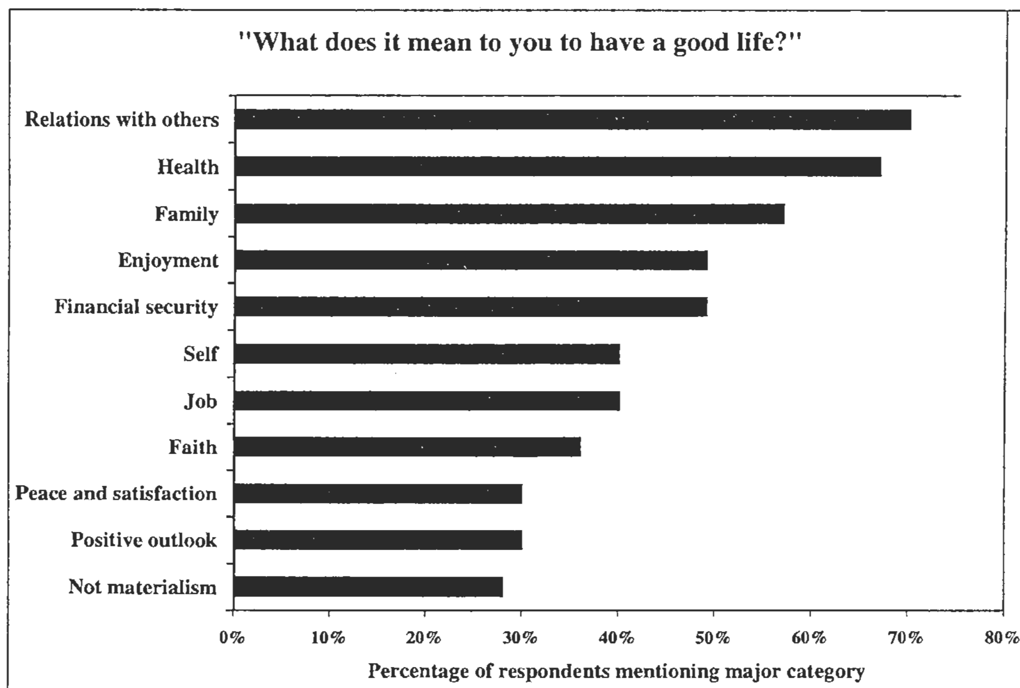

FIGURE 1. Responses to the question "What does it mean to you to have a good life?"

and relationships that are meaningful." Indeed, 70 percent of respondents agreed that RELATIONS WITH OTHERS was a major component of well-being. Most respondents who mentioned RELATIONS WITH OTHERS also mentioned FAMILY, another high-frequency category that was included in RELATIONS WITH OTHERS. The category FAMILY (57 percent of all respondents) was further differentiated into four subcategories, which are designated by italic typeface. Although respondents generating the FAMILY category most often used the general term "family," 38 percent of the respondents who mentioned FAMILY specifically mentioned their *Spouses,* 17 percent mentioned their *Offspring,* 15 percent mentioned *Parents and siblings,* and 13 percent referred to their own *Upbringing.*

What is it about social relationships that make them so important to a sense of well-being? Six specific subcategories pertaining to qualities of social relationships that emerged within RELATIONS WITH OTHERS help illuminate what it is about the company of other people that seems crucial to living a good life. The high-frequency subcategories included a *Positive evaluation of others* (49 percent of respondents mentioning RELATIONS WITH OTHERS); *Loving and caring* (37 percent), an indication that relationships with other people are important because people love, care, and support each other emotionally; *Advising and respecting*

TABLE 5 What Does It Mean to You to Have a Good Life?

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Relations with others[a] *Positive evaluation* *Loving and caring* *Advising and respecting* *Time together* *Instructions* *Financial help*	• "I also have friends that are nice and extended family that's nice." • "A good life means: being loving, peaceful, working together." • "That's part of well-being to me—making connections, finding out what other people think about things." • "We devote time when we just sit down and talk to each other, and try to be very, very open, and not keep things bottled up inside of us, from my husband on down to the kids." • "I know when I'm wrong, I'll admit it. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen." • "I'm very appreciative of the fact that I have some equity that I've been able to put money aside for my daughter's education and something toward my retirement."
Health	• "The basic thing is you have to sleep tight, and not smoke, which I keep tellin' my husband." • "If you're not healthy you don't have a very good time. Nothing is as much fun." • "Your body is God's temple, on loan, so you shouldn't abuse it with anything to excess."
Family[a] *Spouse* *Offspring* *Parents/siblings* *Upbringing*	• "Someone to share [life] with who has the same outlook on life that you do." • "My kids are a constant factor in that as long as I think that my kids are doing okay, it's pretty easy for me to be doing okay." • "Having mom making my life good too." • "You have to be nurtured as a child."
Enjoyment	• "You have to enjoy, to be able to smell the roses a little bit as well as to do a good job." • "A sense of humor is real important to me. Not taking yourself too seriously all the time." • "Taking those vacations, cross-country skiing with my wife, downhill skiing with my daughter . . . Just doing those things that are exciting and fun and memorable."
Financial security	• "To make an income where I'm not having to worry about how the bills are going to get paid, or if they're going to get paid."

(*continued*)

TABLE 5 *continued*

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
	• "Not being wealthy by any means, it's never been particularly important to me, but being comfortable, and . . . having enough money that you don't have to take all the darn creditors' calls." • "A good life is having the things you need. But I'm talkin' about havin' a roof over your head, a job, some kind of security."
Self *Know/love the self* *Purpose and fulfillment autonomy* *Seeking new learning Accomplishment*	• "You really need to know who you are and what works for you, what you like doing. Don't try to be a square peg in a round hole." • "Feeling fulfilled, in general terms. That can come . . . from totally different places for different people." • "Being able to do what I want to do, when I want to do it." • "Not to be afraid to try different things like . . . I have so many people that I see that are afraid of the computer." • "People have certain abilities, certain potentials, and I think you have to fulfill them."
Job	• "When you're on a job, take care of the job. Work, do what the person tells you to do on a job. A job will take care of you." • "I think it's very important to wake up in the morning and want to do what you're doing, rather than drag yourself into work." • "It means having a situation where you can feel that you are involved in meaningful activity—meaningful work, typically, though it doesn't have to be work."
Faith	• "People who haven't had that belief in God have had a lot more trouble handling problems. They just really don't have anything to turn to." • "What's most important in my life is to maintain a level of spirituality. But it comes from in here. It doesn't come at all from the belief in a particular practice, although I get very moved when I go to an Easter mass with my wife." • "See I can go sit in church, and then you can come just as peaceful as you can. I think you really need it."

(*continued*)

TABLE 5 *continued*

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Peace and satisfaction	• "A good life is a life in which I'm at peace with whatever is going on in my life. And that takes a lot of acceptance, it takes a lot of tolerance, to know that no matter what happens, that I can still have peace inside." • "To be content with your lot in life and not necessarily be happy all the time, but generally you're in a situation where the good outweighs the bad." • "I purposely try to be a calm person. And it doesn't mean I'm not passionate about ideas or things."
Positivity	• "Life can't get you down if you have that sense of humor, the playfulness, the some kind of sense of turning tragedy into something fun." • "You've got to believe in the fact that things are going to be okay, that you can prevail in the face of adversity." • "My mantra, if I have one, is instead of thinking problems, think challenges."
Not materialism	• "Having [a] certain kind of inner happiness, not something that can come from outside, from material possessions, but from just a very good feeling on the inside, having to do with people that are close to you." • "You can be poor and have a good life if you're happy; you can be rich and have a bad life if you're unhappy." • "So the tangible assets—anybody can have those. But it's the intangibles that are the most important." • "I don't need the big house and the big car, and all the money. It would be nice, but I don't need it to be happy."

