ent development should address strategies that help to mediate the negative consequences of excellence.

In their introduction to the special issue, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (January 2000) discussed the importance of prevention relative to psychology's traditional emphasis on treatment and remediation. Many of the challenges facing gifted individuals can be prevented or buffered, and discussion of these issues with students is a good course of action. For positive approaches to grow and flourish, psychologists need to include discussions of the potential problems that are encountered when positive psychology serves as an intervention framework. In the same vein, traditional approaches such as therapy may be very useful in addressing these psychological bumps in the road as people pursue the development of their talents. Encouraging optimism and building on strengths is important, but it is equally important to anticipate and address the challenges, however incidental, involved with a comprehensive, positive approach to psychology and education.


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## Choosing Excellence


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Plucker and Levy (2001, this issue) were correct in pointing out that intellectual precocity comes with unique challenges. Almost all personal attributes that differ from the norm in salient ways do. As well, it is a challenge to cover all pertinent issues surrounding a topic in a 14-page article. Our contribution to the *American Psychologist's* special issue on positive psychology certainly did not meet that expectation (Lubinski & Benbow, January 2000). Our intent, however, was to provide an in-depth presentation of our theoretical model for talent development. We believe our conceptual framework (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000), which is being tested through our longitudinal study (Achter, Lubinski, Benbow, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 1999; Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 2000; Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, in press), is useful in identifying unique intellectual strengths, facilitating the development of such strengths, and suggesting ways to enhance psychological well-being throughout the talent-development process and across the life span. That tack seemed to fit well with the theme of the special issue, which focused on ways to construe positive development.

We do, however, view the development of extraordinary expertise as a choice involving trade-offs, and indeed, choosing to achieve genuine excellence has costs. For example, intimacy with one's peers often must be compromised—a very difficult choice. It is understandable then that excellence is so rare. Yet, what one person considers an intense sacrifice, others may view as a minor inconvenience or even as a source of satisfaction, and this, among other things, contributes to the profound differences among gifted individuals in their ultimate career paths (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000, p. 143, Figure 2). High ability does not inform researchers about the magnitude of people's interests, the intensity of their desire to achieve, or what would be seen as a personal sacrifice. That is why assessment across multiple domains can be so helpful—a point that we have tried to make in our articles (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996; Achter et al., 1999; Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Lubinski, Benbow, & Morelock, 2000).

For the most part, gifted individuals appear to be aware that developing their abilities requires much time and hard work (Benbow et al., 2000), and they tend to make choices based on personal preferences. We have argued that both short- and long-term choices are more conducive to psychological well-being when they take into account the salient features of a person's individuality. In our empirical work and theorizing, therefore, we have assimilated affective, cognitive, and conative (individual-differences) attributes to facilitate decision making from a personal point of view (Benbow & Lubinski, 1996; Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Lubinski & Benbow, 2000).

Life choices are complex, and the affordances (opportunities) defining the environmental niches that people traverse are in a constant state of flux. In this respect, the gifted are no different from others. In some respects, however, the friends, family, teachers, and employers of gifted individuals are frequently more invested in influencing how they "choose" to develop, because their potential is seen as so great. That can be felt as or result in excess pressure. To sort things out, being in touch with those aspects of self that have primacy and are likely to be stable (Achter et al., 1999; Lubinski, 2000; Lubinski et al., 2000) can serve as a developmental compass to gifted individuals navigating the often turbulent seas of life.


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# Well-Being in Cultures of Choice: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Schwartz (January 2000) contributed to an important debate about the United States's obsession with individual choice. The story Schwartz told, though, is incomplete. In brief, Schwartz recounted how, prior to the industrial revolution, people were faced with far fewer choices in life. When decisions needed to be made, they were strongly influenced by norms, traditions, and obligations—and at a more subtle level, by a stable set of cultural categories that provided a coherent framework within which to make a decision. Modernity has reduced these influences on decision making. Individual choice has become a dominant cultural value. Americans are faced with a myriad of choices in all areas of their lives, including the very construction of a self. They face so many choices and receive so much information on each alternative that they are overwhelmed. At a deeper level, they are confronted not just with options, but with several different sets of criteria and decision-making processes by which to evaluate these options (i.e., the different "games" in Schwartz's, 2000, insightful metaphor). All this, Schwartz contended, is leading to negative psychological outcomes, most notably an increase in depression. He concluded that "freedom of choice is not all it's cracked up to be, at least not with respect to psychological well-being" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 86).

