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American college students' understandings of the good life: a grounded theory

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ABSTRACT

'What is the good life?' Few empirical studies explore how American college students answer this important question. In this grounded theory study, we analysed the responses of 276 American college students in two phases. In the first phase, we examined responses from 109 students at 10 different universities. In the second phase, we added interviews with an additional 167 students at one of the universities. Based on our coding, we found students' visions of the good life were comprised of 24 unique ingredients; the most common being having a stable or passion-inspired career, being married, having children, continuing advanced learning, and being financially stable. We also discovered that eight distinct clusters of ingredients accounted for three-fourths of student responses. The clusters included American dreamers, happy strivers, comfort, and stability seekers, ECL (enjoy work, have comfort, limited family) students, family cultivators, singular career strivers, moral strivers, and God-followers.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

'What is the good life?' For thousands of years, authors have told us what the good life should be. Yet, if educators and other practitioners, such as student life personnel and youth workers, are going to help persuade students to develop a particular vision of the good life, respectable pedagogy requires that we first understand what students think the good life is.

Unfortunately, few studies explore how American college students answer this important question. In this study, we analysed the responses of 276 American college students in two phases. In the first phase, we examined responses from 109 students at 10 different universities. In the second phase, we added interviews with an additional 167 students at one of the universities.

Based on our analysis, we found students' visions of the good life were comprised of 24 unique good life 'ingredients'. An ingredient is simply one particular element of the good life that students mentioned. The most common ingredients were having a stable or passion-inspired career, being married, having children, continuing advanced learning, and being financially stable.

We also discovered that eight distinct clusters of ingredients accounted for three-fourths of student responses. We named these clusters: American dreamers, happy strivers, comfort, and

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stability seekers, ECL (enjoy work, have comfort, limited family) students, family cultivators, singular career strivers, moral strivers, and God-followers.

What is the good life? American higher education leaders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries required courses that helped students answer this question (Glanzer 2022; Reuben 1996; Sloan 1980). Despite this historic pattern, American higher education leaders in the twentieth century marginalised both ethics courses and this ethical question from the formal curriculum and into the more informal spaces of the extra- or co-curriculum (Glanzer 2022; Reuben 1996; Sloan 1980). Certainly, faithful leaders and educators, especially in student affairs and particular majors, continued helping students reflect on the big questions, but the marginalisation at a general education level took place due to a variety of factors, such as changing ideological commitments (Reuben 1996; Sloan 1980), secularisation (Glanzer 2022; Marsden 2021), the increasing percentage of students attending state institutions (Glanzer 2022) and the growing philosophical view that liberal democratic institutions – within certain broad parameters – do not answer this question for their citizens (Glanzer 2022).

Although some still non-professional forms of moral education are not the role of the university (Fish 2008), since the early 2000s, a number of scholars have advocated that universities re-think and re-establish formal curricula and programmes to help students reflect on the nature of the good life (e.g. Colby et al. 2003; Glanzer, Hill, and Johnson 2017; Nash and Murray 2010; Sullivan and Blaschko 2022). A significant number of studies have shown that reflecting on meaning and purpose – particularly those with pro-social orientations – leads to a host of favourable outcomes among young adults such as identity development, happiness, positive affect, and hope (Burrow and Hill 2011), resiliency (Masten et al. 2002), better school performance (Pizzolato, Brown, and Kanny 2011), and life satisfaction (Bronk et al. 2009; Glanzer, Hill, and Johnson 2017). Yet, for all this discussion, few studies (Glanzer, Hill, and Robinson 2018; Robbins 2008; Schwab 2020) have examined the result of American college students' reflections and subsequent conceptualisations of the good life.

Discovering the answer to this question is important for several reasons. First, if students' visions of the good life provide one source of motivation to pursue various 'goods' – as has been suggested by some scholars (e.g. Smith 2003, 2015; Taylor 1989) – then how students conceptualise the good life will have a significant impact on their decisions and well-being in and beyond college (Lapsley and Hardy 2017). Second, if professors are going to help students critically analyse these various versions of the good life, the professors must first know what students' visions are. For instance, one scholarly critique of how emerging adults are being educated claimed that students 'need some better moral maps and better-equipped guides to show the way around' (Smith et al. 2011, 69). To provide such maps, professors must first know the current terrain.

Thus, in this study, we sought to find the answer to this question: How do American college students define and describe the good life? Furthermore, which ingredients or sets of ingredients are the most important and common in their descriptions?

College students and the good life: the literature

We are aware of only three studies of American college-age emerging adults' (18–23) views of the good life (Glanzer, Hill, and Robinson 2018; King and Napa 1998; Schwab 2020; for adolescents see Bronk 2008). King and Napa asked a group of 104 college students in an upper-level psychology course to rate different scenarios as to their relevance to a good life. Interestingly, they only defined and tested perceptions of the good life using three ingredients: 'happiness, meaning in life, and money' (156). Among the students, 'meaning and happiness determined the desirability of a good life. Wealth was largely irrelevant to judgments of the good life . . . ' (162).

More recently, Glanzer, Hill, and Robinson (2018) did not define the term 'good life' but found in interviews with 229 young emerging adults (18–23) that their vision of the good life was different from their conception of purpose. Although one-fourth could not articulate a purpose, all articulated a five-year vision for the good life. Furthermore, their five-year vision of the good life focused more on individualistic concerns such as happiness, material acquisitions, being stress-free, finding new experiences, and quality relationships with one's family.

