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Self-Centeredness and Selflessness: A Theory of Self-Based Psychological Functioning and Its Consequences for Happiness

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The theoretical model presented in this paper emerged from several different disciplines. This model proposes that the attainment of happiness is linked to the self, and more particularly to the structure of the self. We support the idea that the perception of a structured self, which takes the form of a permanent, independent and solid entity leads to self-centered psychological functioning, and this seems to be a significant source of both affliction and fluctuating happiness. Contrary to this, a selfless psychological functioning emerges when perception of the self is flexible (i.e., a dynamic network of transitory relations), and this seems to be a source of authentic-durable happiness. In this paper, these two aspects of psychological functioning and their underlying processes will be presented. We will also explore the potential mechanisms that shape them. We will conclude with an examination of possible applications of our theory.

Keywords: self-centeredness, selflessness, fluctuating happiness, and authentic-durable happiness

Traditionally, western psychology has been more rooted in understanding the negative aspects of human psychological functioning rather than the positive ones (Simonton & Baumeister, 2005). However, since the early 1990s, the movement of positive psychology has attempted to correct this imbalance by promoting the study of the conditions and processes which contribute to the optimal functioning of individuals, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). From this point of view, the study of well-being and happiness has gradually become a field of primary importance (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Diener, 2000; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schakde, 2005). Moreover, a substantial amount of research has been done in this field, making it possible to identify several factors implicated in the regulation of these phenomena (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Veenhoven, 1997). In this paper, we propose that attaining authentic happiness is linked to the way we relate to the notion of a self, and more particularly to its nature. We defend the idea that the perception of a structured self in the form of a seemingly solid, permanent and independent entity, favors a self-centered psychological functioning, which is the source of unstable, fluctuating happiness. In opposition to this, we propose that selfless psychological functioning emerges from the perception of the self as being flexible (i.e., a dynamic experience) and that this constitutes a source of authentic and durable happiness.

The theoretical model, which we have developed, lies at the crossroad of different disciplines. It aims to integrate knowledge from western psychology and philosophy (i.e., social and cognitive psychology, intercultural psychology, developmental psychology, philosophy of the mind), with insights derived from eastern traditions. Recently, parallels between western and eastern psychology have been made. Some contemplative traditions, such as those using attention-vigilance (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991), offer interesting new perspectives (e.g., Ekman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005; Ricard, 2006; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), which also underline various approaches taken in by both western and eastern psychology (e.g., Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch, 2000; Lutz & Thompson, 2003; Thompson, 2004; Varela & Shear, 1999). In dominant western psychology, human behavior is investigated from the outside (i.e., the "third person's" perspective), while in the attention-vigilance approach psychological processes are assessed through direct introspection (i.e., the "first person's" perspective) using various techniques of mental training. Until recently, a rather low status has been given to introspection by western science (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), as it was considered to be unreliable (Wallace, 2000). Recent studies suggest that the two approaches are complementary and provide congruent knowledge (e.g., Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). The two approaches must be combined constructively, and this has created new fields of investigation. They include the "contemplative neurosciences" and the clinical applications of mental training (e.g., Brefczynski-Lewis, Lutz, Schaefer, Levinson, & Davidson, 2007; Davidson et al., 2003; Ekman et al., 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, & Davidson, 2004; Lutz, Lachaux, Martinière, & Varela, 2002; Lutz, Slagter, Rawling, Francis, Greishar, & Davidson, 2009; Rosch, 1999; Shapiro & Walsh, 2003; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

Accordingly, we have constructed a theoretical model that proposes to identify the mechanisms that are either conducive or detrimental to authentic happiness. Referring to the two kinds of happiness discussed in section I (i.e., fluctuating happiness and authentic-durable happiness), we investigated the mechanisms through which the structure of the self affects our style of psychological functioning, in particular as it relates to our affective experiences and the quality of our happiness (section II and III). In section IV, we studied a variety of factors that we hypothesized regulated styles of psychological functioning as it related to the structure of the self (e.g., cultural background, parental and school

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education, religiosity and spirituality, special life experiences, etc.). In section V we examined some potential applications of our model and some preliminary conclusions were discussed.

I. Two Types of Happiness: Fluctuating and Authentic-Durable

According to Ryan and Deci (2001), hedonic happiness occurs when one is primarily seeking pleasant feelings and avoiding unpleasant ones, while eudemonic happiness is conceptualized more in terms of optimal functioning. Ryff (1995) describe eudemonia "as the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential" (p. 100). These two views of happiness illustrate two traditions whose philosophic roots are significantly divergent. While in hedonistic philosophy the aim of life is to maximize pleasure (e.g., Aristippus, Bentham, DeSade, Hobbes), other philosophers and religious thinkers do not agree with this conception. Aristotle, for example, considers hedonic happiness as vulgar insofar as it condemns man to be a slave of his desires (e.g., Schopenhauer, Stoicism). According to the Stoic Epictetus, happiness does not involve enjoying pleasures, but rather occurs when one is free from desires. This latter conception shows some similarities with Buddhism. The Buddhists use the term *sukha* to qualify authentic happiness, and this term closely resembles eudemonic happiness. *Sukha* can be defined "as a state of flourishing that arises from mental balance and insight into the nature of reality. Rather than a fleeting emotion or mood, aroused by sensory and conceptual stimuli, *sukha* is an enduring trait that arises from a state of mental balance and entails a conceptually unstructured and unfiltered awareness of the true nature of reality" (Ekman et al., 2005, p. 60).

Hedonic and eudemonic happiness reflect two distinct psychological states. By trying to maximize pleasures and avoiding displeasures, the hedonic approach induces a fluctuating happiness in which phases of pleasure and displeasure alternate repeatedly. The experience of pleasure is by nature fleeting and dependent upon circumstances. It is unstable and the sensations it evokes soon becomes neutral (hedonic adaptation; e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). In addition, we have very little control over pleasant and unpleasant sensations, even though we try hard to achieve the first and avoid the latter. We strive for pleasure, experiencing it temporarily or not at all. We try to avoid all unpleasant experiences and yet are confronted with them repeatedly. If pleasant feelings are only the result of satisfying desires for material goods, money or power, they will probably be short-lived. All such pleasures are linked to a variety of outer conditions which, when they disappear, result in a loss of associated pleasure. The alternation of positive and negative phases provokes fluctuating happiness of short duration. Consistently, Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) found that reported happiness varies significantly both with time of day and day of week. To understand hedonism, one thus must take into consideration the positive costs associated with satisfying pleasure, as well as the negative costs associated with the impossibility of fully satisfying our desire for pleasant sensations. It is important to make a distinction between the hedonic quest (i.e., reaping maximum pleasure and avoiding displeasure) and hedonic happiness. The latter is characterized by repeated alternation between periods in which the quest for pleasure is momentarily satisfied and periods during which it is not (i.e., phase of dissatisfaction and displeasure). From our perspective, a high level of alternation between phases of pleasure and displeasure characterizes a high level of fluctuating happiness, and vice versa. In other words, to study the complete spectrum of hedonic happiness, one must take in account the variations between phases of happiness and phases of discontent, the latter being associated with the nonsatisfaction of desires (i.e., nonmaximization of pleasure and nonavoidance of displeasure).

According to many philosophical and spiritual traditions, it would seem that hedonism, which is based on stimulus-driven pleasures of all kinds, does not allow one to achieve authentic and durable happiness. As observed by Wallace and Shapiro (2006), "clinging to such stimuli as the actual source of one's happiness can easily give rise to at least intermittent, if not chronic, anxiety as one faces the possibility, likelihood, or certainty that stimuli will not last" (p. 692). Authentic happiness is not dependent upon circumstances, but rather gives a person the inner resources to deal with whatever comes his or her way in life. It is not linked to an activity but reflects a "state of being," a profound emotional balance. Authentic happiness is understood here as an optimal way of being, a state of *durable plenitude* based on a quality of consciousness that underlies and imbues each experience, emotion and behavior, and allows us to embrace all the joys and the pain with which we are confronted. Plenitude, bliss, peace of mind, serenity, inner peace, or fulfillment would be some of the markers of authentic happiness. In other words, authentic-durable happiness, as opposed to fluctuating happiness, would be a lasting state that could be maintained through the various upheavals of life. It would not be intrinsically dependent on the positive and negative feedback that we are constantly receiving, but rather give one the inner resources to deal with the variability of the world and be a source of continuous optimal adaptation to external conditions. What is specific about our proposed model is that we are predicting that these two types of happiness are related to different kinds of self-based psychological functioning.

II. The Concepts of "Self-Centeredness" and "Selflessness"

The notion of self or ego has an important place in research in psychology. The self and the ego are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g., Greenwald, 1980). However, depending on the discipline, one of the concepts is often emphasized more than the other. Clinical psychologists using Freudian concepts often make reference to the me or the ego (e.g., ego-psychology, Hartmann, 1939), but the various meanings attributed to the ego or the self are often quite different (e.g., Deikman, 1982; Epstein, 1973; Freud, 1953; Hartmann, 1939; Janet, 1907; Jung, 1966; Kohut & Ornstein, 1978; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Other areas of scientific research often refer to the self as well, but they approach this notion in various ways and the models they propose often have little in common (e.g., Allport, 1968; Baldwin, 1897; Cooley, 1902; Galin, 2003; Goffman, 1959; Greenwald, 1980; Harter, 1983; James, 1890; Kelly, 1955; Kihlstrom & Canto, 1984; Lewin, Heider, & Heider, 1936; Maslow, 1971; Markus, 1977; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mead, 1934; Strawson, 1997). The lack of unity among these various approaches makes it difficult to put forth a standard definition of the self, or ego.