I want to expand on Schwartz's (2000) discussion of the impact that modern cultures of choice have on psychological well-being. Schwartz claimed that American culture's increasing individualism is linked to rapidly rising levels of depression. In contrast, Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995) found that at a national level, the correlation between individualism and subjective well-being (.77) was positive and very strong and remained so even after possible confounds were controlled for. In an extensive review, Veenhoven (1999) corroborated the strong positive relationship between individualistic societies and average levels of psychological well-being. Veenhoven also found no evidence that developed Western societies have exceeded some optimal level of individualism.

How does all this square with Schwartz's (2000) contention that a culture of choice has led to soaring levels of depression? First, although American society has continued to place an ever greater emphasis on choice since the rise of the "me generation" in the 1970s, there is no evidence of a broadly based decline in psychological well-being over this period. In fact, although Myers (January 2000) saw no statistically significant change in subjective well-being in the last half of the 20th century, Oswald (1997) found a slight increase in happiness over time, and Hagerty and Veenhoven (2000) reported a moderately strong increase in happiness in the United States and Europe. If depression rates are indeed rising, it may be that the absolute number of depressed persons is too small to impact aggregate statistics.

By focusing on depression as a negative outcome of the American culture of choice, Schwartz (2000) implicitly bought into the modern Western assumption that a good life is a happy life. In general, I agree with this assumption, and much of my research focuses on increasing subjective well-being. However, not all cultures make happiness their first priority. Because Schwartz began his article with an extended anecdote, allow me to share a few as well. Some years ago, an Indian doctoral student of mine saw the back cover of Myers's (1993) book, which read, "We all want to be happy. . . ." The student remarked simply, "I don't." I recall another conversation, this with a young Singaporean man, who confided to me that he was going to marry his fiancée because it was socially expected of him, not because he thought he would be happy in the marriage. In Singapore, he informed me, this is just what one does. Similarly, I exchanged lengthy emails with a Korean student who was very explicit about choosing a career to be rich, not to be happy, so that he could bring face to his parents by buying them a new Mercedes.

Westerners tend to see individual happiness as the ultimate motivation underlying all action. For example, they may assume that at some deep unspoken level, the Korean student felt that buying his parents the Mercedes would make him happier than having a career he enjoyed. However, there is no more reason to think that his desire to bring face to his parents was really just a way of making himself happy than there is to think that people seek happiness with the ultimate goal of bringing honor to their parents for having raised such a well-adjusted child. Personal happiness is just one of many possible goals that may underlie human action. As countries industrialize and become richer, they systematically become more individualistic. A major part of this transition to individualistic culture is the rise of psychological well-being as a cultural priority. Cross-cultural research shows that values like "enjoying life" are stronger in affluent Western societies, whereas "social recognition" and "honoring parents and elders" are particularly strong in collectivist societies (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990, p. 1015). Modernity didn't produce just individualism and choice, it produced a culture in which positive psychology itself can be an organizing principle of individual and social action. By and large, cultural outcomes reflect cultural priorities. Cultures that place a high priority on happiness (i.e., individualist cultures) seem to produce more of it (Diener, 2000, pp. 39–40; Diener & Oishi, in press).

Odd as it may sound given my previous statements, I am not sanguine about the costs and consequences of individualism. Intuitively, I share many of Schwartz's (2000) concerns. The American obsession with choice seems so extreme that I find it hard to believe it lacks serious negative consequences, but any critique, such as Schwartz or I would like to make, must start by addressing the research showing a strong overall correlation between individualistic culture and higher levels of subjective well-being. Perhaps researchers will find that their methods are faulty or omit important areas of the human experience, but these findings must be addressed. Otherwise, they are speaking more from their gut than from their data, and the long run viability of their position will be in jeopardy.

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