Schwab (2020) interviewed 24 emerging adults (18–29) to find their conception of the good life (also without first defining the good life). He found their articulation of the good life also expressed a focus on individualism, idiosyncrasy, pluralism, and relativism. It should be noted that both the Glanzer et al. and Schwab samples included emerging adults not in college.

Interestingly, we know more about how college students view the good life from other countries than we do about U.S. college students (Bonn and Tafarodi 2013; Tafarodi et al. 2012; Winston, Maher, and Easvaradoss 2017; Zhang and Yu 2014). In these studies, certain key elements included in college students' definitions of the good life appear to transcend cultures and genders (Tafarodi et al. 2012; Winston, Maher, and Easvaradoss 2017). For example, in a study of Canadian, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese university students, Tafarodi et al. (2012) did not pre-define the good life but instead asked students to describe the good life (the initial question was open-ended and asked participants what they would consider a good or worthy life at 85 years of age). They found students defined the good life using a range of thirty qualities. In every country, the ten most indicated qualities included these four general categories: a lot of wealth and assets, having achieved great things, having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partner, and having had close and enduring friendships. Considering this commonality, it is reasonable to assume that there will be significant commonalities between Canadian and American college students considering their close cultures.

Method

We used a qualitative interpretivist approach and an iterative categorical analysis consistent with a Charmazian (Charmaz 2014) grounded theory methodology to explore

Table 1. Methodological elements*.

Research Element	Our Approach
Epistemology	Constructionist
Theoretical Perspective	Interpretivist
Methodology	Charmazian Grounded Theory
Methods	Narrative Based Interviews
Coding Stages	(1) Microanalysis (Open Coding) (2) Axial Coding (3) Iterative Categorical Analysis

*Research elements derived from Crotty (1998).

how American college students described the good life (see Table 1). Qualitative approaches elevate the unique experiences of individuals and the meaning they make of those experiences (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). We analysed participant responses in light of a constructionist epistemology that holds that the meaning humans make of their unique experiences is not created independently (Crotty 1998). To explore the social construction of reality embedded within individual responses, we used an interpretivist theoretical approach (Crotty 1998). This approach provided the necessary framework for capturing the cultural and historical meanings situated within participants' constructions.

Given the paucity of studies about how American college students in the young emerging adult age range (18–23) conceptualise the good life, we sought a methodology that would enable us to explore student constructions using a fully inductive approach. Our desire to study the good life inductively was the impetus for employing a grounded theory methodology which is often used to explicate understudied social realities (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory was well suited for such a task because its processes allow theory to arise naturally from the data through iterative and inductive data collection, rather than presupposing theory on social realities (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Since its origin, grounded theory has split into four main strands, each with a unique emphasis (Apramian et al. 2017). Whereas traditional grounded theory relies on post-positivist epistemology, a 'Charmazian' approach aligns with our constructionist epistemology (Charmaz 2011, 2014).

Given these philosophical commitments, the goal of the Charmazian approach is to use participant responses to present 'arguments about the world and the relationships within it' (Charmaz 2006, 128). By considering the unique contexts and experiences of participants, the Charmazian approach is intended to cultivate categories of meaning from participant responses that would be meaningful to the participants themselves (Apramian et al. 2017, 365). A Charmazian approach accomplishes this goal by carefully reviewing participant stories, contexts, and responses and then coding in a way that reveals the 'implicit meaning and actions' in the social performances of everyday life' (Charmaz 2014, 124). In short, the commitments of the Charmazian approach to grounded theory enable us to discover student conceptualisations of the good life within the particularised context and narrative of their responses.

In accordance with grounded theory methodology, we did not start with a prior theoretical framework. Furthermore, like most studies mentioned above and consistent with grounded theory, we began without a definition of the good life. Not surprisingly, Whitty (2002) has found that open-ended narrative questions are the best way to discover

goal constructs. The data upon which this article is based come from qualitative interviews using narrative-based questions (e.g. 'Tell me about a time when . . . ') that were part of two larger mixed-methods studies (Dougherty et al., 2022; Glanzer et al., 2017). One of these studies that focused on college students' conception of purpose found that participants made important conceptual distinctions between how they described purpose and how they described the 'good life' (Glanzer et al., 2017). Given that distinction, we decided to undertake a separate exploration of students' conception of the good life that became this study. As a result, the interviews were undertaken in two distinct phases.

First phase participants

The first phase of this study began with in-depth face-to-face interviews with 109 students from 10 different colleges and universities between October 2012 and March 2013. The table below (see Table 2) provides the demographic information of the participants from this first phase.

Within the institutional contexts described below, we sought a diverse representation of students regarding religion, classification, gender, and ethnicity. Students were from 20 different states.