[a] See table 6 for additional subcategories.

(30 percent), an indication that relationships with other people are important because people advise each other, teach each other new things, and enable each other to feel respected and worthy; and *Spend time/physical presence together* (27 percent). Lower-frequency subcategories included *Instructions for how to relate well together* (20 percent) and *Help others financially* (10 percent). (See table 6 for examples of responses included in these subcategories.)

TABLE 6 Family and Relations with Others Subcategories

Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Positive evaluation of others	• "To have a family that I'm proud of and happy with." • "My wife—she's nice and she's sweet. I just love her." • "I am really happy with my husband and my kids. I mean, I'm not saying that every single day is happy. We have your bad days and your good days. But I think if I was living out on an island somewhere, I would just live with them. I think I'd really be happy."
Loving and caring	• "The most important is having someone who loves you, and who you love." • "Just take each day as it comes, and try to do the best with it, and have lots of love in your heart to give to others." • "They [kids] need that loving and caring—that's the most important thing is to be cared about."
Advising and respecting	• "Respect peoples, 'cause you want respect." • "When you talk to somebody, you're sharing with your ideas, what you're thinking about different issues or yourself. The responses you get when you share reaffirm your perception of yourself. If they don't, then at least you have some input... mean, sharing implies that you're going to get something back, and therefore that it will either reaffirm or tell you that you're out in left field. And that's a good thing too."
Spend time/ physical presence together	• "Just being able to do something like that—relax and enjoy yourself and be with friends and relate way very satisfying." • "That your hours of work are reasonable so that you can enjoy your family, or you can enjoy other things in your life." • "I also have friends that are nice and extended family that's nice, and we have time enough to spend with them now. It's sort 'a like rediscovering them, later in life after you're done doing all the kiddy things."
Instructions for how to relate well together	• "Not to harbor hard feelings or bad feelings about people and hold grudges against people." • "Treat others as you would want others to treat you." • "So I think the whole well-being thing to me is just try to put yourself in that other person's place, and try to question a lot of what you do, not necessarily what everybody else does."
Help others financially	• "I like to buy things for people." • "I'm very appreciative of the fact that I have some equity that I've been able to put money aside for my daughter's education." • "I'd say having a good life is having a wonderful family and having the financial means to provide for them."

The importance of physical HEALTH, including health-promoting behaviors such as walking, golf, diet, and so forth, was mentioned by a large majority (67 percent) of respondents. In addition to health and social relationships, respondents frequently noted that ENJOYMENT (49 percent) is an important aspect of living a good life. FINANCIAL SECURITY (49 percent) was also on the minds of many of the respondents. Topics that related to aspects of the respondents' JOB (40 percent) and the development of the SELF (40 percent) were also found in many of the respondents' answers. Five subcategories comprised the SELF category. The most common responses from the respondents who talked about the self included the ability to *Know and love the self* (52 percent), a feeling of *Purpose and fulfillment* (45 percent), and a sense of *Autonomy* from others' expectations and opinions (42 percent). Also noted was the importance of being curious and *Seeking new learning* (18 percent). Finally, a sense of *Accomplishment* (16 percent) was mentioned as one part of a good life. (See table 7 for verbatim examples.)

Other less frequent but commonly mentioned aspects of the good life included one's FAITH (36 percent) and feelings of PEACE AND SATISFACTION (30 percent).[3] The feeling of well-being induced by maintaining a POSITIVE OUTLOOK (30 percent) was also a major category mentioned by some respondents. Finally, although many people mentioned the importance of having enough money to meet their needs, some respondents pointed out that an excess of money is not important for well-being, a sentiment captured by the major category NOT MATERIALISM (28 percent).

What Are Some of the Reasons Your Life Has Gone Well?

To explore respondents' ideas about the sources of a life well lived, interviewers asked them, "Thinking back over your life, what do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?" Twelve major categories (each mentioned by at least 10 percent of respondents) emerged from the resulting answers (see fig. 2). Similar to the narratives about what it means to have a good life and well-being in the present, many of these high-frequency categories reflect the importance of other people as a source of well-being.

More than half of the respondents (52 percent) felt their lives had gone well because of various experiences and relationships during their UPBRINGING. A variety of subcategories were identified within this major category. As might be expected, the majority of respondents (72 percent) who gave an answer that fit within this major category made reference to the influence their *Parents* (and grandparents) had in their lives. Some

TABLE 7 Self Subcategories

Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Knowing and loving the self	• "I think you have to have some sense of who you are and what satisfies you, what your needs are, and then a situation that satisfies those needs." • "That's very important, that anyone has to have some self-respect, certainly confidence in themselves." • "Love yourself . . . When you love you, then you can love people."
Purpose and fulfillment	• "Always to have a goal. I think when people stop having that, they really stop living the good life, because then they have nothing to strive for. And if you don't strive for something, if you're not working toward something, then you lose your sense of purpose. And if you have no sense of purpose, I don't think you have a very good life." • "To have some sense of purpose and goals to work toward. Some reason to get up and do what you do everyday and not just exist." • "That would come down to the question where 'Do you wander aimlessly in life?' and that would be somebody who has no spirituality at all.
Autonomy	• "I could care less what other people think." • "Question yourself and others, question your situations." • "Having the ability or living in the circumstances that allow you to be pretty much in control. It gives you a good life because you will make the choices that make it good for you."
Seeking new learning	• "Having the opportunities to do different things, to meet different people." • "You need other people around you to bring in new ideas, 'cause you can get some from books, but more so probably from talking to people." • "Sit down and figure out who you are, and then develop a healthy curiosity, and learn how to learn."
Accomplishment	• "You have to have decided that you want to do something and successfully accomplish it." • "You have to earn things. If you don't earn some things, you don't work for some things, I don't think they're gonna to be meaningful for you." • "Where you think at the end of day—that I have accomplished something. And I have learned to not be unhappy that it didn't shake the earth."

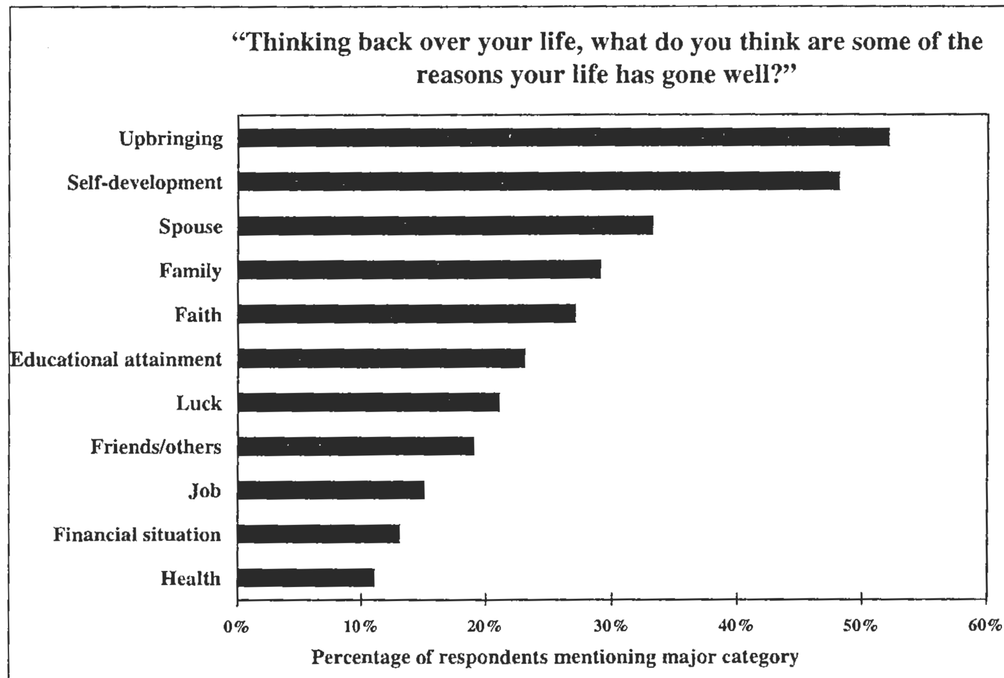

FIGURE 2. Responses to the question "Thinking back over your life, what do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?"

respondents discussed the benefits of their upbringing in terms of *General positive family relationships* (28 percent), such as having a loving family or perceiving a strong sense of family. Some respondents spoke of more specific aspects of their upbringing that contributed to their lives having gone well, such as learning *Values* (40 percent), feeling *Supported* (26 percent), experiencing *Normalcy* (19 percent), receiving *Attention* (9 percent), or having been *Disciplined* (7 percent). (See table 8 for verbatim examples.)