In the present model, self refers mainly to the perception that we have of our identity, which takes the form of a specific mental construct and results in a particular conception of self. Unlike works where the concept of self focuses on its content (i.e., the way in which one describes oneself) or self-esteem (i.e., the way in which one evaluates oneself), we are more interested here in the structure of the self, its organization and the mental concepts associated with it. As will be detailed, the self can have different mental configurations; it can, for example, take the form of a solid entity, which is constant and relatively well separated from the rest of the world (i.e., autonomous, independent). Such a structure would generate a specific kind of psychological functioning. Moreover, we propose that there are very different styles of psychological functioning where the self is concerned. They can be as diverse as those which characterize a dictator who is concerned only with himself and dreams of a world tailored to the image of his desires; and a genuine altruist who is ready to confront danger to help others and believes that all living beings are part of a vast family (Monroe, 1996). These reflect markedly different structural organizations of the self. These conceptions of self not only shape our relation to the world and to others, but also affect our own well-being.

2.1. Definition of Self-Centeredness and Selflessness

The present theoretical model postulates the existence of two qualitatively distinct aspects of psychological functioning related to the self. We propose to qualify the first psychological functioning as "self-centeredness." Two principal dimensions underlie this style of functioning: self-centeredness and an exaggerated sense of importance given to the self. By self-centeredness, we mean that the self takes on a central point of reference with regard to many psychological activities (i.e., conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect/emotion, and behavior). The exaggerated importance given to the self emerges mainly from self-centeredness and refers to the increased degree with which the individual considers that his own condition is more important than that of others and this takes unquestionable priority. Self-centered psychological functioning includes characteristics such as biased self-interest, egoism, egocentrism, and egotism.

In contrast, we use the term "selflessness" to qualify the self's alternative psychological functioning. It is characterized by low levels of self-centeredness and a low degree of importance given to the self (i.e., not exaggerated). This style of psychological functioning is closely related to characteristics such as altruism, kindness, respect, empathy, compassion (including the self; e.g., Neff, 2003) and the search for harmony. Unlike self-centered psychological functioning, a selfless functioning is based on a weak distinction between self and others, and self and the environment as a whole (e.g., Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008). Thus, selflessness is intimately related to self-transcendence (e.g., Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Piedmont, 1999), wisdom (Ardelt, 2008), and a quiet ego (e.g., Bauer & Wayment, 2008; Leary, 2004).

By proposing two different categories of self, self-centered and selfless, we realize that we are simplifying reality to a certain degree. Before introducing the characteristics, which justify this heuristic approach, some distinctions and nuances must be addressed. First, categorization tends to accentuate intercategorical differences and intracategorical similarities (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963), favoring the emergence of watertight categories. To counteract this, we propose to envisage these two types of psychological functioning as a single continuum varying along an important variety of characteristics. There is little likelihood that the two types of functioning proposed can operate simultaneously, the two having a tendency to be in conflict and in opposition to each other. However, they are proposed to consist of specific characteristics which generate qualitatively different processes. Second, we do not conceive that self-centeredness and selflessness are fixed types of psychological functioning wherein which each individual acts in a rigid and unchangeable manner. On the contrary, the plasticity of human functioning allows for a certain degree of malleability (e.g., Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000; Eriksson, Perfilieva, Bjork-Eriksson, Alborn, Nordborg, Peterson, & Gage, 1998; Kelly & Garavan, 2005; Maguire, Gadian, Johnsrude, Good, Ashburner, Frackowiak, & Frith, 2000; Markus & Kunda, 1986; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Tang, DeRubeis, Hollon, Amsterdam, Shelton, & Schalet, 2009; Schlaug, Norton, Overy, & Winner, 2005; Wall, Xu, & Wang, 2002). More to the point, we propose that the propensity to adopt a particular style of psychological functioning operates on two levels. Level 1 reflects the basic temperament and personality of the individual. The term personality trait is often used to refer to this level. In our model we believe that the basic level corresponding to temperament and personality is shaped strongly, but not irreversibly, by variables such as culture, education, and so forth. These variables favor the adoption of a particular style of functioning which can become dominant and, consequently, lasting. However, other variables, including acculturation and life experiences, can also strongly affect the dominant tendency of an individual. We propose that this dominant style of psychological functioning (i.e., self-centeredness or selflessness), can be modified on a long-term basis by various variables, which will be shown in section IV. Level 2, the second level, refers to the situational or contextual variables, which affect self-centeredness and selflessness. While the basic level refers to a dominant and lasting predisposition, the situational and contextual level refers to temporary and transitory states. So we propose that the dominant tendency to operate in a self-centered manner can be supplanted by a selfless type of functioning. Altered states of consciousness, some contemplative states or the use of certain drugs seem to be able to temporarily induce a selfless type of functioning in individuals having a dominant tendency toward self-centered functioning. Consequently, rather than conceiving of self-centeredness and selflessness as two exclusive styles of functioning, we suggest that they are both present in each individual and that the tendency to adopt one or the other is largely a question of degree, and depends on a large number of variables that are explored in section IV. Before examining the processes underlying the two types of functioning affecting self and happiness, we present both the characteristics and structure of the self and the mental processes that underlie them.

2.2. Characteristics of Self-Centeredness and Selflessness

The dichotomy proposed in this paper (i.e., self-centeredness vs. selflessness) might be considered to be a general one, because it intersects with and encompasses several other specific dichoto-

mies. These will be presented briefly and it will be shown how they can be integrated into a wider perspective.

2.2.1. Independent/Interdependent self. Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguish between an independent self and an interdependent self. They postulate that individuals have strikingly different concepts of their self, and these variations are a function of differences in cultural settings. These different self-constructs affect the ways in which individuals experience themselves and others, and also affect their cognitions, emotions, and motivation. According to the present model, an independent self would be characterized by "self-centeredness," while an interdependent one would function in a "selflessness" way. An independent self is characteristic of an individual who perceives himself as being fundamentally separate from others, autonomous from the world and relatively unique. Individuals with a self that is interdependent have a strong feeling of connectedness with others. The emotions, which are expressed most spontaneously by individuals with an independent self are ego-centered. These include jealousy, anger and pride (i.e., ego-focused emotions). Conversely, individuals with an interdependent self experience mental states and emotions that are more centered on others (i.e., other-focused emotions). Examples of these include "feeling indebted to someone" or "feeling in harmony with someone" (Kitayama & Markus, 1990). Concerning motivation, attaining personal goals is more strongly linked to an independent self, while goals involving the concerns of others is characteristic of an interdependent self. Regarding self-evaluation and self-presentation, those who perceive the self as interdependent have a modest self, while those with a strong and independent self are inclined to self-enhancement or self-promotion (e.g., Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004).

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), "independent" and "interdependent" styles are mainly considered in relation to the social context. When they define an independent self as being apart from the social context and an interdependent self as being connected to the social context, they are referring mainly to the self as it relates to others. In our conception, the independence-interdependence continuum includes additional dimensions, encompassing all the elements with which we interact on various levels of integration and is not limited to relations with other people. In other words, one can perceive oneself as being connected with other human beings (intraspecies interdependence), but using a broader perspective, one can also perceive oneself as being connected to all of the different elements with which we interact (e.g., human beings, animals, plants, etc.; Leary et al., 2008). This state of profound interdependence is similar to a "transpersonal state" in which one's identity goes beyond the individual and encompasses everything that surrounds him, including other individuals, life and even the cosmos (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). This is what William James referred to as "cosmic consciousness" in its most extreme form (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Consequently, we propose the existence of a continuum going from a perception of moderate interdependence or moderate connection (e.g., self-others) to a very strong one (e.g., self-cosmos). "Selflessness" is here linked to a perception of strong connections with others, but possibly also to the perception of a connection with all of the elements in the environment (i.e., connected to the whole). Contrary to this, a self-centered psychological functioning is based upon the perception of being naturally independent of other people (i.e., separation self-others), and also of the environment as a whole (i.e., separation self-world).