First phase recruitment

Phase one interviews were conducted across 10 different institutions. Seeking diversity in the secular vs. religious identification of the institutions as well as in institutional types (e.g. a community college, liberal arts colleges, various levels of

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of qualitative sample 1 (N = 109).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Race/Ethnicity	White	74	67.89%
	Asian	7	6.42%
	Hispanic	7	6.42%
	Black	5	4.59%
	Indian	4	3.67%
	Middle Eastern	2	1.83%
	Native American	1	0.92%
	Mixed	9	8.26%
Gender	Female	58	53.21%
	Male	51	46.79%
Year in College	First	20	18.35%
	Second	21	19.27%
	Third	34	31.19%
	Fourth/Fifth	34	31.19%
Religion	Protestant (or 'Just Christian')	43	39.45%
	Catholic	14	12.84%
	Jewish	14	12.84%
	LDS	9	8.26%
	Nonreligious/None	8	7.34%
	Atheist	6	5.50%
	Agnostic	6	5.50%
	Buddhist	5	4.59%
	Muslim	2	1.83%
	Hindu	1	0.92%
	Unification Church	1	0.92%

research universities), we pursued participants on an assortment of campuses: a secular community college, secular private research university, secular public research university, secular liberal arts college, Baptist university, Catholic university, Evangelical university, Jewish university, Latter-Day Saints university, and a Lutheran college. The choice to interview students at these universities was designed to provide a significant degree of worldview, geographical, and class diversity.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the primary investigator's institution, we contacted the appropriate person at each university and presented our request and IRB approval documentation. We used a variety of convenience sampling methods to obtain student participants. In all but the two institutions that allowed us to recruit through their IRB offices, we used student newspaper advertisements, on-campus advertising, email forums, or relational networks. Initial contacts and appointments were all made through email. We offered interviewees a $30 gift card for their participation. The co-authors conducted the interviews at all but one institution where graduate students educated in grounded theory methods conducted the interviews with guidance from the principal investigator.

First phase data collection

Interviewers obtained both verbal and written consent from respondents. The location of the interviews varied according to institutional requirements. Interviews at the two institutions that requested our research take place off campus were conducted in public settings such as coffee shops or local libraries. In all the other cases, the institutions provided rooms where the interviews could take place or chose locations requested by the students. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. The interview protocol related to this paper involved one question that was asked along with others. We asked students, 'What would the good life look like to you five years from now?'

Second phase participants

The second phase of data collection emerged out of the recognition that our qualitative answers from the interviews revealed an important finding. Yet, we still needed to accomplish two things. First, we wanted to ensure saturation of the initial ingredient categories we discovered in the first phase (we did). Second, we wanted to achieve saturation of different sets of categories that comprised three-fourths of the good life visions we found in stage one. Due to financial and logistical limitations, we were forced to rely on convenience sampling and interviewed students at one of the universities, a private Christian research university with open enrolment (students are not required to be Christian to attend). We interviewed 167 students first- and final-year students over three years (2018–21) (see Table 3).

Although our convenience sampling approach ensured we could conduct a substantial number of interviews year after year, we acknowledge our choice led to a sample where white and Protestant students were over-represented.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of qualitative sample 2 (N = 167).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (Within Sample)	Percentage (Institution Overall)
Race/Ethnicity	White	120	72	61
	Asian	11	7	10
	Hispanic	16	10	16
	Black	15	9	7
	Mixed race/Other	5	3	4
Gender	Female	94	56	60
	Male	73	44	40
Year in College	First	92	55	
	Second	6	4	
	Third	4	2	
	Fourth and Beyond	67	40	
Religion (n = 69)	Christian	61	88	88
	Baptist	10	14	
	Catholic	7	10	
	Nondenominational	9	13	
	Assembly of God/Pentecostal	2	3	
	Mainline Protestant (e.g. Lutheran)	2	3	
	'Believes in Jesus'/'Bible-Believing'	2	3	
	Non-Christian	8	12	12
	Nonreligious	6	9	
	Agnostic	3	4	
	Atheist	2	3	
	Nonreligious	1	1	
	Animist	1	1	
	Spiritual	1	1	

Second phase recruitment

Subject selection for this case study occurred at six separate times. We sought to interview a wide variety of students in three different first-year and final-year classes (i.e. first-year students in 2018, 2019, 2020, and final-year graduating students in the spring of 2019, 2020, and 2021). We recruited participants through graduate students who contacted full-time staff and residence assistants charged with directing and facilitating co-curricular communities on campus. Participation in this study was voluntary and not incentivised

Second phase data collection

Participant recruitment, selection, and data collection began in the fall of 2018 and are ongoing – this paper reports on interviews completed between the fall of 2018 and the spring of 2021. Interviewees provided both verbal and written consent before participating. We conducted interviews in person or on Zoom video conferencing software (since part of the second phase was conducted during COVID-19). The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were digitally recorded

Considering our experience from phase one, the interview protocol for phase two included the same question regarding the good life, but with a slight adjustment. Recognising both the benefits of a time-limited question – revealing more pronounced changes in students' views of the good life during college – and desiring to introduce

a longer timeframe to the question, we asked: 'Ten years from now, what does the good life look like to you?' Intensive interviews were semi-structured, consisting of twenty-five open-ended, exploratory questions about the categories and frameworks guiding students' moral thinking.

Data analysis procedure

When engaging in data analysis for both sets of data, we utilised the constant comparative method that is core to the qualitative tradition (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2015). We individually manually coded transcripts line-by-line using *microanalysis*, also known as *open* or *initial coding* (Corbin and Strauss 2015, 70). What became clear from this initial coding is that students consistently answered the good life question in both data sets, not by telling a narrative or painting detailed descriptions, but by offering lists of what we would eventually call good life ingredients. Thus, our first cycle of coding broke participant responses into pieces, using the language of the student as the title of the code. The codes were never assigned more than one heading, and we never had problems with ambiguity. We should note that adjectives became important in creating multiple codes. For instance, most respondents used three types of adjectives to describe the future job they wanted (e.g. 'secure', 'comfortable', or 'enjoyable').