The social nature of well-being also was expressed beyond the realm of early family life. For example, SPOUSES were given credit for the role they have played in helping the lives of one-third of the respondents (33 percent) go well. A similar number of respondents (29 percent) mentioned other current FAMILY members (i.e., children and siblings). In addition, 19 percent of the respondents reported that their relationships with FRIENDS AND OTHERS had a positive impact on their lives.

The self also was given credit for causing life to go well. Almost half of the respondents (48 percent) discussed ways in which facets of their SELF-DEVELOPMENT have contributed to the positive parts of life. Within this major category, six specific subcategories emerged, including putting forth *Effort* (38 percent), being able to take *Control* (28 percent) when

TABLE 8 What Are Some of the Reasons Your Life Has Gone Well?

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Upbringing *Parents* *Values* *Positive family relations* *Support* *Normalcy* *Attention* *Discipline*	• "I think he [father] was extremely honest, an extremely hard worker, and taught me that whatever, if I was going to make it I was going to have to do it on my own." • "My mother was very self-confident . . . and she imparted that to my sister and I." • "My parents showed us the importance of hard work, getting a good education, and saving money." • "My parents taught me a sense of right from wrong." • "The life that they gave me, even though it was not money-filled, in a way it was still rich." • "I was raised in a household with two parents, and they appeared to be loving." • "They encouraged us to try things, and were real supportive, and still are real supportive." • "You need a basic background to be a normal person." • "They were always very interested in what the kids were doing." • "When I was young, she kept me on the straight and narrow."
Self-development *Effort Control* *Goals Compassion* *Adaptability* *Resiliency Skills*	• "None of it came on a silver platter: I worked for everything I got." • "You just kinda' take control of your life, and you say, well I gotta' do something about this." • "I set up my goals, and I followed my goals." • "I've always cared about other poeple and tried to put myself in their position." • "I've learned the ability to change and be happy about it." • "I've had to work through a lot of things . . . I don't give up." • "I was always good at what I did . . . that helped me from the start."
Spouse	• "I think our relationship is what has cemented me together." • "I've had a really good partner for most of my life."
Family *Offspring* *Family* *Siblings*	• "I have five children . . . they filled up my life . . . watching them grow." • "Just by having the blessing of having family." • "My family—both my parents, and brothers and sisters, and my wife and kids . . . that's ninety-nine percent of it."
Faith	• "I think having a strong faith has helped us through a lot." • "The only time my life ever goes well is when I'm doing what I ought to be doing when I'm obeying God's word."

(*continued*)

TABLE 8 *continued*

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Educational attainment	• "Even though I'm not using my education, I'm who I am because of it." • "I was fortunate enough to go through school, and do well, and then, get to go to college, and do well."
Luck	• "Sometimes I just think I was in the right place at the right time, and maybe it was meant to be." • I have honestly always felt like that I was leading a charmed life. . . things have tended to fall into place."
Friends/others	• "I can count on them when I need help . . . whether it's for spiritual need or I need help with at project, or whatever." • "He was more like a father to me than a boss or an employer . . . he gave me some good advice."
Job	• "I've always had a job, I have a good work ethic." • "I've got a great environment to work in . . . with people that I like."
Financial situation	• "I think having financial stability is important, even though I would like to say, you know, it's not that important." • "We're not rich, but we've got enough money."
Health	• "I don't have any major diseases . . . I'm healthy." • "I guess I've taken care of myself, I've gotten rest, I've eaten well."

needed, and setting and achieving *Goals* (20 percent). Other aspects of SELF-DEVELOPMENT generated less frequently included *Developing compassion* (18 percent) as a social skill, being able to *Adapt* to life's circumstances (15 percent), maintaining *Resiliency* (the strength to persevere and cope with difficult situations; 15 percent), and relying on one's *Skills and abilities* (10 percent). Finally, some of the reasons listed for life going well invoked more metaphysical forces. Slightly more than one-fourth of the respondents (27 percent) felt their lives had gone well because of their FAITH. In addition, 21 percent of the respondents thought that LUCK had played a role in how their lives had turned out thus far.

Three other major categories that emerged from the respondents' discussions about why they think their lives have gone well included EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (23 percent), JOB (15 percent), and FINANCI AL SITUATION (13 percent). The discussion in these three areas was often interrelated. For example, one woman explained, "I worked till

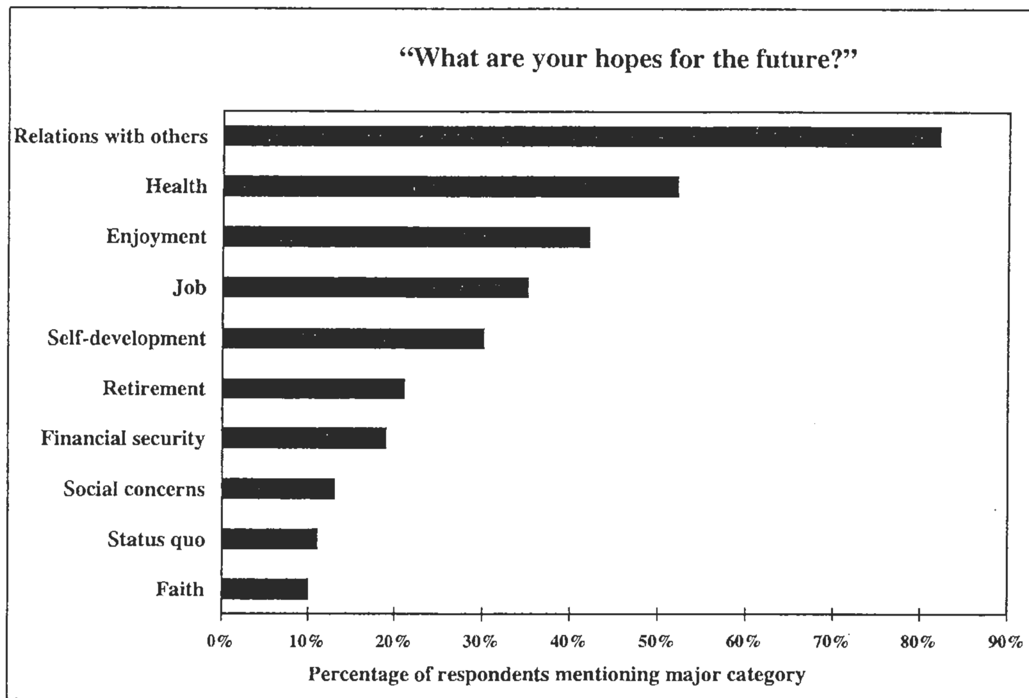

FIGURE 3. Responses to the question "What are your hopes for the future?"

midnight every night and went to school all day to achieve what I wanted." Finally, 11 percent of the sample felt that their good HEALTH had contributed to their lives going well.

What Are Your Hopes for the Future?