2.2.2. Insider and outsider phenomenologies. Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, and Leung (2007) have proposed a second dichotomy, which is relevant to our discussion. By studying people's phenomenological experience of themselves in the world, they have discovered the existence of two types of phenomenologies related to the self, which they have called "insider" and "outsider" phenomenologies. According to these authors, "In the "outsider" form of experience, a person experiences himself or herself from the point of view of an outsider looking at the self. In the "insider" form of experience, a person does not see himself or herself as others would; instead, the insider dwells in his or her own private, internal experiences and may end up either (1) projecting those experiences onto others or (2) mistaking the private, internal experience for something that is actually "out there" in the world" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 2). The concept of the "insider" is characteristic of a self-centered psychological functioning, while that of the "outsider" reflects, at least partly, what we call a selfless psychological functioning. The empirical research of these authors consistently shows insider/outsider differences in egocentric bias that derive from dwelling too much on one's own internal experience (e.g., Cohen & Gunz, 2002; see also Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 1998; Vorauer & Ross, 1999). In 1980, Greenwald proposed three types of cognitive biases of the ego: (1) egocentricity (i.e., self as the focus of knowledge), (2) "beneffectance" (i.e., perception of responsibility for desired, but not undesired, outcomes), and (3) cognitive conservatism (i.e., resistance to cognitive change). According to this author, these biases reflect normal human cognition. From the perspective of Cohen et al. (2007), as well as from that of the model that we are proposing, these cognitive biases are characteristic of a predominantly self-centered type of functioning.

2.2.3. Permanent/Impermanent self. While this dichotomy is quasi nonexistent in psychological literature, we believe that it is fundamental to our subject. In western psychology, this distinction between permanent self and impermanent self finds its origin in the intersection of the philosophy of the mind and the tradition of attention-vigilance (Varela et al., 1991). According to Varela and his colleagues (1991), most of the introspective traditions in human history have questioned the temporal discontinuity of experience and the absence of a substantial self. However, the solution of this problem varies largely from one philosophical tradition to another.

Everyone can observe the temporal discontinuity of experience as Hume (1973) has noted: "As for me, when I dwell more intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on one or another particular perception of hot or cold, of light or darkness, of love or hate, of suffering or pleasure. At no moment can I grasp myself by myself without a perception, and I can never observe anything other than the perception." The experience is perception and each perception appears suddenly and vanishes at each instant. Consequently, it seems that the experience is discontinuous. The study of the rhythmicity of the structuring of sensorial activity shows that the brain functions in a discontinuous manner when focusing on perceptual framing (e.g., Varela, Toro, John, & Schwartz, 1981). If the experience is discontinuous, where does the perception of a substantial self come from? It is interesting to consider how different introspective traditions deal with the phe-

nomena that give rise to distinct conceptions of the self. As stated by Descartes, "I cannot discover in myself any parts, but I clearly know that I am a thing absolutely one and complete" (cited in Bogen, 1986). Several authors suggest the existence of a permanent and unified self, which, however, remains inaccessible (e.g., Sherrington, 1947). In the Criticism of Pure Reason, Kant postulates the existence of a transcendental my-self based on a transcendental consciousness, the latter preceding all experience and being responsible for our feeling of unity (Kant, 1976). The idea of an impermanent self has, however, always been central in eastern psychology. In Buddhist analytical investigations, conducted using logic and contemplative introspection, the self has been found to be impermanent, nonunitary, and no more than a convenient concept attached to the dynamic flow of ever-changing experience, which is itself intimately interdependent with others and the environment at large. The quest for a self is considered to be at the center of every moment of experience (see Varela et al., 1991). This property of the self has lead Buddhist philosophers to distinguish between the existence of a relative, conventional self, which is a mere conceptual imputation, from the belief in the existence of an absolute, ontological self that could stand as a unitary, autonomous entity (e.g., see Ricard, 2006; Varela et al., 1991). This distinction between a relative, nominal self and an autonomous, truly existing one echoes the distinction we proposed earlier between an independent and interdependent self. In Buddhist psychology, impermanence and interdependence are directly linked and underlie the concept of a relative, nominal self, while permanence and independence underlie a representation of self endowed with an intrinsic existence.

Despite of the interest in questions such as these, the main point of the present work is not to determine if the self is endowed with an intrinsic or a conventional existence (see Varela et al., 1991, for an interesting discussion), but rather to examine the impact of these kinds of self-perceptions in terms of psychological functioning and happiness.

Using this dichotomy, we propose that there is a distinction between a conception of the self as a permanent distinct entity, with its conception as impermanent, with the latter being based on various streams of personal experience. While a permanent self would be perceived as a stable unity over time, an impermanent self would be perceived as a continuum based on moment-to-moment experiences (i.e., discontinuous experience). Regarding the style of psychological functioning, the permanent self would appear to us to be characteristic of a self-centered type functioning, while a impermanent self would be involved in more selfless psychological functioning.

2.3. The Structure of Self-Centeredness and Selflessness

Based on the characteristics proposed, we can associate two types of psychological functioning with two distinct structures of the self (see Figure 1). A "self-centered" structure of the self would be underlined by an entity with sharp boundaries. This kind of

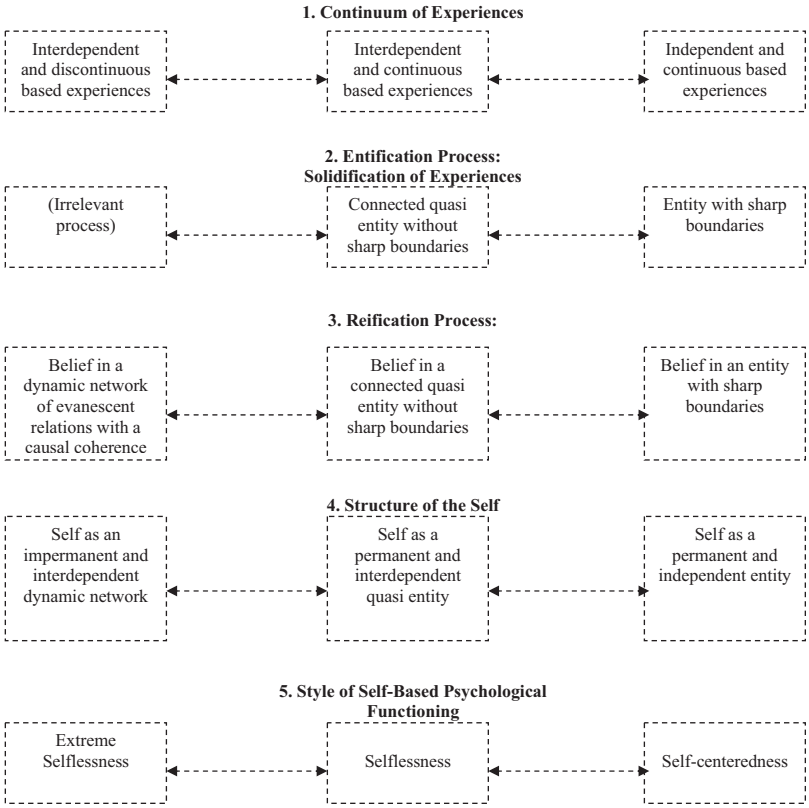

Figure 1. The genesis of self structures.

individual perceives himself as a special entity with well-defined boundaries between himself and others, as well as between himself and all the diverse elements of the environment (i.e., independence of the self). Like every entity, the self-entity is part of a dualistic perception in which the other entities that make up the environment, are profoundly separated from the self-entity. This entity is perceived as being autonomous, singular, and endowed with an intrinsic existence (i.e., absolute per se). Finally, this entity is also perceived as being endowed with a durable and relatively stable existence (i.e., permanent self). We call this structure the self-entity (i.e., self as a permanent and independent entity).

When the structure of the self is perceived as selfless, it is more subtle and complex (see Figure 1). We propose that it varies along a continuum, which goes from the perception of a "quasi self-entity" without sharp boundaries to an absence of self-entity (i.e., "no-self"). When the individual has the perception of being connected to others (i.e., interdependence of the self) and also perceives that he is the object of a relatively continuous experience (i.e., permanent self), its structure is a quasi entity without sharp boundaries. The duality of self-other is greatly lowered by the perception of interdependence, favoring a relatively flexible and open boundary between self and others. However, when the individual combines a strong perception of interdependence (e.g., "cosmic consciousness") with an impermanence of the self (i.e., discontinuity of the experience), no entity is established. There is a no-self, in the sense of an absolute self with a proper existence. In this last case, it is likely that the structure of the self takes the form of a continuum of experience devoid of intrinsic existence, in profound interconnection with the other elements. According to Galin (2003), in the Buddhist tradition "the self is seen, not as an entity, or as substance, or as essence, but as a dynamic process, a shifting web of relations among evanescent aspects of the person, such as perceptions, ideas, and desires." This form of self is close to a "dynamic open network of relations." In the different eastern and meditative traditions, this structure of the self can be compared to a state of no-self or egolessness (Collins, 1982; Garfield, 1995). In Buddhism, for example, anatta is the term used to describe the concept of no-self, which does not mean the inexistence of the self, but the inexistence of a self-entity with an intrinsic existence. On a quite different level, it also seems that a state of no-self and a transpersonal state can also occur in a relatively spontaneous and transitory manner (e.g., Beauregard & Paquette, 2006; Blanke, Ortigue, Landis, & Seeck, 2002; Maslow, 1971; Vailt et al., 2005). In the west, such phenomena are often identified as altered states of consciousness (ASC; Ward, 1989), and are said to reflect an abnormal psychological functioning. This contrasts with the various eastern traditions where the concept of no-self is often associated with an optimal way of being, awareness, and wisdom.