To reveal the cultural patterns in our data (Crotty 1998), we used *axial coding* to 'reassemble data that were "split" during the initial coding process' (Saldaña 2016, 244). We recombined the split data based on common patterns and categories among participants. This process results in a refined and saturated list of good life ingredients (Corbin and Strauss 2015). In other words, we sought to identify all the possible good life ingredients that respondents listed.

Although with 24 ingredients the number of different possibilities is over eight million, we realised that our participants articulated only a limited number of patterns. Thus, we created letter combinations for all our ingredients using the letters A to X. In some cases, the respondent may only have one letter (e.g. 'B') ingredient due to their limited response (e.g. 'Hopefully. I'm in love with my job'.). In other cases, a respondent might list up to eight ingredients and therefore would be labelled with multiple letters (e.g. 'BDEHIR'). We then determined the ingredient baskets that would account for the highest number of respondents. As we will describe below, we came up with eight mutually exclusive baskets that accounted for 68% of students. By 'mutually exclusive' we do not mean that they did not have ingredients in common (they did). Instead, we mean the groupings were mutually exclusive – one person found in one basket was not also in another basket of ingredients.

Methodological integrity and positionality statement

We took the following measures to bolster the methodological integrity of this study: (a) performing member checks, (b) engaging in memo writing throughout the research process (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2015), and (c) the inclusion of the following positionality statement. We admittedly have a bias against more materialistic visions of the good life in favour of versions of the good life focusing on beyond-the-self purposes and goals (c.f. Glanzer et al., 2017). Though we might hope more students would choose

beyond-the-self goals for the good life, our years working with, teaching, and studying college students made us aware that this vision of the good life might be in the minority among them. Indeed, our predilection for beyond-the-self purposes – and our growing concern about the number of students who held them – was part of the impetus for our study. To avoid priming the students with our preferences, we merely asked them to describe their vision of the good life without additional prompts and with minimal follow-ups (occasionally we'd ask a student to elaborate on a brief response). Additionally, to avoid artificial responses from participants due to our age and position as researchers, several interviews were conducted by graduate students who were much closer in age and social location to the participants (we saw minimal content differences in responses given to us versus responses given to graduate students). Finally, we protected participant intent by maintaining participant phrasing throughout our analysis as well – several of the category names are words used by participants. Because these are typical methods of a grounded theory approach, our methodology was all the more useful given our relationship to the topic.

Limitations

Our study faces the usual limit of grounded theory analysis performed in specific locations. Although we achieved data saturation in these locations, new categories might arise from additional interviews with college students elsewhere. For example, our second location for 167 interviews was a private Christian university. Although not all participants there were Christians, interviews at a secular university would likely have produced slightly different answers or emphases within those answers. Finally, we note our questions about the good life were time-bound (5 or 10 years away), thus capturing different perceptions than previous studies asking students to evaluate their lives at 85 years of age.

Findings

Overall, student responses consisted of a list of elements or ingredients which they believed – when combined – would make up the good life. We use the term ingredients because student responses typically took the form of a particular combination of items. For example, a student shared the following recipe:

> Amanda (pseudonym) and I married. At least had our first kid. Working in an outpatient orthopedic physical therapy clinic, more than likely. Um probably somewhere near [specific city] but not in the city. Close to where my best friend . . . lives and works now . . . . Those are the main things.

In this way, students defined the good life in two ways – a) which ingredients were present and b) how they were combined into a particular recipe. We have organised our findings to reflect these two elements of their definition and include responses from both data sets.

The ingredients of the good life

In sum, we found 24 distinct ingredients with the first ingredient having two sub-categories. We categorised these ingredients into three sub-categories: I. Self-Achiever

Ingredients; II. Relational Achievement Ingredients; and III. Moral Achievement Ingredients.

I. Self-Achiever Ingredients

(1) Career (sometimes additionally characterised by one of these two qualities)
  (a) Passion (e.g. 'Hopefully. I'm in love with my job.')
  (b) Stability (e.g. 'I just want a stable career')
(2) Being financially stable or independent (e.g. 'financially stable, would definitely be the good life')
(3) Being wealthy (e.g. 'being successful to me is like having a good salary. Got to be able to take care of yourself.')
(4) Living in a certain geographic place (e.g. 'Hopefully be back in New York City – I love that city a lot.')
(5) Being fit or healthy (e.g. 'just being in a good place physically, mentally, emotionally")
(6) Travelling (e.g. 'going on vacation every now and then . . . . I want to see more of the world')
(7) Achieving a certain level of stability or comfort (e.g. 'Well, for one, I mean, it would be living in a house, not on the streets – I guess that's obvious, but . . . to have some sort of stability.')
(8) Learning (e.g. 'I feel like learning is always going to be part of my life; if I'm not learning I kind of feel like stuck, you know, knowledge is big to me.')
(9) Enjoying hobbies (e.g. ' . . . to do things that I'd enjoy like hobbies;' 'I'd like to . . . go to all the hockey games.')
(10) Being happy (e.g. ' . . . a successful life is for me, at the end of every day to be able to say that I am happy.')