To explore respondents' wishes and expectations regarding well-being and the good life in the future, we asked our respondents, "What are your hopes for the future?" Their responses fell within the domains of ten major categories (answered by at least 10 percent of respondents) (see fig. 3 and table 9). Similar to answers to previous questions, the largest category to emerge in response to hopes for the future was RELATIONS WITH OTHERS. Eighty-two percent of the respondents communicated that their hopes for the future involve other people. Within the major RELATIONS WITH OTHERS category, a number of subcategories were identified. Seventy-four percent of the respondents who answered within this major category discussed their hopes about the future of their *Offspring* (children and grandchildren), and 29 percent expressed their aspirations in terms of continuing to share their lives with a *Spouse*. Some of the respondents spoke in more general terms about their futures with their *Families* (16 percent), not specifying a certain family member. Others did specify

TABLE 9 What Are Your Hopes for the Future?

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Relations with others *Offspring* *Spouse* *Others* *Family* *Parent* *Relative* *Friends*	• "That my children and my grandchildren will prosper and be happy." • "That our relationship will continue to grow and deepen." • "Try to make a difference in other peoples' lives, like through Habitat for Humanity." • "That I will continue to enjoy my family." • "That she [mother] can remain healthy and happy with her grandchildren." • "My aunt is eighty-nine . . . getting less capable . . . I hope I can help." • "To continue to be good friends."
Health *Health* *Longevity*	• "To keep good health, and for my family to have their health." • "I just want to be able to continue to do the things that I want to do, and be productive, and not be a burden." • "Hope me and my wife live for a hundred years."
Enjoyment	• "For my wife and I to be able to go out and travel, have fun." • "Just to keep on being as happy as I am now . . . wake up every morning with a smile on my face."
Job	• "To keep doing what I'm doing now . . . I may just go on until I drop." • "I just hope that the difficulties that I'm going through right now in my business get resolved."
Self-development *Goals* *Active* *Education*	• "My eventual goal is to have my own court reporting firm." • "To stay active and doing things with and for other people as long as we can." • "I would really like to go back to school and finish my master's."
Retirement	• "I hope everything goes fine, as far as the job, and my future, and my family, and if everything goes well, in a few years I'll have enough money to retire." • "We're like a lot of baby boomers, we're going to get hosed when it comes to retiring."
Financial security	• "To live another thirty, forty years, and be able to live on our farm, have enough money to pay the taxes so I won't have to give it up." • "We're not asking to be wealthy, but at the same time, financially in a position where we can enjoy life instead of having to work all the time."

(*continued*)

TABLE 9 *continued*

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Social concerns	• "I hope our country gets its act together in terms of morality." • "I hope that we're able to protect and take care of this planet of ours."
Status quo	• "Just kind 'a keep goin' the way things are, in a lot 'a ways." • "That there are no unexpected glitches down the road."
Faith	• "As far as the world is concerned, I wish that they would come to their senses and come back to the Lord." • "And I ask the Lord, use me, use me in any way he sees fit . . . whether it's preaching your word, whether it's singing your word, whether it's helping people."

that their hopes for the future involved *Parents* (6 percent), their *Relatives* (3 percent), or *Friends* (2 percent). Eighteen percent of the respondents who answered within the RELATIONS WITH OTHERS category spoke more broadly about interacting with unspecified *Others* in the future.

HEALTH was also very much on the minds of our respondents (52 percent) as they looked to their future. Most respondents who mentioned HEALTH did so in general terms, although 28 percent of the respondents explicitly discussed their hope for *Longevity.*

Themes involving life ENJOYMENT were reflected in the answers of 45 percent of the respondents, including comments about continuing or developing new hobbies and enjoying leisure-time activities. Thirty-five percent of the respondents cited ways in which their hopes for the future included aspects of their JOB, either continuing in a current position or aspirations for a new line of work. Thoughts directed at impending RETIREMENT (20 percent) and FINANCIAL SECURITY (19 percent) reveal that these issues also are expected to play a relatively important role in the future of these midlife respondents. These two categories were often interrelated; respondents hoped to have enough money to be able to retire.

Slightly more than one-third of the respondents (35 percent) noted that their hopes for the future included various aspects of continuing SELF-DEVELOPMENT. Within this category, 59 percent of respondents mentioned *Goals* that they had hopes of attaining. Specific goals were also mentioned, including remaining physically fit or psychologically *Active* (28 percent) and furthering their *Education* (17 percent).

Thirteen percent of the interviews generated discussion directed at broader SOCIAL CONCERNS. Here their narratives included concern over morality and family values, environmental issues, and world peace. In addition, 11 percent of all the respondents felt comfortable with the STATUS QUO and hoped that things would remain pretty much the same. Finally, 10 percent of all respondents shared their hopes for the future in terms of their FAITH (hoping that their own faith would continue to grow and that others would find faith).

Summary

The preceding analyses reveal a consensus among Americans at midlife as to one major element that constitutes the good life—relations with others. Whether defining the good life, identifying the causes of life going well, or expressing hopes for the future, respondents mentioned relationships with other people (especially with one's parents, spouse, and offspring) most often in their narratives. The importance of good health was also frequently mentioned, especially when describing what is necessary for a good midlife and future life. Across the questions, two additional concepts were also central and important: developing aspects of the self (loving the self, pursuing goals, experiencing autonomy, etc.) and enjoying life as it progresses.

Lower-frequency categories that consistently appeared in answers to each question included the need to have financial security (enough money to meet one's needs) as well as a steady and enjoyable job, and the opportunity to comfortably retire. For about a third of the respondents, faith and a positive outlook were important parts of well-being. Finally, many respondents described a feeling of contentment comprised of peacefulness, satisfaction with the status quo, and adaption to and acceptance of what life presents.

It is interesting to note the relative lack of responses regarding civic engagement, community service, or volunteer activities. The low frequency of these types of answers might imply a focus on local instead of public worlds (see Markus et al. 2001). It also leads one to ask whether the pursuit of individual well-being is good for society as a whole.

Diversity in Well-Being American Style: Variation by Education and Gender

Meaning of a Good Life

> *College-educated woman:* Always to have a goal. I think when people stop having that, they really stop living the good life,

> because they have nothing to strive for, and if you don't strive for something, if you're not working towards something, then you lose your sense of purpose, and if you have no sense of purpose, I mean, I don't think you have a very good life.
>
> *High school–educated man:* A good wife. How she takes care of me. She's nice and she's sweet. I just love her. And each day God blesses me to see her. It seems like I grow more in love with her. It's just, she's just a sweet person.

Although we were not surprised to find considerable consensus among Americans at midlife about what constitutes a good life, we anticipated differences in explanations and experiences of well-being among subgroups of respondents who are engaged in local worlds that differ from one another. Specifically, we expected variation among respondents with respect to gender and education level. For example, RELATIONS WITH OTHERS is an apparent key to a good life, but do college-educated and high school–educated respondents have similar understandings of the role of others in their lives? Similarly, many respondents mentioned that purpose and fulfillment are essential elements for a life well lived. Is this a view shared by college-educated and high school–educated respondents, and if so, is it realized in similar ways? Although gender differences did exist and are reported when significant, most of the variation found in the answers related to respondents' level of education.