2.4. The Mental Processes Underlying the Genesis of Self-Structure

Entification and reification. Understanding the structure of the self involves questioning the mental processes which are at the origin of the self and its structure. The process of categorization is fundamental insofar as it underlies our cognitive activities and influences the way in which we think about the world, including others, and also the self (Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978). This process leads us to develop simplified mental constructions of reality. With regards to the self, this process results in the development of a simplified mental construct of the self.

Concerning the genesis of the structure of the self and it's subsequent psychological functioning, two distinct mental processes seem to be particularly important: entification and reification (Galin, 2003). Entification refers to the mental process by which we simplify a complex whole by creating an entity. For example, the crystallization of experience favors the edification of a self-entity. Reification is a distinct process where the mental entity is treated as real. In other words, once the entity is mentally constructed (i.e., entification), a sense of a real self with the form of a solid entity emerges (i.e., reification). As seen in Figure 1, when the individual has the perception of a relatively continuous and independent experience, the processes of entification and reification result in a structured self in the form of an entity with well defined boundaries (i.e., self as a permanent and independent entity). The perception and/or the understanding of interdependence gradually dissolve the boundaries of the self. The fact of perceiving, for example, a strong connection between self and others (i.e., self-others interdependence) weakens the boundaries between self and others. In this case, the process of entification leads to a crystallization of experiences based on interdependence with others. The self then takes the form of a quasi-entity without a sharp boundary between the self and others. In the end, the structure of the self is a permanent and interdependent quasi-entity. A third structuring of the self can be identified in certain eastern traditions. When the perception of interdependence combines with a perception of impermanence, the process of entification does not occur because the crystallization of experiences is based on a perception of some degree of permanence. When there is no entification of experiences, the self is perceived as a dynamic network of evanescent relations that have a causal coherence (i.e., self as an impermanent and interdependent dynamic network). On the basis of the dichotomy proposed by Minsky (1986) between a "self" with a small "s" and a "Self" with a capital "S", Varela and his colleagues (1991) define this type of self as "a convenient way of referring to a series of mental and bodily events and formations, that have a degree of causal coherence and integrity through time" (p. 179). On the other hand, the Self with a capital "S", which refers to the self-entity, "does exemplify our sense that hidden in these transitory formations is a real, unchanging essence that is a source of our identity and that we must protect" (p. 179). We propose that these two conceptions of the self (self and Self) reflect two distinct forms of structuring, which in turn lead to different kinds of psychological functioning that have notable consequences on happiness. While a Self with a capital "S" underlies a self-centered type of functioning, a self with a small "s" implies a selfless psychological functioning.

III. Self-Based Psychological Functioning and Happiness: Self-Centeredness and Selflessness in Action

In our model (see Figure 2), we propose that there are two principal types of psychological functioning that are linked to the self: self-centeredness and selflessness. These two processes are seen as a single continuum characterized by specific functions. By psychological functioning, we refer to all the interconnected psychological components that operate on different levels (i.e.,

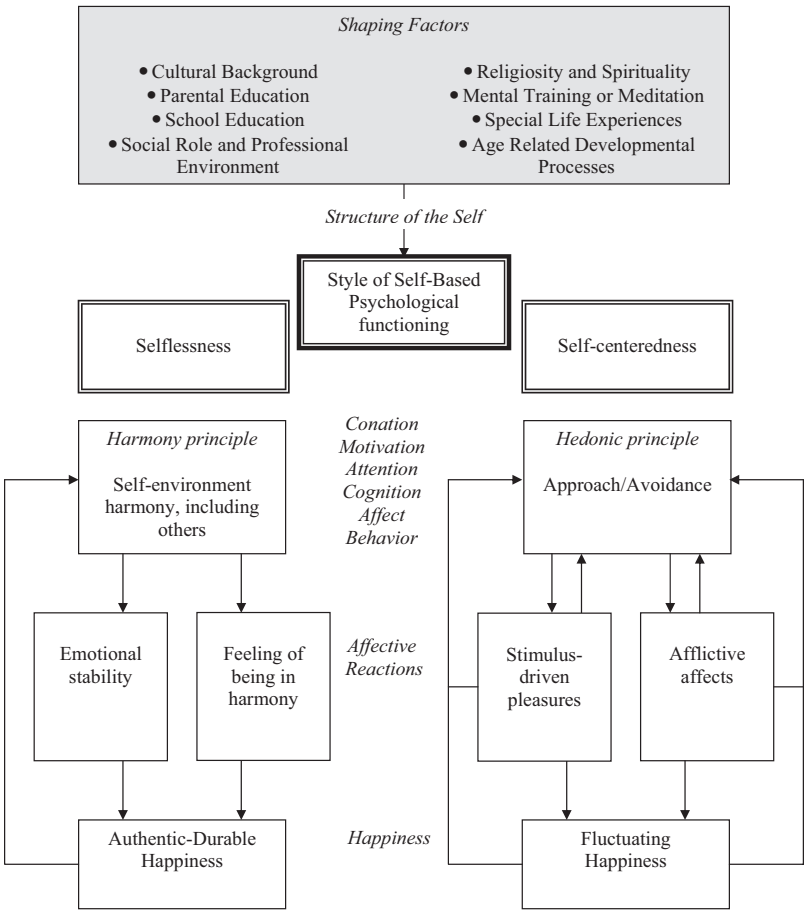

Figure 2. The Self-Centeredness/Selflessness Happiness Model (SSHM).

conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect, and behavior). The processes involved in self-centeredness are discussed first, followed by those which are generated by a selflessness type of functioning.

Self-Centered Psychological Functioning

As stated above, we postulate that self-centeredness is based on the belief in a "Self" that has the form of a real entity with sharp boundaries. According to the bio-social psychological model developed by Laborit (1979), *each entity* (or organized structure in the form of an entity), which aims at its preservation, is led to favor gratifications (i.e., positive, agreeable, socially valued things) that positively reinforce it, and to avoid negative, disagreeable, and demeaning things that threaten its homeostasis. In other words, self-centeredness and the exaggerated importance given to the self which comes out of it, leads one to approach gratifying things and experiences and to avoid those that are unpleasant or threatening. This process corresponds to the "hedonic principle" (e.g., Higgins, 1997), which states that individuals are motivated to obtain pleasure (i.e., approach) and to avoid displeasure (i.e., avoidance). It is known that approach and avoidance are two fundamental adaptive mechanisms involved in affects, cognitions and human behaviors (e.g., Atkinson, 1964; Bowlby, 1969; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Festinger, 1957; Freud, 1950; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The perception of the self as being a permanent and independent self-entity results in impulses of attraction and repulsion (i.e., approach and avoidance).

By favoring the mechanism of approach/avoidance (i.e., hedonic principle), self-centeredness influences activity at many psychological levels. Intentions and volitions (i.e., conations) are orientated toward seeking pleasant stimuli and avoiding unpleasant ones. These two impulses produce specific motivations and affects associated with approach (i.e., desire for gratifying stimuli) and avoidance (i.e., aversion for disagreeable stimuli). As a result there is a strong focus on stimuli favoring satisfaction and self-defense, both of which are generally devoid of mindfulness (i.e., mindlessness attention; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Expectations about the value of objects (e.g., belief that acquiring agreeable stimuli is indispensable to one's well-being) affects both cognitions and behaviors. Cognitive distortions, resulting from various egocentric biases, are also associated with self-centeredness (e.g., Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007; Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 1998; Greenwald, 1980; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002; Vorauer & Ross, 1999). Self-centered behaviors involve frequent impulses toward pleasurable stimuli and away from unpleasant ones. Specific affective reactions are associated with this style of psychological functioning. We differentiate two types of affective

reactions: transitory pleasure (i.e., stimulus-driven pleasures) and afflictive affects.

Attaining priority objectives (i.e., obtaining gratification and avoiding disagreeable stimuli) creates a feeling of pleasure, joy and transitory satisfaction. These stimulus-driven pleasures are contingent upon the appearance or disappearance of certain stimuli. When the stimulus is present, the pleasure associated with it appears. However, as soon as the stimulus disappears or is supplanted by a new stimulus, the positive feeling fades. The appearance or disappearance of the stimulus itself is linked to a variety of phenomena, which are not under the control of the individual. Hence, when the hedonic principle applies the pleasure generated is transitory. Moreover, as soon as it is attained, a new stimulus can supplant the initial one. A replacement of the initial stimulus by another one can cancel the positive effect that was generated by the first one. In other words, even when a goal is attained, a new goal can be defined with the main consequence of interrupting the pleasure which was associated with attaining the first objective. Hedonic adaptation refers to the process by which people quickly become accustomed to the positive (or negative) effects of new stimuli and eventually return to their baseline level of happiness. For example, studies of lottery winners confirm that these individuals exhibit only a temporary increase in well-being before returning to their base level of happiness (Argyle, 1986; Brickman et al., 1978). Additionally, a recent study has confirmed that the well-being resulting from hedonic behaviors is not stable (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