II. Relational Achievement Ingredients

(1) Married (e.g. 'I'd like to be married.')
(2) Having a family/children (e.g. 'I would be happy knowing that I raised a family and since I was raised Hispanic, there is definitely a cultural thing of like, 'this is like what should be done. We should be like, a mom.")
(3) Friendships (e.g. 'Having a good social life . . . . just having friends, I think that's really important.')
(4) Owning pets (e.g. 'at least three dogs')

III. Moral Achievement Ingredients

(1) Acquiring virtues (e.g. 'I would love to see myself just overflowing with constant joy and constant love.').
(2) Good marital or family relationships – the emphasis here is on the moral quality of the relationship and not merely having the relationship (e.g. 'I think, for me, a good life would be to have maintained a healthy relationship with my husband')
(3) Showing virtue towards one's parents (e.g. 'to have my parents live comfortably. . . . Still pay them back literally, for everything.')

(4) Career with moral focus (e.g. 'I'm working towards something that I think is worthwhile and I think it would be some sort of environmental project.').
(5) Serving others (e.g. 'I think being able to flourish is . . . that ability to serve the people around me.')
(6) High quality of involvement with community (e.g. 'definitely having some kind of leadership position and being proactive in the community that I'm in to help or maybe being on the board of a non-profit but in a position that I know I'm really making a difference.').
(7) Helping nature (e.g. 'Doing conservation work; helping creatures that can't get help themselves; preserving the beauty of nature.')
(8) Changing the world for good (e.g. 'what I want to do is find work that allows me to, it just sounds corny, change the world . . . .').
(9) Loving, serving, or following God (e.g. 'And just honestly finding ways to serve God through whatever I'm doing like that would be really, really ideal. I don't know exactly what that might look like . . . .').
(10) Respect from others (e.g. 'I would have a community of people that respect me' 'I hope when people see me, they know that's a good person.')

Though not generalisable to a broader population, seeing the frequency with which our respondents mentioned these ingredients is helpful (see Table 4).

Our data reflects a consistent list of ingredients across two large datasets. As Table 4 indicates regarding our findings for phase two, our analysis confirmed the saturation of ingredient concepts found in phase one. Moreover, it only produced one additional ingredient category (respect from others). Furthermore, the general frequency order of the ingredients was the same with career, marriage, having children, and being financially stable all being mentioned by over a quarter of respondents (26%) in both groups (see Table 4). The major differences (descriptive, not inferential) between the two sets only involved the frequency with which students mentioned certain ingredients such as marriage (60% vs. 32%), quality of marriage/family ingredients (35% vs. 10%), as well as a concern with living in a certain location (31% vs. 7%).

Recipes for the good life

As mentioned earlier, students' visions of the good life were usually a combination of ingredients that make a recipe for the good life. Students identified anywhere from one to eight ingredients in their recipes. Among our 276 participants, we found 189 unique ingredient sets (83 in the first set and 106 additional new ones in the second set).

Despite these subtle nuances between each of the 83 individual sets in our first group, our analysis revealed that 73% of students fell into one of eight thematic visions. That is, the ingredients comprising their sets were informed by one of eight ways of thinking about how those ingredients combined in support of the good life. These thematic visions were usually shaped by either one ingredient (making it a meta-ingredient), one meta-ingredient family (a group of related ingredients), or a particular combination of ingredients.

Our analysis of the second set found a similar pattern in that 65% of students fit into one of these eight groups (see Table 5). Furthermore, the percentage of students

Table 4. Percent of participants for each phase who mentioned each good life ingredient.

No.	Ingredient	Good Life in 5 Years (n = 109)	% Who mentioned it	Good Life in 10 Years (n = 167)	% Who mentioned it
1	Career (Passionate or stable)	95	86%	107	64%
2	Married	66	60%	54	32%
3	Having a family/Children	33	30%	48	29%
4	Advanced Learning	41	37%	38	23%
5	Financially stable	34	31%	43	26%
6	Loving, serving, God	20	18%	44	26%
7	Good marital or family relationships	39	35%	17	10%
8	Living in a certain geographic place	34	31%	11	7%
9	Serving others	13	12%	31	19%
10	Being happy	19	17%	25	15%
11	Friendships	20	18%	18	11%
12	Achieving a certain level of stability or comfort	11	10%	19	11%
13	High quality of involvement with the community	8	7%	16	10%
14	Career with a moral focus	15	14%	6	4%
15	Being wealthy	2	2%	14	8%
16	Acquiring particular virtues	6	5%	8	5%
17	Virtue towards parents	3	3%	10	6%
18	Changing the world for good	6	5%	6	4%
19	Owning pets	3	3%	5	3%
20	Travelling	3	3%	5	3%
21	Enjoying Hobbies	6	5%	1	1%
22	Being fit or healthy	2	2%	3	2%
23	Helping Nature	2	2%	0	0%
24	Respect from Others	0	0%	6	4%

mentioning these visions within the phase was relatively similar. Thus, we consider these eight thematic visions important for theory building about the good life and for understanding American college students.

American dreamers

The 59 students who held the most popular thematic vision shared two to six of the following ingredients: career success, marriage, kids, friends, some degree of material

Table 5. Summary of thematic visions in both samples.