The MIDUS comparable sample results show that the high school–educated and the college-educated respondents are living in quite different structural and social worlds (see tables 3 and 4), and we explored whether these differences are reflected in their narratives about well-being. Looking first at the major categories of well-being displayed in figure 1 (RELATIONS WITH OTHERS, HEALTH, FAMILY, ENJOYMENT, FINANCIAL SECURITY, SELF, JOB, and so forth), generated in answer to the question "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" and the follow-up probe "Do you have anything to add about what's important for well-being?" some significant differences according to gender and education level are evident. First, more college-educated respondents (60 percent) than high school–educated respondents (38 percent) mentioned ENJOYMENT. This difference may reflect the fact that college-educated respondents had more of their basic needs met (job security, health care, and so forth), as well as more disposable income, and thus they had the

means to expend time and energy on leisure activities, hobbies, and "fun." Men (59 percent) mentioned JOB more than women (21 percent), which is understandable given that almost half of the high school–educated women in the EDWB sample did not work for pay. Within the FAMILY category, men specifically mentioned their *Spouses* (M = 32 percent; W = 20 percent) and *Parents and siblings* (M = 15 percent; W = 2 percent) more than women did. Women, on the other hand, mentioned FINANCI AL SECURITY more than men did (W = 62 percent; M = 37 percent).

We also calculated the relative emphasis our respondents placed on each category. These percentages reflect the *proportion* of each respondent's answer to "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" and its follow-up probe that was dedicated to a specific category. For example, RELATIONS WITH OTHERS was more likely to be emphasized by high school–educated women. In fact, the largest proportion (more than one-third) of answers by high school–educated women concerning what it means to have a good life were responses in which other people are focal—RELATIONS WITH OTHERS and FAMILY. This proportional analysis also clarifies two gender differences that appeared in the earlier analysis of what it means to have a good life. FINANCIAL SECURITY, noted earlier to be a category mentioned by more women, is shown here to be a particularly salient issue for high school–educated women. Almost half of these women did not work outside the home. Perhaps the high school–educated women emphasize the importance of having basic needs met because they were more likely to have had times when their own needs were not met or they knew others who did not have them met. Similarly, JOB was a category of response generated more by men in the previous analysis and can be seen here to be one of the major features of the good life for high school–educated men specifically.

More variation among education groups appeared in the subcategories within the major categories than in the major categories themselves. For instance, with respect to the major category RELATIONS WITH OTHERS, there were two subcategories that reflected different ways of relating to others: *Advising and respecting* and *Loving and caring* (see table 6 for verbatim examples). Although most respondents reported both types of interactions and did not differ in the number of sentences generated in their narratives, the ratio of sentences involving *Loving and caring* to sentences involving *Advising and respecting* (BA = 1.55, HS = 1.11; $p =$ .08) reveals that relatively more of the college-educated respondents' explanations (especially those of college-educated men) about *how* others are important for the good life reflected the idea that others are important

because of the knowledge they can impart and the self-confidence they can engender.

Thus, the broad cultural mandate to work on oneself and develop oneself is for some college-educated respondents realized in relations with others. Relationships are not just about support or connection; they are about developing the self and affirming and praising each other. For example, a college-educated woman said, "I think it is very helpful if you have some stalwart persons in your corner. They'll string your confidence [along] in saying positive things." These divergent ways of thinking about the role of others in one's life is more than just a difference in how people with different educational levels "talk" about other people. Instead it is related, we suggest, to the conditions of life experienced by these two groups of respondents and a reflection of the general nature of their social interaction with other people. The context of the high school–educated respondents does not require them to experience themselves as agents influencing and being influenced by other agents. Instead, other people are interpreted as affording connection and relationship.

Subcategories within the major SELF category also reflected educational variation. First, the college-educated respondents elaborated the general category SELF more frequently. That is, they mentioned significantly more SELF subcategories than did the high school–educated respondents (BA = 2.1; HS = 1.5). Specifically, the college-educated respondents were decidedly more likely to mention *Fulfillment* (BA = 28 percent; HS = 0 percent), *Accomplishment* (BA = 33 percent; HS = 0 percent), and *Seeking new learning* (BA = 28 percent; HS = 7 percent) as aspects of the good life (see fig. 4 and table 7). These are some of the aspects of well-being that have been central in well-being theories and measures.

Although the high school–educated respondents were just as likely as the college-educated respondents to mention at least one aspect of the self and its development as important for living a good life, they seemed to mean something different by it. For example, there were no high school–educated respondents, men or women, who mentioned feeling good about oneself because of *Accomplishment* or *Fulfillment.* Moreover, although a few high school–educated men mentioned *Seeking new learning* as important for the good life, no high school–educated women generated any responses that fit this subcategory. Instead, the high school–educated respondents were somewhat more likely (although not statistically significant) to say that it is important to *Know and love the self* and to have *Autonomy* from others' expectations and opinions. For the

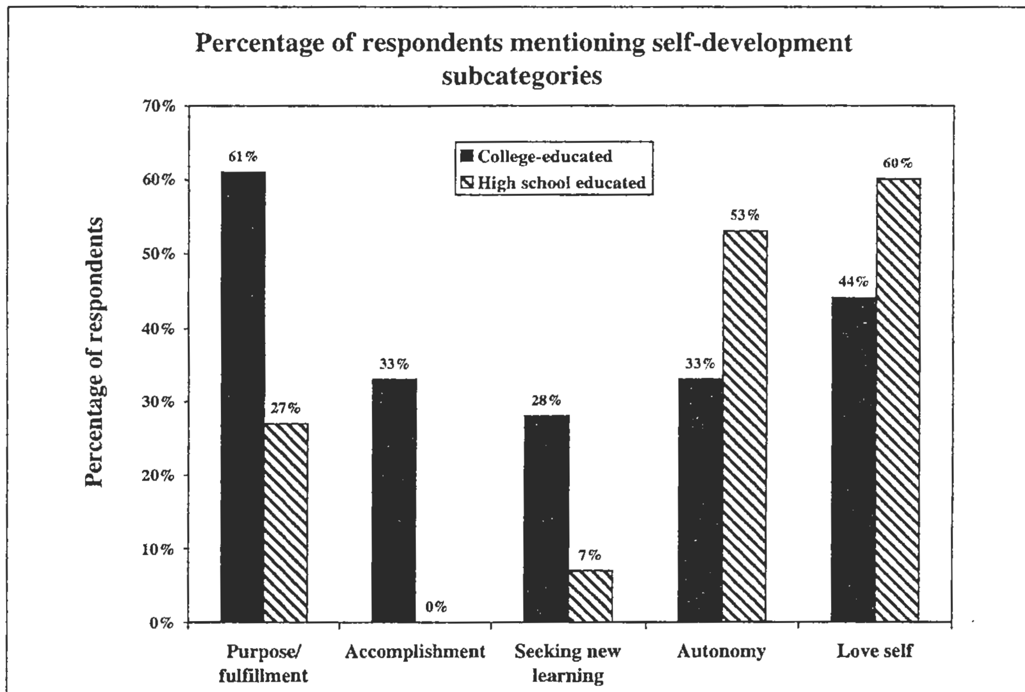

FIGURE 4. Percentage of respondents mentioning self-development subcategories.

high school–educated, self-development is more about liking the self and protecting it from imposition by others than about being a fulfilled and accomplished self. Again, we suggest these differences go beyond styles of answering questions and reflect the different lives and the activities afforded and required by these lives.

Reasons Why Life Has Gone Well

There are only a few differences by education level or gender in responses to the question "Thinking back over your life, what do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?" Forty percent of the college-educated respondents cited EDUCATION as a reason their lives had gone well, compared with only 5 percent of those with a high school education. In addition, the FRIENDS AND OTHERS category revealed a significant difference between gender groups. Twenty-nine percent of the male respondents believe their lives have gone well partly because of their relationships with friends and other people, whereas only 10 percent of the women gave answers that fit in this category.