The second type of affective reaction involves the emergence of afflictive affects. We qualify these affects as afflictive for two main reasons: first, as will be shown, this type of affect damages our physical and mental health as well as our well-being. These affects are self-reinforcing insofar as they reactivate a self-centered psychological functioning based on the process of approach-avoidance. The impossibility of attaining valued objectives gives rise to affects such as frustration, anger, hostility, hatred, jealousy, fear, the feeling of being threatened, pride, and so forth. The experience of such affects impairs our well-being. Fluctuating happiness is characterized by the alternation of positive phases (e.g., satisfaction) and negative phases (e.g., dissatisfaction). While "stimulus-driven pleasures" are at the origin of positive phases, negative phases cause the appearance of afflictive affects. In the end, the recurring experience of these affects is likely a source of problems for both physical and mental health. This hypothesis has found some support in the existing literature. Negative affectivity in general which groups affects such as annoyance, hostility and fear, is strongly linked to both anxiety and depression (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). Other studies have shown that hostility can have a particularly "toxic" effect, and this has been observed in coronary morbidity (Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro, & Hallet, 1996; Siegman & Smith, 1994). Thus, there is much evidence to show that this type of affect has harmful effects on health. Additionally, we argue that these affects are afflictive because they are self-reinforcing insofar as they have a tendency to reactivate the approach-avoidance process at many psychological levels. For example, when an obstacle makes it impossible to satisfy a desire, a feeling of frustration and anger would be directed toward that obstacle. As well there would be a feeling of jealousy toward the person who has succeeded in satisfying that same desire. Moreover, these affective states will result in a reactivation of the original desire and the processes associated with it. Similarly, the impossibility of avoiding disagreeable stimulation can generate anxiety and fear and this experience can result in avoidance (e.g., Frijda, 1986). So we can see that approach and avoidance favor the emergence of afflictive affects, which, in turn, have a tendency to be reactivated, thus instigating a circular process of self-reinforcement.

In the end, all of these processes generate fluctuating happiness which is characterized by the alternation of phases of well-being and ill-being. It seems to us that this type of happiness, if it can be qualified as such, also has a tendency to be self-reinforcing. Because the phases of well-being are of short duration, the individual runs the risk of finding himself in a state where he or she is perpetually seeking new gratifications to maximize his or her well-being. In other words, a self-centered style of functioning produces a circular effect in which the individual is, in a way, the prisoner of an "egoistic and hedonic" spiral.

Our theoretical approach does not envisage self-centeredness and its subsequent psychological functioning as being inevitable. On the contrary, we propose that an alternative form of psychological functioning is conceivable; it is what we call selflessness.

Selfless Psychological Functioning

According to our model (see Figure 2), selfless psychological functioning has as its basis a structuring of the self which ranges from a quasi-entity without sharp boundaries (i.e., self as a permanent and interdependent quasi entity) to a dynamic network (i.e., self as an impermanent and interdependent dynamic network). The degree of selflessness is then dependent on the type of structuring of the self. When the self is organized in the form of a quasi-entity without sharp boundaries, it can be inferred that psychological functioning will be less strongly oriented toward selflessness than when the self is organized in the form of a dynamic network of ever changing relations with a causal coherence.

As opposed to self-centered functioning that has as its basis the hedonic principle, selflessness is based on the principle of harmony (see Figure 2). Harmony means there is perfect agreement between the diverse parts of whole. When the self is perceived as being an impermanent and interdependent element of the whole, a person's psychological functioning becomes more mindful and respecting of all the elements comprising this whole. Here the whole is meant in its broad sense. It is constituted of the totality of elements which make up our environment, including not only oneself and other human beings, but also animals and all forms of life and our natural environment (e.g., Leary et al., 2008). In other words, the perception of interconnectedness underlies a specific psychological functioning by which the individual adjusts harmoniously to all of the elements of the environment.

Selfless functioning favors harmonious adjustment and decentering, and this affects the operation of various psychological elements. By harmonious adjustment, we refer to a psychological functioning in which the individual adjusts optimally to the different elements of the environment. As we have seen above, this environment can be restricted to intraspecies (i.e., self-other), but it can also be enlarged to encompass relations with nature. It appears that the understanding of this interconnectedness is intimately linked to human qualities such as altruism, love, kindness, empathy, compassion, tolerance, and pacifism. In fact, these var-

ious qualities involve specific psychological processes. Conations (i.e., intentions and volitions), motivations, cognitions (i.e., beliefs, etc.) as well as behaviors, are oriented toward harmonious adjustment. The intention to ease the suffering of another (conation), for example, would be linked to specific goals, as well as to consistent cognitions (e.g., genuine altruism is the basis of harmonious relations) and will favor altruistic behaviors (e.g., respect for others, genuine altruism, etc.). We propose that this type of psychological functioning is also associated with a particular quality of attention, which can be qualified as "mindfulness" (e.g., Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). "Mindfulness" is characterized by undistracted attention, free of distorting bias. Such mindfulness is oriented to the present moment, but it is also combined with a meta-awareness such that one remains aware of one's state of mind over time. On the affective level, this kind of psychological functioning is associated with specific affects such as compassion, empathy, and respect. We propose to show how these benevolent affects have a beneficial effect on a person's level of happiness.

Several authors have proposed and shown that empathy (being in tune with the sentiments of others) and compassion (the desire that others be free from suffering) are the driving forces behind prosocial behaviors such as altruism and social support (e.g., Batson, 1995; Davis, 1996; Dovidio & Penner, 2001; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). From a social perspective, these affects are clearly beneficial for others, but they also seem to be beneficial for the person expressing them. Several works indirectly support the idea that prosociality affects health in a positive way. Caprara and Steca (2005) note that generosity toward others is associated with higher levels of well-being (e.g., Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Post, 2005; Simmons, 1991; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Williamson & Clark, 1989; Yinon & Landau, 1987). A "loving-kindness meditation" significantly increases positive emotions (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), and significantly decreases psychological distress (e.g., Carson, Keefe, Lynch, Carson, Goli, Fras, & Thorp, 2005). The experience of positive emotions such as love during youth increases longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). Grateful thinking improves positive affects and well-being (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

According to the model, at least two processes make it possible to understand this phenomenon. First, we propose that benevolent affects enhance emotional stability. Contrary to affects linked with self-centeredness, benevolent affects are not affected by variations in the environment. When expressing genuine compassion or unconditional love one is not expecting anything in return and these emotions are not dependent on the way others treat us (Ricard, 2010). As noted by Sprecher and Fehr (2006), "compassionate love may be experienced for someone to whom love is not reciprocated" (p. 228). Because of this disinterested nature, benevolent affects are unconditional and therefore independent of feedback from the environment. Since this affective activity is not very sensitive to environmental variations, it is relatively stable and contributes to the establishment of sustainable happiness (i.e., not fluctuating). Works showing a positive link between emotional stability and well-being corroborate this point of view (e.g., Hills & Argyle, 2001). In our view, benevolent affects also generate a feeling of being in harmony with the environment (Ricard, 2006). When we carry out an act of disinterested kindness and we are fully compassionate, the well-being that we feel is authentic and powerful because it is underlined by the feeling of being on the same wavelength as the superorganized harmony that governs the whole (i.e., transpersonal harmony), as well as in harmony with our intrinsic intentions and motivations (i.e., harmony with oneself). This specific feeling is intimately linked to characteristics of authentic happiness such as inner strength, serenity, completeness, inner peace, and fulfillment.

In the end, it appears to us that selflessness establishes a circle in which psychological activity favors stable and authentic happiness and this happiness reinforces the harmony principle. Once it has taken root, the state of mind linked with eudemonia pervades every experience in life. Thus, it is likely that this way of functioning will be self-reinforcing.

IV. The Variables That Shape the Style of Self-Psychological Functioning

In this section, a number of variables expected to both modulate and directly affect the tendency to adopt one style of psychological functioning rather than another are proposed.

Cultural Background

In the model proposed by Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2002), *cultural and social transmission* is one of the principal variables that shapes the individual. *Enculturation*, *socialization* and *acculturation* are the processes by which cultural transmission takes place. The concept of enculturation comes from cultural anthropology (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovitz, 1936). As the term suggests, an individual in a particular culture acquires, through learning, what the culture deems necessary. According to Berry et al. (2002): "there is not necessarily anything deliberate or didactic about this process; often there is learning without specific teaching" (p. 29). The concept of socialization derives from sociology and social psychology, and can be defined as "the process by which the human individual learns and internalizes the sociocultural elements of his environment throughout his life, integrates them in his personality under the influence of experiences and significant social agents, and thereby adapts to the social environment in which he must live" (Rocher, 1969, p. 105). When cultural and social transmissions come from contact with another culture, the term *acculturation* is used (e.g., Redfield et al., 1936).

The term "cultural background" designates the culture in which the individual is immersed. The heritage of a specific culture is an important factor that shapes the psychological functioning of an individual and, most likely, the functioning of his self.