		Phase 1 (n = 109)		Phase 2 (n = 167)		Combined (n = 276)	
	The Good Life Includes . . .	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
American Dreamers	*Material and Career success paired with family.*	28	25.45%	31	18.56%	59	21.38%
Happy Strivers	*Whatever makes you happy.*	19	17.27%	20	11.98%	39	14.13%
Comfort and Stability Seekers	*Avoiding the negative aspects of life.*	7	6.36%	13	7.78%	20	7.25%
ECL Students	*An enjoyable job, comfortable house or income, and limited family.*	6	5.45%	9	5.39%	15	5.43%
Family Cultivators	*Having quality family relationships.*	5	4.55%	7	4.19%	12	4.35%
Singular Career Strivers	*Getting a specific career or achieving a particular goal through a career.*	7	6.36%	7	4.19%	14	5.07%
Moral Strivers	*Living out a particular moral vision.*	6	5.45%	7	4.19%	13	4.71%
God-Followers	*Loving or following God.*	2	1.82%	7	4.19%	9	3.26%
	Totals	80	72.73%	101	60.48%	181	65.58%

success, and/or living in a certain location. We call them the American Dreamers because some of them even explicitly referenced the 'American Dream' within their vision of the good life. Here is one such statement from an individual describing the good life in 10 years:

> I'd be married. Absolutely have a kid or two at that point so not five. I probably won't have like four or five kids. But yeah, you know, I mean like the American Dream . . . be pursuing a lucrative career both financially and personally.

Of course, others described their vision of the American Dream without labelling it and just provided similar types of ingredients.

Happy strivers

The second most popular group, Happy Strivers (39), were the students who listed a set of ingredients with the key qualification that they just want to be happy. Thus, despite identifying anywhere from one to eight ingredients, happiness was the primary meta-ingredient for these students (e.g. 'I'm happy. I guess that's the big thing'.). In some instances, Happy Strivers were like American Dreamer students, including many of the same ingredients. However, they clearly and uniquely qualified their ingredients based on whether they led to happiness. For example, the following sounds like an American Dream student, but includes a happiness qualification:

> I really hope that I've graduated from law school and that I'm working for a successful firm. I don't necessarily want to say that I want to be married or have kids yet, but I would hope that my life is stable, so I want to have my own place to live. I want to know that I have a steady income, I'm not worried about putting food on the table, and *overall that I'd be genuinely happy*, whether that means that I just have friends or that I'm married. [Emphasis added]

The interesting thing about Happy Strivers is that they are not always sure what will definitively make them happy. Regardless, they desire the positive emotions associated with happiness – especially in contrast with certain expected negative emotions.

Comfort and stability seekers

The Comfort and Stability Seekers were closely related to, but distinct from, both American Dreamers and Happiness Strivers (20). These students also wanted to be free of stress but emphasised comfort and/or stability as primary. Interestingly, students prioritising comfort and stability often focused on these elements because they had grown up without them. They looked for ingredient combinations, such as a stable career and family, as sources of stability and comfort. Andres, a microbiology student at a public university shared his five-year desire.

> I would say, having a family, hopefully, a fiancé, wife, [and] maybe kids. I'd say having a decent home, like growing up I know how it is to struggle, so I just wanna live in a decent house. I don't want a mansion, or like two houses. I don't want things like that. I just want something that I can live comfortably in. A nice car, maybe, not an extravagant car, just a nice car. I just want to be able to live comfortably without having to live paycheck to paycheck like my mother did.

It was not always past experiences that made students resort to this view of the good life. Some students looked less to difficult financial pasts and more to uncertain financial futures. Overall, this group was less focused on positive dreams and more focused on avoiding both previous and potential negative realities.

Enjoyable job, comfort, and limited family (ECL) seekers

Though again sharing ingredients with other groups, a certain set of students (15) uniquely emphasised three features: an *enjoyable* job as well as a *comfortable*, and *limited* or unencumbered family life. We simply call this group ECL. Angie, a student at a public university majoring in engineering shared the characteristic good life dream of the ECL student:

> Well, first things first, A) I'd like to have a job I enjoy to do. B) still be single, . . . marriage is forever, that's a pretty big deal to them, unlike some people who kinda go through lives, that's kind of mean, so a job that I enjoy, be single; C) make enough money to be living comfortably, like I don't need to be making like $100,000 or anything, but I don't wanna be like I'm struggling to have to pay rent in not a very nice place, just like always having to worry about that. D) Have a good group of friends that I enjoy being around, and yeah, I guess that's about it.

One student even said in an interview, 'I'd wanna be married . . . um, I don't know about children. I'm an emerging adult so the idea of children scares me'. We found it interesting that these three ingredients went together in this same pattern for more than just a few students.

Family cultivators

In contrast to ECL students, a small group identified family – being married and having kids – and quality family relationships as their primary meta-ingredients (12). We called these students Family Cultivators. Interestingly, Family Cultivators all came from religious institutions of some type. For example, Tom from a Latter-day Saints University shared:

> To me, the good life would be with my family, with my wife, any kids, with my parents, and my siblings. We've become closer since I've been in school. Being close to them and continually learning every day. Pretty simple. I guess that's probably harder than it sounds, but that would be it. No cars, no houses to me it would just be being with my family.

Despite all Family Cultivators attending religious institutions, they did not all talk about following God, God's plan, or involvement in church or community. Their vision of the good life centred on quality family relationships.