Analyses within the major categories resulted in a number of significant gender and educational differences between subcategories. Within the UPBRINGING category, 28 percent of those with a college education

identified *General positive family relationships* as a reason their lives have gone well, but no high school–educated respondents mentioned this subcategory. Two significant subcategory differences are noted within the major category FRIENDS AND OTHERS. A gender difference can be seen in that 20 percent of the men in this study mentioned unspecified *Others* who have in some way benefited their lives, whereas only 2 percent of the women did. In addition, more college-educated respondents (14 percent) than high school–educated respondents (3 percent) mention *Friends* as a reason their lives have gone well ($p < .06$). Finally, within the SELF-DEVELOPMENT category, 9 percent of the college-educated respondents cited their *Skills and abilities* as a reason their lives have gone well, but none of the high school–educated respondents gave this answer.

Hopes for the Future

A few significant gender and educational differences in answers to "What are your hopes for the future?" were evident in analysis of subcategories. Within the RELATIONS WITH OTHERS major category, 23 percent of the high school–educated respondents made reference to their *Family* in general terms when discussing their hopes for the future compared with only 5 percent of those respondents with a college education. A gender difference is also noted within this major category. Women are more likely (71 percent) to discuss their *Offspring* (children and grandchildren) as part of their hopes for the future than are men (49 percent).

Agency Analyses

> *College-educated woman:* To be able to make choices. To have circumstances and the ability to make choices in your life. Not to be in a position where you have to do something because you have no choice. Like going to work, for instance. I can either work or stay home.
>
> *High school–educated man:* God has helped me out a lot too, to reinforce my feelings. . . . Just gives me an inner-self confident feeling that no matter how bad things get they can always get worse. That if they get bad enough that God feels I can't handle it, then he'll help me out of it. If things get bad, I just feel that maybe God is testing me to see what I am capable of. . . . Yeah, probably the self-confidence, endurance, not giving up, just hang in there, hang tough, things are going to get around to here real eventually.

Respondents' answers to the three questions organizing this chapter give us a sense of what they care about and hope for at midlife and how they characterize themselves, but their answers can also provide a view of the respondents' implicit theories of action as well as additional indirect insight into how they think about themselves and their roles in their diverse worlds. To gain a more complete picture of the nature of the self and its relation to being and well-being, we developed a code that was designed to reflect respondents' sense of agency, by which we mean how these respondents described what they were doing in their lives or how they understood their way of interacting with the world.

Most Americans generally have an optimistic view of the future and show a belief in their ability to do what they have set their minds to. Thus they score high on MIDUS items designed to assess plans and control (e.g., "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to" and "When things don't go according to my plans, my motto is 'where there's a will there's a way'"). However, the college-educated respondents were decidedly more likely to agree with MIDUS statements reflecting a sense of control, including a feeling of mastery and freedom from constraint (Lachman and Weaver 1998), planning for the future, and making sense of the past. They gave significantly stronger endorsements to 25 of 42 such items from MIDUS than did the high school–educated respondents. In addition, they scored higher on the purpose and environmental mastery components of positive psychological functioning. In contrast, the high school–educated were significantly more likely than the college-educated to endorse statements that imply adjustment and adaptation. They appear to be focused more on the present than the future, implying that the future may not be able to be controlled or predicted.

Overall, looking across the answers given to the EDWB questions, we found that when talking about themselves and their lives in their own terms, people sometimes characterized themselves as *influencing* the world by proactively taking charge and acting directly on the world; at other times they characterized themselves as *adjusting* to the world's circumstances. When describing their behavior in proactive terms or themselves as instrumental agents, respondents talked about the ways in which they create, manage, rearrange, change, initiate, stick to agendas, plan actions in advance, set long-term goals, and prevent future negativity. For example, a college-educated woman's answer to why her life has gone well illustrates this proactive sense of self: "All the good things in my life? Yeah, I think I made them myself. I mean, I think I created the situations, and I think everybody has that ability, I think. Whatever

happened, you know, it was a result of whatever I did or said, or good or bad, or otherwise."

When describing themselves as adjusting, respondents did not report themselves to be influencing or rearranging their circumstances. Still they characterize themselves active; they neither give in nor give up. They frame, interpret, regulate thought, control emotions, focus on the present, avoid bad circumstances, respond to luck, and generally "hang tough." A high school–educated man illustrated this active adjustment when talking about what it means to him to have a good life: "I've got limitations, physical limitations right now with, um . . . I can't go off, and take a one-mile walk without getting distinctly out of breath. But I've learned to work within the limitations. I'm happy with it."

We hypothesized that it would be the college-educated respondents who would most often characterize themselves as agents who influence the world, while the high school–educated would be more likely to describe themselves and their behavior as adjusting to the world. Every sentence given in answer to the EDWB questions presented in this chapter was coded as ADJUSTING, INFLUENCING, or neither. (See table 10 for category definitions and examples.) In general, all respondents showed more sentences involving themes of ADJUSTING than themes of INFLUENCING. Across answers to the three questions, the average respondent had 14.5 ADJUSTING sentences that characterize the respondent as actively adapting to the world and 10.5 INFLUENCING sentences that characterize the respondent in terms of acting directly on the world.

Although respondents more often used the language of ADJUSTING than the language of INFLUENCING, when INFLUENCING language was used, the college-educated respondents used it significantly more often (see fig. 5). College-educated respondents had significantly more sentences that fall into the INFLUENCING category (BA = 17.8; HS = 11.6). Within this major category we could identify three subcategories: *Internal attributions,* in which the self is responsible for life going well; *Proactive hopes,* which reflects hopes for future events on which the respondent will have a direct effect; and *Influencing language,* which included sentences with active verbs (i.e., verbs related to influencing, controlling, choosing, and planning) as opposed to passive verbs (i.e., sentences in which the respondent was the object, not the subject, of the sentence). Why might the college-educated have used more influencing language? We assume that a sense of one's self as an influencing agent is in some important part afforded by the particular circumstances (e.g., income level, particular types of employment, physical health) in one's life in which it is

TABLE 10 Agency Categories

Major Category and Subcategories	Verbatim Examples from Interviews
Influencing *Internal attributions* *Proactive hopes* *Influencing language*	• "I think I created the situations and I think everybody has that ability." • "Probably the main reason I think is I've always accepted responsibility for making my own way through life, not look for excuses. • "I set up my goals, and I followed my goals. The goals I have set, that's the reason that I guess I'm fairly well-off." • "When I get . . . older . . . get myself a pair of bib overalls and straw hat, move to the Gulf Coast of Florida, and mow lawns for people." • "I'm going to have a second career." • "That we're [husband and self] both still around where we can really just do things for ourselves." • "You have to have decided that you wanna do somethin' and successfully accomplish it." • "To kind of plan out my life, and to be able to achieve some of my . . . objectives . . . whether it be for myself or with other people." • "To have circumstances and the ability to make choices in your life; not to be in a position where you have to do something because you have no choice."
Adjusting	• "[Take] one day a time; get in there and do what needs to be done and tomorrow will take care of itself." • "There's just some things that you can't have control over. I could die of cancer in two years, and everything I'm telling you would probably change." • "Try to look at the positive aspect of every situation."

possible to exercise some direct influence over the world. We know from the MIDUS comparable sample data that the college-educated are more likely to experience such circumstances.