The recent works done by Le and Levenson (2005) on wisdom show direct links between what we call a selfless type of functioning and various cultural indicators (i.e., individualism and collectivism). Individualism and collectivism are measured in their research as interindividual differences. Differences exist between cultures (i.e., intercultural differences), and also within cultures. Triandis and his colleagues (e.g., Triandis & Gelfand, 1998), Le and Levenson (2005) measured horizontal individualism (i.e., self-freedom without competition and inequality), vertical individualism (i.e., self-enhancement with inequality and competition), hor-

izontal collectivism (i.e., harmony and cooperation) and vertical collectivism (i.e., conformity imposed by hierarchical authority). Interestingly, they defined wisdom as a kind of self-transcendence clearly linked to what we call selflessness. Specifically, according to them, "self-transcendence refers to the ability to move beyond self-centered consciousness, and to see things as they are with clear awareness of human nature and human problems, and with a considerable measure of freedom from biological and social conditioning" (p. 444). Although the notion of self-impermanence is not explicitly mentioned, there is an obvious link between this kind of self-transcendence (characterized by a high level of self-interdependence) and selflessness. Using the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (Levenson et al., 2005; including items such as "I feel that my individual life is part of a greater whole" or "Material things mean less to me") and a measure of compassionate love (e.g., "I can love without expecting anything in return"), Le and Levenson examined the relationship between various types of individualism and collectivism. The results showed that cultural indicators are directly related to selfless psychological functioning. While horizontal collectivism and horizontal individualism were positively linked with selfless functioning (i.e., self-transcendence and compassionate love), vertical individualism was negatively linked to it. In other words, certain cultural values, such as cooperation, harmony with others, individual freedom to explore and to experience, favor selflessness. On the other hand, cultural values linked to egoism, competition and the cult of self seem to hinder selfless functioning. As Le and Levenson (2005) point out: "Presumably, vertical individualists are more self-centered, placing an emphasis on distinguishing themselves as unique and different from others through competition and achievement. This self-centered focus reinforces one's sense of separation from others and thus becomes an obstacle to the experiential knowledge of the self as a construction" (p. 453). It seems that these specific cultural dimensions affect the degree of a person's self-centeredness more than the culture as a whole. By favoring either interdependence or independence and self-impermanence versus permanence, specific cultural elements can shape one's style of self-psychological functioning in a lasting way. Regarding human values (e.g., Schwartz, 1992), it is likely that the cultures that favor universalism (i.e., understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature), and benevolence (i.e., preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact) are more likely to encourage selflessness. Conversely, individuals from societies in which the salient values are those of power (i.e., social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources), achievement (i.e., personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards), and/or hedonism (i.e., the pursuit of personal pleasure and sensory gratification), have a tendency to develop a self-centered type of functioning. We propose testing this assumption empirically in future research.

The process of acculturation is also particularly interesting for our study. It represents an effective way in which an individual's original cultural roots can be profoundly modified. It is likely that the process of acculturation can elicit lasting changes in terms of self-psychological functioning. For example, a self-centered person, through contact with a society in which both horizontal individualism and horizontal collectivism are valued, can be led to acquire new cultural elements which are capable of shaping and modifying the structure of his self and, subsequently, his psychological functioning. It therefore seems possible that through contact with a new cultural environment, the (culturally) dominant tendency of an individual to function in a certain way could be modified over the long-term, thereby illustrating the concept of the malleable personality to which we subscribe. This point of view has led us to propose future research where the impact of specific acculturations (e.g., religious acculturation, acculturation linked to human values) on the style of self-psychological functioning will be examined.

Parental Education

In the context of what we call parental socialization, the parents are the principal agents of cultural and social transmission. They may intentionally transmit to their child values, skills, beliefs, emotions, and even motivations. When parental socialization is only implicit and not direct the child is shaped without any specific training. We suggest that both these processes shape the style of self-psychological functioning in a lasting way.

The process of attachment is particularly important for the parent–child relationship (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969). According to Bowlby (1969), the main function of attachment is to protect the child from danger and to maximize his chances of survival. However, interindividual differences exist regarding styles of attachment, and these result in markedly different behaviors, emotions and expectations. The secure attachment style is generally distinguished from the insecure attachment style by the degree of avoidant-attachment and anxious-attachment. Avoidant-attachment refers to a tendency to lack confidence in the interpersonal relationship and to consequently maintain a behavioral and affective independence in relation to the partner. In anxious-attachment there is fear or anxiety that our partner will abandon us or will not be present when we are in need of him. A low level of avoidant-attachment combined with a low level of anxiety-attachment is characteristic of a secure attachment style. Contrary to this, an insecure attachment style is the result of a high level of avoidant-attachment and/or anxious-attachment. The hypothesis that a secure attachment style would favor a selfless type of functioning while self-centered functioning would be partly related to an insecure attachment style finds some support in the literature. Several correlational and experimental works carried out by Mikulincer and his colleagues have shown that attachment security facilitates empathy, strengthens self-transcendent values, fosters tolerance, is associated with volunteering to help others in everyday life, and fosters compassionate love and altruistic behaviors (Mikulincer, Gillath, Halevy, Avihou, Avidan, & Eshkoli, 2001; Mikulincer, Gillath, Sapir-Lavid, Yaakobi, Arias, Tal-Aloni, & Bor, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). Conversely, insecure attachment, as measured by the avoidant-attachment scale, is negatively linked to compassion and altruism. The higher the individual's level of avoidant-attachment, the less likely he is to be compassionate and the less inclined he will be to engage in altruistic behaviors (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2005).

Similarly, the works carried out by Kasser, Ryan, Zax, and Semeroff (1995) show a direct link between styles of parental education (i.e., warmth vs. cold) and the development of selfless or self-centered values in the child (i.e., prosocial values or materi-

alistic values). More specifically, teenagers who evaluate materialistic values as more important than prosocial ones have mothers who are colder and less nurturing. Because materialistic values are negatively linked to well-being and happiness (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993), it appears that the style of parental instruction, whether it be intentional or not, ultimately influences the child's values and well-being. Recent research even suggests that positive affects experienced during childhood are associated with a longer life expectancy. For example, Danner et al. (2001) have found that positive emotional content in early life autobiographies was strongly associated with longevity six decades later. Referring to our model, a secure caring and warm parental style favors experiencing benevolent affects (e.g., compassionate love, empathy, etc.), generating self-reinforcing authentic-durable happiness, which contributes positively to physical and mental health. From this perspective, the link between positive affects during childhood with health and longevity can be better understood. An insecure-cold parental style seems to favor self-centeredness. It is associated with insecurity regarding protection, reliability and security, and ultimately raises the individual's level of distress. In an attempt to alleviate this distress the individual must focus his energy on himself.

A second way that parents influence their children is through social learning. Children can learn from their parents by imitation. Social learning theory proposes that children develop beliefs and behaviors by imitating people who they consider to be important (Bandura, 1997). As we have just seen, the attachment theory suggests that children internalize the expectations and the values of their parents insofar as the latter offer them a secure-attachment style (see also Bretherton, Golby, & Cho, 1997). Allport (1954) proposed that because children desire the affection and approval of their parents, parents can have a very strong influence on their children's development (e.g., Maccoby, 2000; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Recent studies confirm this by showing a strong connection between parents' values and those of their children (i.e., positive correlation), but only among children who strongly identified with their parents (see Sinclair, Dunn, & Lowery, 2005). Children who have a low level of identification with their parents tend not share their parents' values (i.e., negative correlation). In other words, studies suggest that there are two distinct phenomena: a process of social learning by assimilation (e.g., assimilation of parental values) and a process of social learning by opposition (e.g., nonassimilation of parental values, even assimilation of opposing values). This conceptual framework makes it possible to consider a rather direct transmission from parent to child of their level of self-centeredness/selflessness. Moreover, we predict that when children strongly identify with their parents they will, through a process of social learning, adopt a similar self-psychological functioning. Strong parental identification seems to occur when there is secure attachment, and a powerful desire for parents' affection and approval. When there is a low level of identification with the parents one expects a weaker correlation between the style of psychological functioning of parents and children.

School Education

In many countries, a considerable part of education is done at institutions–schools (including high school and the university) during childhood, adolescence and sometimes early adulthood. The school is a special environment where the transmission of cultural and social values and behaviors occurs. The educators, as well as peers, are the principal agents of this transmission. Not only does the child acquire cognitive and executive skills, but also goals, values, beliefs, and ideologies, which shape him over the long-term.

Studies in the psychology of education, mainly carried out in the west, suggest that some educational practices cause children to develop psychological functioning that is self-centered. Schematically, two styles of educational practices can be distinguished: first, there is learning that emphasizes competition between students and social comparison. This approach focuses mainly on performance, as well as the demonstration of competencies, skills, and abilities. The second type of learning is more concerned with cooperation between students and the commitment to a better understanding of academic work. There is also an emphasis on being competent, and obtaining the intrinsic satisfaction that often accompanies learning. These two styles of education affect the scholastic objectives of the students as well as their motivational goals (see Ames & Archer, 1988; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Maehr & Pintrich, 1991; Meece, 1991; Nicholls, 1989; Nolen, 1988; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). While the first type of education is concerned with performance and ego goals, the second style generates what can be qualified as task or master goals.

Several studies indicate that performance and ego goals are encouraged in western schools while task goals (master goals) are not. In the United States, Midgley, Anderman, and Hicks (1995) have shown that middle school students were more oriented toward performance goals, and less oriented toward task goals, than were upper elementary school students (see also Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Thus, the cultural and social transmission, operating within the western school system, seems to favor self-centered rather than selfless psychological functioning. Studies that have examined the links between these differing goals and the well-being of children confirm our point of view. Research carried out by Kaplan and Maehr (1999) has shown, for example, that when schools encourage task goals and are perceived as encouraging these goals, students are happier. Conversely when schools encourage performance goals and are also perceived as encouraging these goals, the children are less well adjusted (see Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2008, for similar results).