Singular career strivers for moral causes

Of the two ingredients listed *singularly* more than three times, one of them was in the career category (the other we discuss in the final thematic vision below). Fourteen students mentioned only their careers when asked about the good life. Still, another 12 noted career criteria alongside only one other ingredient, and in these cases, the career ingredient predominated (e.g. 'being a lawyer, or if I can get a job as a lawyer, prosecutor. I want to live in New York, but I don't know how I'm going to be a prosecutor and live in New York City'). We labelled the students with this thematic vision Singular Career

Strivers. Though students described earlier wanted 'enjoyable' or 'stable' careers, virtually all Singular Career Strivers saw their career as an expression of a particular moral cause. One student stated, 'It doesn't matter how much money I'm making if I have found something worth living for in my job'.

Moral strivers

A seventh common thematic vision of the good life included a moral goal as a singular ingredient (e.g. 'I think living the good life would be being a good person'.) or a set of ingredients guided by a particular moral vision (13). Moral Strivers prioritised the moral ingredients of serving other people, changing the world, or being a person of virtue. Interestingly, all these students were theists. The following student response provides an example of a student combining multiple ingredients aligned with a specific moral vision:

> I will be living in inner-city Memphis, hopefully running an after-school program or something for at-risk youth. . . . just living a good purpose would be in a place that we're loving people that are unloved and serving those who are outcasts of society.

Moral Strivers differed in their specific life plans, but they each had a clear moral goal they hoped their life would accomplish.

God-followers

The final thematic vision of the good life, which we call God-Followers, involved loving or following God as the good life – a finding that was also only found among theists. This ingredient was the only one besides career that was a singular ingredient over three times (9). The following statement is typical of a God-follower: 'I'm most fulfilled when I'm where the Lord wants me to be, and so if the good life to me would be, is like wherever God wants me to be'. In over a quarter of the cases (17 of 65) in which the loving, serving, or following God ingredient was mentioned with others, it was identified as the meta-ingredient. In these instances, students conceptualised other ingredients as secondary to the good life. Julie shared:

> I want to honor Christ and live for Him. That's the first thing that I hope I'm doing in 10 years; is I hope that I am taking every opportunity to glorify Him and to honor Him wherever I am. And in terms of where I am, job, family, things like that, married, which is in the works. So, that's not a weird thing to say if I wasn't already engaged. Married, hopefully working as a speech therapist, maybe going back to get a Ph.D. I don't know, we'll see what the future holds. Maybe I'll have kids by then maybe I won't. Yeah, probably living somewhere in Texas. Hopefully near family.

Although other patterns exist, given the fact that these eight thematic visions of the good life represent over two-thirds of our extensive sample, we believe these represent the most prominent visions of the good life American college students currently hold, even if the relative frequency among these visions would be different in less Protestant and less white samples.

Discussion

Overall, our findings from interviews with 276 American college students revealed that their visions of the good life were comprised of 24 unique ingredients. Over 68% of students combined these ingredients into one of eight thematic visions of the good life.

Implications for theory

The theory we present here is an inductively built and bounded empirical description and an abstract theoretical generalisation about American college students' understanding of the core variable (the good life) and the relationship between the ingredient variables used to make sense of that core variable. Based on our findings, we theorise that virtually every 5-to-10-year description by American college students will consist of one or more (at most eight) ingredients. Moreover, we hypothesise that two-thirds of American college students will describe one of the eight dominant visions of the good life that we identified (even though there are over 8 million possible combinations). In other words, our theory is that American college students will identify 24 good life ingredients and that two-thirds of these ingredient combinations consist of eight types of good life visions.

Comparing lists to other good life studies

Although previous research has demonstrated that students differentiate between purpose and the 'good life' (Glanzer, Hill, and Robinson 2018), the ingredients and groupings we found seem to suggest that some students view their purpose more pro-socially than others. For example, the vision of the good life depicted by the happy strivers, comfort, and stability seekers, ECL students, and singular career strivers did not indicate much in the way of 'beyond the self' purposes (Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk 2003). The good life for those students merely included some combination of individual financial and psychological comfort.

This finding seems to reiterate the limits of a study that forces students to choose a single ingredient. For example, King and Napa (1998) asked students to choose between 'happiness, meaning in life, and money' (156). When forced to choose, the students in their study prioritised meaning and happiness over money. But in our study, when students were not forced to choose, several students described how financial comfort contributed to or led to psychological comfort or happiness. In this way, studying student conceptions of the good life through the language of ingredients and recipes reinforces critiques that humans are not rational maximisers and instead seek multiple goods at the same time, at varying levels of instrumentality (Smith 2015), and often for non-rational reasons (Thaler 2015). Thus, the question is not so much which single ingredient determines the good life, as much as which *set* of ingredients (and what order within that set) leads to the good life.

Given the importance of understanding the full range of ingredients, to extend our discussion and compare our theory of American students' approach to identifying the good life, we think it is helpful to compare the list of ingredients we found with the 30 ingredients identified by the most extensive inductive study of emerging adults' conceptions of the good life to date (Tafarodi et al. 2012) (see Table 6).

We purposely did not refer to this list when coding; nevertheless, our codes were similar on nineteen items. Given differences in participant nationalities, religious backgrounds, and the age differential present within our questions (i.e. they asked people to imagine what the good life would be at 85 years of age), the similarities are striking. Regarding differences, the list of 30 was missing three of our identified ingredients: pets, living in a certain geographical location, and caring for nature. The first two are

understandable considering the five- and ten-year timeframe of our questions, during which these are considerations for college students. Moreover, the two references we categorised as 'caring for nature' could be coded alternatively under the broader category of living according to one's moral principles.