Discussion and Conclusion

Returning to the questions that motivated this chapter, we again ask what does it mean to experience well-being in America at midlife, and does it differ by education and gender? We focused on a subsample of MIDUS respondents (half high school–educated, half college-educated; half men, half women) who reported that they were currently experiencing moderate to high well-being. In terms of frequency of mention across respondents and the proportion of any one respondent's reflections to general open-ended questions about well-being, one answer stands out

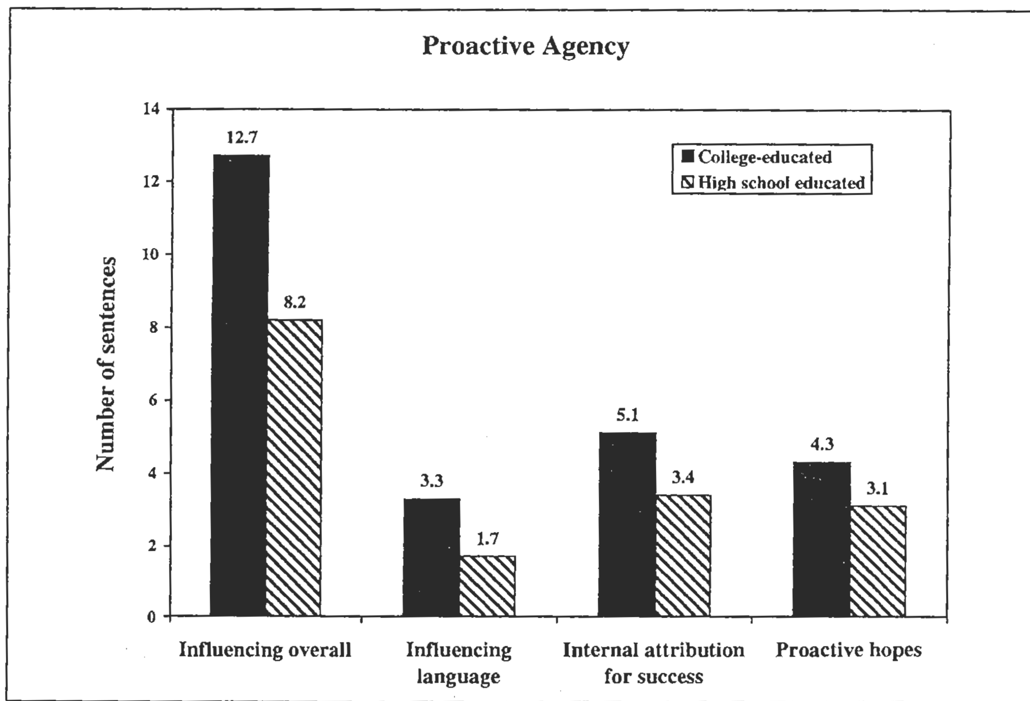

FIGURE 5. Proactive agency.

from the others. For American respondents 40–59 years old, across educational level and gender, there is a clear consensus that relations with others is the most important key to well-being. This answer emerges as the common answer in response to questions about what a good life is, why life has gone well, and what hopes respondents have for the future. Most often respondents talk about people who are part of their local, everyday worlds—parents, spouses, children, other family members, co-workers, and friends—rather than general others or the wider community. Other studies have also noted the importance of interpersonal aspects of well-being (Dowd 1990; Myers 2000; Ryff 1989b). These qualitative findings emphasizing the social nature of well-being are interesting in light of existing quantitative measures of well-being that give relatively little emphasis to the interpersonal realm (Diener et al. 1999; Ryff 1989a; Ryff and Keyes 1995).

The EDWB respondents also agree that well-being is strongly affected by having physical health, being able to enjoy oneself, and developing the self (feeling autonomous, feeling good about oneself, being open to new experience, feeling a sense of accomplishment, feeling fulfilled, and so forth). The American midlife well-being prescription includes a capacity to look on life events with peaceful and positive attitudes, in some cases with a faith in God. Finally, many respondents point out the importance

of having a good job, financial security, and the chance to retire as part of the definition of a good life.

Although the respondents were basically in agreement about some aspects of what is desirable and important in life, the relative importance of key elements of well-being and the existence of distinct elements depend on level of education (which may be a proxy for socioeconomic class) and to some extent gender. The largest differences are that the college-educated more often mention the desire for enjoyment, and men are more likely than women to focus on job-related issues while women are more likely than men to be concerned with financial security and having basic needs met.

Further differences found in subcategories help to clarify why Americans with different levels of education report equally high levels of global life satisfaction despite marked differences in quality-of-life measures such as income, health, and early childhood experience. Detailed analysis of the form and content of their narratives reveals that respondents with different sociodemographic profiles take somewhat different routes to life satisfaction and well-being. These varying approaches to well-being are related to differences in the primary and extended social and structural worlds of respondents and, in turn, to differences in the sense of agency that develops as individuals engage in their relevant communities and societies. In other words, respondents whose worlds diverge from one another according to education or gender are realizing similar life satisfaction and positive affect (general assessments of overall well-being) in different ways.

Those with a college education engage others and their social environments in ways that diverge systematically from those with a high school education; members of these different groups have a different stance toward their worlds and their places within them. The well-being of those with a college education (feelings of positive affect and satisfaction with the various domains of life) reflects the nature of their "being," which includes a sense that one is influencing, choosing, planning, changing, or in some respects in charge or in control. Feelings of well-being among the high school–educated respondents are more likely associated with a sense of having adjusted, or having managed to do the "right" thing, or having survived and not given up.

Respondents with a college education emphasize that having a purpose, accomplishing their goals, seeking new opportunities, and enjoying themselves are the foundations of well-being and the life well-lived. They stress that their educational attainment and their own skills and abilities

have contributed to their lives having gone relatively well. The narratives of their lives reflect a self that is structured by purpose and goals. They describe themselves as acting directly on the world and as being responsible for their lives having gone well. Relations with others are central, but they often emphasize the role of friends and characterize these relationships in terms of influencing, advising, and respecting one another.

The MIDUS sociodemographic variables such as health, income, and family relations provide insight into the lives of these college-educated respondents and suggest that the nature of their selves and well-being can be linked to the specific nature and extent of their connections to others. Compared with the high school–educated, the college-educated are in some senses "freer" from others and can focus on themselves. They are likely to have fewer demands made on them by family members who need immediate support, and they are more likely then to have both more time and resources to act on their own individual needs and preferences. In many cases, a college education may require an initial move away from home and may create the beginning of an extended social network in which friends become central and one encounters more diverse expectations and requirements from others. Moreover, the tasks and requirements of both a college education and the jobs and careers that are linked to them likely involve a relatively high degree of choice, planning, and decision-making, which in turn fosters a sense of self as relatively separate from others and a sense of agency as influencing, exercising control, and taking charge. As might be expected, the comparable college-educated MIDUS respondents scored higher than did the high school–educated respondents on those components of well-being that assess self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose, and environment mastery. Presumably, their social worlds afford them this way of being well.

Those with a high school education, in contrast, are more likely to be engaged in worlds where relatively more people are confronting serious illnesses, unemployment, and a variety of complex financial and family problems, either of their own or of their significant others. Moreover, these respondents have fewer resources of every type with which to confront these difficulties. The high school–educated respondents are aware of these difficulties and their relative positions in society. In the MIDUS survey, the high school–educated compared with the college-educated were significantly more likely to report not having had as many work opportunities as others, not being able to live in as nice a home or neighborhood as others, and feeling when they were growing up that

"they were worse off financially than the average family." One high school–educated man said in his narrative about well-being,

> My quality 'a life is good. And it's simple. I mean, we don't go out a lot. . . . Couldn't afford it. . . . We do play a lot 'a board games at home. We have video games that we play. Or go out and rent movies instead of going to the movie theater at seven, eight bucks a pop. . . . So you don't see it right away, but in six months to a year they're all out anyway. So we do things like that. And that's a pretty good life . . . considering some of the people, what they go through, and they keep on going.

When characterizing their lives and their well-being, the high school–educated respondents do not focus on personal accomplishments, do not explain the course of their lives in terms of their own skills and abilities, and do not focus on enjoyment as key to the good life as often as college-educated respondents do. Instead, they tend to focus more on the role of their families, on financial security, and on jobs. Some suggest that Americans with less education are more concerned with religion and spirituality (Idler and George 1998), although this trend did not surface in the current analysis. The immediate contingencies associated with lives involving health-related physical limitations, financial constraints, and fewer opportunities for self-development (Dowd 1990) may well preclude the opportunity to focus on one's own interests and enjoyment. Instead, the needs and requirements of others are what seem to structure everyday life. Consistent with this suggestion is the observation that the high school–educated respondents are more likely to describe themselves as adjusting to the world, and they appear to experience themselves primarily as incorporating these expectations and obligations.