According to our model, western education encourages self-centered psychological functioning that contributes to an individual's fluctuating happiness and then is the source of psychological and physical distress. Education of this type, which focuses primarily on performance or ego goals, conforms to hedonic principles. The consequence is that students are driven toward stimulus driven pleasures and afflictive affect. This can negatively affect the tendency of some young people to function in a selfless manner since the various aspects of selflessness will be negatively affected by performance goals and by the perception that this type of goal is valued by the school system. We predict, for example, that mindfulness (i.e., undistracted attention which is unaffected by distorting bias and attentive to the present), a quality of attention that underlies selflessness, will be negatively affected by the encouragement of performance goals. We expect that, with time, the pursuit of performance goals will foster inattention to the present, rumination about the past and future, and the seeking of pleasur-

able sensory stimuli—all of which will decrease the possibility of experiencing peace of mind. On a phenomenological level, the perception of an independent and permanent self can be enhanced by educational practices focused on performance. Conversely, educational practices that encourage cooperation, creativity and prosocial values, along with a more holistic worldview, should favor the perception of interdependence and selflessness. Gaskins (1999) notes that the current (western) school system does not allow children to be fulfilled or find inner peace and authentic happiness. According to him, "if teachers can develop classroom contexts that loosen the grip of conceptualization (including the self) and open students to the interfusion of all things, they will have weakened the structure of impediments that must be removed for students to realize true freedom and function with wisdom, compassion and contentment throughout their lives" (p. 213).

Social Role and Professional Environment

Professional activities are a primary source of socializing during adulthood. A particular job implies a specific social role within a particular organizational setting. In choosing a profession, the individual takes on the norms, values, attitudes and behaviors that are attached to it and shared by other members (Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Harris, 1995). According to the theory of social dominance, it is important to distinguish two types of social environments: the Hierarchy-Enhancing (HE) environment and the Hierarchy-Attenuating (HA) environment (e.g., Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Sinclair, Sidanius. & Levin, 1998). These environments are made up of organizations or institutions that strengthen or weaken social inequalities and intergroup domination. Each particular environment is governed by specific norms. In some ways the army, the police and some large companies are examples of antiegalitarian normative environments because they facilitate the allocation of negative social status to subordinated groups (see Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991). Conversely, social services, humanitarian and charitable associations, some unions, and human rights organizations are examples of proegalitarian normative environments (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Their main function is to combat social inequalities so as to establish an equitable redistribution of services and resources. A number of studies show that most individuals belonging to HE environments endorse fewer prosocial values and behaviors (e.g., antiegalitarianism, intolerance toward disadvantaged groups) than members of HA environments (e.g., Haney, Banks, & Zimabordo, 1973; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Two processes seem to be responsible for this effect: selection (i.e., the least prosocial individuals select—and are selected by—HA roles and environments) and group socialization (i.e., transmission and acquisition of antiegalitarian values, etc.). We propose that HE environments are not conducive to the development of selflessness, while some types of HA environments and social roles favor selflessness.

Religiosity and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are often meaningful variables in the personal development and the education of individuals. While some authors predicted an important decline in religiousness during the 20th century (e.g., Leuba, 1916), several recent statistics have shown that religious devotion and spirituality endure. A survey conducted in the United States in 2005, for example, shows that 88% of Americans describe themselves as being religious or spiritual. Only 7% of them state that spirituality is not at all important in their daily life (Newsweek, 2005). However, it is important to differentiate religion and spirituality as these two terms are not synonymous. According to Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001), religion refers to an organized system involving beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols which allow the individual to connect to the sacred or the transcendent (God, a principal superior organizer, or ultimate truth). Spirituality refers more to a personal quest about meaning in life and to a path of inner transformation. Spirituality is not necessarily associated with a religious practice or membership in a religious community, and can therefore develop without adherence to a particular religion (e.g., Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo, & Koenig, 2006).

Because both prosocial affects (e.g., empathy and compassion) and behaviors (e.g., altruism) are central characteristics of most religious and spiritual traditions (e.g., Underwood, 2002), one may expect that religiousness and spirituality encourage the development of a selfless type of functioning. A large number of studies have focused on the effect of religion and spirituality on affects, prosocial behaviors, well-being, and health.

Recent experiments suggest that religiosity is associated with prosocial behaviors (e.g., Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005). A study done by Shariff and Norenzayan (2007), for example, has shown that experimentally induced religious thoughts reduced rates of cheating and increased rates of altruistic behavior toward strangers. Religiosity has also been associated with prosocial affects such as kindness (e.g., Hardy & Carlo, 2005).

Several works also suggest that religiosity and spirituality are positively associated with well-being. In a recent review of the literature, Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo, and Koenig (2006) concluded that: "the majority of well-conducted studies found that higher levels of religious involvement are positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being (life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale) and with less depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, drug/alcohol use/abuse" (p. 242). However, several authors have emphasized the importance of distinguishing intrinsic religiosity from extrinsic religiosity. According to Donahue (1985), the latter is a "religion of comfort and social convention, a self-serving, instrumental approach shaped to suit oneself" (p. 400). On the other hand Donahue has described intrinsic religiousness as "a meaning-endowing framework in terms of which all of life is understood" (p. 400). As noted by Allport and Ross (1967), the main difference between these two types of religiosity is that "the extrinsically motivated people use their religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated live their religion" (p. 434). As would be expected, several studies have shown that only intrinsic religiosity is associated with a sense of meaning and purpose in life (e.g., Ardelt & Koenig, 2006; Bolt, 1975). The research has shown that only intrinsic religiosity is associated with beneficial and salutogenic effects (e.g., Ardelt & Koening, 2006). Research done by Underwood and Teresi (2002) has also shown that the daily experience of spirituality is a factor that favors well-being. With regards to social values intrinsic religiosity is positively linked to prosocial values, while extrinsic religiosity is linked negatively (Donahue, 1985).

These studies seem to indicate that intrinsic religiosity and spirituality could favor selflessness. However, it appears to us that certain religions are more directly linked with the concept of selflessness than others. In Buddhism, in particular, there is a belief that clinging to a concept of the self which is conceived as an unitary, independent entity, is a distortion of reality and a fundamental cause of suffering. A body of Buddhist contemplative practices, including analytical meditations, aim at freeing a person from perceiving a self. Rather, they see the self as a conceptual fabrication attached to mind-body aggregates. Thus, although religiosity and spirituality seem to favor prosocial behaviors and well-being, it can be seen that certain spiritual traditions enhance selflessness more than others. Studies pertaining to mental training and meditation should provide interesting answers to these kinds of questions.

Mental Training or Meditation

According to Cahn and Polich (2006), "the word mediation is used to describe practices that self-regulate the body and mind, thereby affecting mental events by engaging a specific attentional set" (p. 180). Different techniques of meditation exist. Some focus on obtaining insight into the nature of reality and the mind, as well as altruistic love and compassion. This is believed to free the mind from afflictive mental states and deconstructive self-clinging (e.g., Vipassana meditation), Other forms of meditation have as their goals the cultivation of inner calm and attention (e.g., Samatha meditation, Transcendental meditation). Numerous studies have examined the effects of long and short term meditation practices on both brain and psychological functioning, while other studies have focused on the clinical application of meditation.

A review of the literature in neuroscience by Cahn and Polich (2006) has shown that meditation appears to be associated with changes in the anterior cingulate cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal areas. The studies carried out by R. J. Davidson's team have highlighted the potential for change linked to the practice of meditation. In this vein, Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, and Davidson (2004) have shown that when practitioners meditate on compassion (i.e., Buddhist practitioners with 10,000 to 50,000 hours of mental training), an increase of a high magnitude in rapid oscillations in the so-called *gamma* frequencies is produced, particularly in the left prefontal area that is an area of the brain linked to positive emotions. This modification of the electroencephalographic baseline does not occur in students who have been trained for one week in meditation (control group). This same team concludes in recent longitudinal research "that plasticity in brain and mental function exists throughout life and illustrates the usefulness of systematic mental training in the study of the human mind" (Slagter, Lutz, Greischar, Francis, Nieuwenhuis, Davis, & Davidson, 2007, p. 1228). This shows that mental training can be a way of generating psychological modifications.