There were also nine ingredients on the Tafarodi et al. (2012) list that were not mentioned on our list. Again, a few of these can be explained by our differing periods. Even ten years post-college, judging the success of one's children, or one's power or influence over others would prove difficult. That said, a couple of the ingredients missing from our list are a bit surprising. When students in our study mentioned 'fun', it was used about jobs (3) or 'I think being able to pay my own bills that'd be fun' (1) rather than experiences (1). Furthermore, no one in our study directly talked about living a free or independent life, though comments from ECL students wanting limited families or those describing financial stability came closest.

Despite these differences, our findings, from a different set of emerging adults, reinforce the findings of Tafarodi et al. (2012).

Table 6. Comparing good life ingredients between studies.

	Ingredients from Tafarodi et al. (2012)	Equivalent Ingredients in this Study
1.	Having had close and enduring friendships	Quality Friendships
2.	Having a happy and healthy family	Slightly like good family relationships and being happy
3.	Having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	Changing the world for good
4.	Well-being and contentment	Being happy
5.	Having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	Being married/Good marriage
6.	A lot of wealth or assets	Being wealthy
7.	Having had a successful career	Stable career
8.	Having achieved great things	*No equivalent*
9.	Having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	Acquiring virtues & serving others
10.	Having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	*No equivalent*
11.	Having gained wisdom	Acquiring virtues
12.	Good relationships with family members	Virtue towards family/parents
13.	Having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my potential	*No equivalent*
14.	Having travelled the world	Travelling
15.	Having had a personally fulfilling career	A career I am passionate about
16.	Having raised my children well	Having children
17.	The respect and admiration of others	*Respect from others*
18.	Financial security and comfort	Being financially stable
19.	Knowing that I'll be remembered after I'm gone for who I was or what I did	*No equivalent*
20.	High social status or celebrity	*No equivalent*
21.	Being highly educated or possessing great professional skills/ knowledge	Learning
22.	Having had a lot of involvement in my community	Moral involvement with the community
23.	Having overcome obstacles or successfully taken on challenges	*No equivalent*
24.	Having had successful children	*No equivalent*
25.	Having had many friends	Friendships
26.	Having lived a free and independent life	Indirectly: the ECL students
27.	Having attained harmony with nature or God	Loving, serving, or following God
28.	Having pursued hobbies or leisure activities that were personally fulfilling	Hobbies
29.	Power or influence over others	*No equivalent*
30.	Having lived in accordance with my religious faith	Loving, serving, or following God
	No equivalent	Pets
		Living in a certain geographic location
		Caring for nature

Implications for future research

Future surveys of American college students' vision of the good life would do well to focus on the 24 ingredients identified, but they should also consider ingredients that come from a longer view of the good life such as the success of one's children or one's power or influence over others (Tafarodi et al. 2012).

Future qualitative studies could explore the nuances of each of these ingredients with wider audiences, to see how these categorisations compare with other groups of emerging adults – particularly those who did not attend college or those who attended public and more pluralistic institutions. Additionally, researchers could use quantitative methods to validate the ingredients and groupings generated from our qualitative approach. Finally, it would be particularly interesting to use an approach like latent profile analysis to explore the effects these groupings have on a host of other outcomes over time as was done with religiosity in a recent study (Lee et al. 2022).

Implications for practice

Identity formation and moral development are commonly recognised as significant projects for the years of emerging adulthood (Lapsley and Hardy 2017). Indeed, 'authoring the life narrative takes on a certain urgency during emerging adulthood given the many transitions and life-changing events that occur during this period . . . ' (5). In light of our findings, we agree with Smith et al. (2011) that students need better moral maps, but we would take it one step further. Students not only need better maps but – as one of us has argued previously – the moral tools necessary to evaluate what counts as a worthy destination.

Practically speaking, colleges and universities have already established several offerings intended to help students explore and reflect on the big questions of life. But our proposal builds on the work of Colby et al. (2003) who suggest that these offerings must go beyond mere values clarification, to offer substantive visions of 'the good'. We recognise that practitioners working in public, pluralistic settings may be wary of offering substantive definitions of the good life, but we'd like to offer a solution. The vast number of coherent ethical traditions agree that one's good is inextricably linked to the good of others – and thus the 'good life' objectively includes pro-social elements. Thus, just as Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk (2003) defined purpose in a way that precludes autonomous individualism, we would like to argue that a normative definition of the 'good life' should be defined similarly. Thus, those working with college students should feel the freedom to teach students that a good life includes the consideration of, and dependence upon, others. Given the individualism we found in our data, adopting the definition we are proposing would mean practitioners would need to develop programming to help students see the limitations of their otherwise individualistic visions.

Conclusion

Higher education has historically been concerned with helping students engage 'the big questions'. What is truth? Who am I? What does it mean to be human? What is the good life? For contemporary colleges and universities to consider their effectiveness in helping students explore various visions of the good life, they will need to assess what visions

students presently hold. Few empirical studies explore how American college students answer these important questions. We hope scholars and administrators will use our study as a baseline for future studies into the various thematic visions students have of the good life and the ingredients comprising them.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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