Given the social worlds of the high school–educated respondents, it is not surprising that they scored lower than the college-educated on scales of self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose, and environmental mastery.[4] Their social worlds do not afford or encourage a self-focused and influential way of being. Yet despite the self-reported difficult circumstances of their lives, these respondents also reported relatively high levels of well-being as indicated by general measures of life satisfaction and positive affect. Apparently they have found alternate paths to well-being. They have developed somewhat different means of maintaining relations with others and of attending to and understanding the self and one's actions in the world. It is a way of being well that is intimately

tied to what these high school–educated respondents are doing in their lives and to the local norms for the "appropriate" or "good" way to be. In particular, well-being in high school–educated contexts involves being a good person, fulfilling duties, upholding responsibilities, and caring for others. For example, a high school–educated man said, "I'm not looking to be rewarded for what I do. I just think that . . . there are certain things in life everybody has to fulfill, and one thing is . . . to be able to take care of themselves and take care of others and be helpful and kind and generous and do it all with a moral attitude."

As we looked more closely at how these high school–educated respondents discussed their well-being, we found that their evaluations of their own well-being commonly appeared to be rooted in the standard set in one's immediate community—specifically, the community's expectations for the respondent, the respondent's own expectations for himself or herself, and the way one compares with others in a relevant community. Many respondents seemed to gauge their own well-being on the local expectations about educational attainment, financial status, positive family relationships, religious devotion, and other such keys to well-being. As one high school–educated woman offered, "I didn't have to deal with a lot of bad things during our kids' teenage years. Sometimes I think I just had it really well. I listen to other people, things that have happened to them and with their kids." A further analysis of these high school–educated respondents' ways of being well may provide some insight into how and why some people are more resilient in the face of challenge than others.

Which Way of Well-Being Is Best?

The observation of different pathways to well-being leads to a number of challenging questions. For instance, overall our respondents agree about the important aspects of well-being (positive relationships, opportunities to develop and enjoy oneself, physical health, financial security, job satisfaction), but does a sense of well-being for each individual require all of them, and if so, at what level? Our findings suggest, for example, that many people can develop a sense of well-being with only moderate financial resources, but it is clear that some minimal level of security is essential. As one woman explained, "having enough money that I don't have to eat potato skins any more, and that's not that much money."

Many other questions about diversity in well-being also remain to be answered. Can our high school–educated respondents' ways of being well afford them some measure of psychological or even physical resilience

and the means for adjusting to the limitations imposed by their health and financial status? In contrast, will proactive college-educated Americans who suffer from an unexpected financial or physical loss be less resilient in the face of sudden and unfamiliar dependency (see Elder 1996)? Are the different ways of being well equally "good"? MIDUS and other studies reveal that high school–educated respondents are significantly more likely to have compromised health, finances, and opportunities to make their own choices (Heise 1990; Herzog et al. 1998; House et al. 1994; Marmot et al. 1997; Ryff et al. 1999; Ryff and Singer 1998). If the well-being style of the high school–educated respondents is not associated with an active healthy life, with longevity, with financial prosperity, with opportunities for choice and self-development, is it in some sense less "good"?

What criteria should be used to determine which is the "best" type of well-being? Level of physical health and longevity? Career and financial success? Number of daily opportunities for self-determination, freedom of choice, and personal development? Number of acts of social responsibility, extent of close relationships, or extent of recognition by one's community? Goodness of fit with the surrounding community's values, norms, and expectations? And what implications do these criteria have for social policy and social justice within American society?

Informing Current Measures of Well-Being

Finally, a major advantage of embedding the EDWB within the MIDUS is that we can ask how the results from each study compare with one another and how they both can inform existing well-being theories and measures. Specifically, how do these open-ended responses to "What does it mean to you to have a good life?" "What do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?" and "What are your hopes for the future?" compare with what we know about existing understandings of well-being from the MIDUS questionnaire measures of well-being? Overall, when using their own words, respondents generated most of the domains that have been identified and elaborated in various theories of well-being (relations with others, especially family, self-development, physical health, financial security, job satisfaction, enjoyment, and so forth). But their responses also suggest ways to expand current theories by incorporating newly recognized components of well-being. For instance, the self and its development surfaced frequently in answers to the questions about well-being. The scales of psychological well-being seem to capture most of what it is about the self that is important for well-being for the college-educated (purpose in life, personal growth, environmental

mastery, self-acceptance); they are somewhat less good at capturing what it is for the high school–educated.

The narratives indicate that some previously identified domains merit further exploration and emphasis. For instance, the interview results indicated that relations with others (whether the other is a spouse, children, friend, or co-worker) is not just one category among others but instead the major source of the good life for nearly everyone at midlife. The role of other people in one's sense of well-being is the number one most frequently mentioned topic for every interview question discussed. Parents and spouses seem to be major causes of life going well, current family (especially one's spouse) is key to well-being in the present state of midlife, and hopes for one's offspring is a major focus for future well-being. Friends are emphasized more often by the college-educated, perhaps because they replace some of the roles typically played by family in lives that are less mobile or less distant. Because relations with others is such a salient feature of well-being and because it takes different forms, depending on the questions and respondent, perhaps additional scales involving relations with others warrant development for use in large surveys.

Several other domains that have not received much emphasis in existing scales of well-being, but that were frequently mentioned by these respondents, include faith, peace and satisfaction, a positive outlook, and a recognition that money does not guarantee a good life. Future well-being measures might consider adding such previously unidentified components of well-being. Weighting at least some of the different scales of well-being according to the norms, values, and expectations of the respondents' communities might also be explored. In addition, although these findings confirm observations that Americans are a determined, purposeful, and optimistic lot, it is also evident that a solid sense of well-being can be realized through active adjustment to others and to one's world, and without the feeling that one is always directly in control of one's actions.

Well-being is a dynamic and personal state, yet by examining respondents' own words along with their sociodemographic profiles, we begin to see the ways in which an individual's well-being is given form and substance by the prevalent meanings, practices, and institutions that configure the contexts in which people participate. Our analyses reveal that among Americans at midlife there exists considerable consensus about what it means to live a good life, which, presumably, reflects joint participation in national media and consumer culture. Further, our comparison between the college-educated and the high school–educated respondents

reveals some systematic differences in ways of well-being that appear to reflect divergent understandings of what is good, what is self, and how individual action, or agency, is experienced. Additional research on how well-being varies according to education level as well as other such sociocultural parameters will continue to sharpen theories and measures of positive human functioning.

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Notes

1. All education levels and gender differences reported have p values less than or equal to .05 unless otherwise stated.

2. The terms "well-being," "being well," and "living a good life" are used interchangeably in this chapter. Although most of the interview discussions revolved around the term "well-being," some respondents were more comfortable with the less abstract phrase "living a good life." These different but related terms were designed to focus the interview on the positive aspects of life.

3. PEACE AND SATISFACTION included reports of feeling "calm" and "content," different from the more intense, elated emotions like "happy" and "having fun," which were coded as ENJOYMENT.

4. The high school–educated MIDUS comparable sample also scored lower on positive relations with others, yet the EDWB high school–educated respondents spoke often about how important relations with others are to well-being. The statements included in the scale asked specifically about the ease with which long-term, meaningful relationships are maintained. The high school–educated respondents may have scored lower on the scale because they indeed have had more difficulties with long-term relationships (e.g., they are significantly more likely to have been divorced and to have experienced health problems), or because "meaningful relationships" may imply spouse-like relationships that are "chosen" rather than relationships with kin and co-workers.

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