From the perspective of our model, it is interesting to examine research which has studied the effects of meditation on self-psychological functioning, and on well-being and health. As observed by Cahn and Polich (2006): "State changes from the meditative and religious traditions are reported to include a deep sense of calm peacefulness, a cessation or slowing of the mind's internal dialogue, and experiences of perceptual clarity and conscious awareness merging completely with the object of meditation, regardless of whether a mantra, image or the whole of phenomenal experience is the focal point" (p. 181) (see also Wallace, 1999). Several works confirm the idea that the practice of meditation can encourage selflessness. Research carried out by Emavardhana and Tori (1997) illustrates that the practice of meditation can affect levels of self-psychological functioning. In their study, two cohorts of participants who attended separate 7-day Vipassana meditation retreats and an untreated control group were compared. The results showed important changes in both self-perception and ego defense mechanisms. The participants in the "Vipassana mediation" group showed a significant increase in self-acceptance at the end of the retreat. They were also less affected by external stimuli and sexual impulses than the control groups. Moreover, those in the meditation groups were less likely to use the defenses of displacement, projection (i.e., attributing unacceptable feelings to others) and regression (i.e., immature behaviors) following the retreat. More recently, Wayment, Wiist, Sullivan, and Warren (2010) found a positive correlation between meditation experience and a quiet ego (e.g., altruism, wisdom). Concerning social relations, a loving-kindness meditation significantly increased feelings of social connection and was associated with more positive feelings toward new individuals (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008). Regarding attention, a research study done by Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney (2006) showed that meditation was significantly linked with Mindfulness. Meditation based on mindfulness improved interpersonal relations by favoring a larger acceptance of—and openness toward—other people (Carson, 2003). The research done by Mendenhall (2006) confirmed this point by showing that when incarcerated juvenile delinquents practiced meditation their emotional problems and aggressiveness were substantially diminished. Finally, several studies have indicated that meditation helps in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kam-Tim & Orme-Johnson, 2001; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), and improves well-being (e.g., Smith, Compton, & West, 1995) and longevity (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies, 1989). Several works suggest that mindfulness at least partly mediates the positive effect of meditation on well-being (Brown et al., 2003; Baer et al., 2006; Baer, Smith, Lykins, Button, Krietemeyer, Sauer, Walsh, Duggan, & Williams, 2008).

In conclusion, the practice of meditation seems to offer a mode of intervention capable of significantly modifying the tendency of individuals to function in a self-centered manner, and this at any age. Meditation can therefore affect long-lasting change.

Special Life Experiences

While cultural transmission and socialization can affect self-psychological functioning in a relatively permanent way, specific life experiences, sometimes unexpected, can also affect self-psychological functioning, sometimes in a temporary way and at other times in a more lasting manner.

End of life and terminally illnesses. The period at the end of life, whether it follows old age or illness, obviously takes on a particular significance. Some individuals cultivate their selfless dimension to face this transition. Research done on aging shows that the elderly who are the happiest are those who have a high intrinsic religiosity, and have developed a sense of purpose in life (e.g., Ardelt & Koenig, 2006). They have also developed some wisdom including self-transcendence (Ardelt, 1997), and have a

sense of meaning in their lives (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Intrinsic religiosity also helps one to accept death (Ardelt, 2003). When one's search for meaning occurs only later in life there are deficits in the person's well being (Steger et al., 2009). The few works done on patients suffering from incurable illnesses (e.g., cancer, AIDS) point in the same direction. Coward (1994), for example, has found that women with AIDS continue to find meaning and purpose in their lives through experiences of receiving from others, giving to others and maintaining hope. Spirituality decreases both hastened death and suicidal ideation, and increases hopefulness among terminally ill cancer patients (McClain, Rosenfeld, & Breitbart, 2003). Self-transcendence decreases the distress of illness and increases well-being in women with advanced breast cancer (Coward, 1991). Spirituality and a sense of meaning are important resources for coping with emotional and existential suffering as one nears death (Breithbart, Gibson, Poppito, & Berg, 2004; Daaleman & VandeCreek, 2000). All of these works suggest that selflessness makes death easier. One may speculate that as death approaches, some individuals would have the tendency to become more selfless in their functioning because this would favor a more peaceful and calmer death (Coward & Reed, 1996). Studies with people who are in various stages of approaching death indicate that some individuals end up "letting go" by transcending their own ego (Coward & Reed, 1996; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Smith, 1995). This indicates that "self-clinging" (self-centeredness) prevents a peaceful experience of death.

Near death experience (NDE). Since the 1970s, there have been numerous reports about people who were near death, survived, and described similar unusual experiences (Moody, 1975). Several characteristics seem to appear recurrently in the reports about these experiences—which are commonly called Near Death Experience (NDE)—such as the sensation of being outside of one's body (out of body experience), the feeling of very positive emotions (i.e., feeling of harmony and peace), meeting deceased persons, and/or the impression of moving though a tunnel toward a bright light (e.g., Moody, 1975; Parnia, Waller, Yeates, & Fenwick, 2001; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001). This phenomenon is not yet well understood but, in any case, these type of sudden experiences, despite of being of short duration, can have major and lasting consequences on the post-NDE life of survivors. Van Lommel and his colleagues (2001) have compared the changes in lifestyle of survivors of cardiac arrest after 2 years and 8 years; 12% of the survivors experienced NDE. The comparison between the two cohorts (i.e., cardiac arrest with vs. without NDE) showed striking differences. The survivors who had a NDE exhibited significantly more prosocial attitudes than the others (i.e., acceptance of others, more loving and empathy, improved understanding of others, involvement in their family). They also became more religious and spiritual (i.e., understanding the purpose of life, sense of the inner meaning of life, interest in spirituality). It seems that the intense, yet short experience of NDE results in people having a more selfless orientation.

Brain Lesions. The recent story of Jill Bolte Taylor (see Taylor, 2006) is particularly interesting in this regard. This neuroscientist suffered a stroke during which she lost a certain amount of cognitive abilities. After the stroke, she also found herself immersed in a state of extreme selflessness. "I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle," she later wrote (Kaufman, 2008). She also mentions having felt a state of harmony and happiness that she had never felt before. This testimony leads us to consider the relationship between having a sense of self and specific brain functions. While it is particularly difficult to determine the self and its cerebral correlates (Legrand & Ruby, 2009), some preliminary works indicate interesting directions. According to Wheeler, Stuss, and Tulving (1997), lesions to the right fronto-temporal cortex led in some cases to the experience of cognitive detachment from self. A first tentative study suggests that the right prefrontal cortex is involved in the meditative state of self-dissolution (Lehmann, Faber, Achermann, Jeanmonod, Gianotti, & Pizzagalli, 2001). These data suggest a neurological basis for selflessness. But, of course, more research is needed to understand these intriguing phenomena.

Mind-altering drugs. It is known that the use of certain drugs such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline provoke temporary states of modified consciousness in which individuals sometimes have the feeling of losing their self-boundaries, and experience mystical and spiritual states (e.g., Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Borg, Andrée, Soderstrom, and Farde (2003) have argued that this same serotonin system may serve as a biological basis for spiritual experiences. It is possible that the use of certain drugs occasionally generates what we call selflessness. Such experiences are temporary, as they depend on the psychopharmacological actions of the substances. Nevertheless, as suggested by psychedelic research (e.g., Walsh & Grob, 2005, 2006; see also James, 1936/1958), it seems that such experiences can effect lasting modifications (e.g., understanding of the nature of the mind, interest in spirituality, meaning in life, etc.). Whatever the case, it seems that there is a possible psychoneurobiological basis for the experience of selflessness as well as for its plasticity.

Age Related Developmental Processes

It appears that during life, specific developmental processes are associated with styles of self-based psychological functioning. We are interested mainly in two processes: cognitive egocentrism, which occurs during childhood, and maturity and wisdom that comes with age.

Piaget and Weil (1951) have divided the cognitive development linked to egocentrism into three stages. Egocentrism refers to the self-centered understanding that children have of their world; they assume that others experience the world as they do. From 4 to 7 years of age, children are particularly egocentric. From 7 to 10 years, they decenter from themselves but become centered on the groups to which they belong (e.g., groups of boys, of girls, etc.). From 10 to 15 years of age, children undergo more extensive decentering. This three-staged model predicts consequences concerning self-psychological functioning. At the peak (between 4 and 7 years), for example, it is possible that cognitive egocentrism produces self-centered behaviors and affects (e.g., self-interested behaviors, afflictive emotions). At the same time, the limited centering on others should inhibit empathetic and compassionate emotions, as well as prosocial behaviors. While young children (2 years old) are quite capable of experiencing affective empathy (e.g., Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992), the capacity for cognitive empathy (the ability to understand the thoughts and perspectives of another person) appears to take somewhat longer to develop (e.g., Selman, 1980). According to Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, and Penner (2006): "they will be

unlikely to spontaneously come to a person's aid in an unfamiliar situation—not because of a lack of caring, but because of a lack of understanding. Note what is being suggested here: Very young children are not selfish—they are just egocentric." (p. 197). Complementarily, the work showing a development of infantile intolerance and egocentrism parallel to sociocognitive development supports our hypothesis (e.g., Aboud, 1988). Finally, if cognitive egocentrism tends to diminish from the age of 10, it can be expected that other variables, such as those involved in scholastic education (e.g., promotion of ego goals) can limit the likelihood that self-centeredness will be reduced (see above the section "School education").

It seems that processes linked to aging affect the style of self-based psychological functioning. Vaillant (1977) proposes that there is an increase in wisdom and a decrease in immature defense styles with age. Maslow (1968) suggests that lifelong personality growth occurs as people satisfy more and more needs. According to Erikson (1963), maturity (e.g., ego-transcendence) increases during the last part of life (see also Peck, 1968). Interestingly, some authors propose that individuals become more altruistic and prosocial with age (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994). In a paper entitled "Getting Older, Getting Better," Sheldon and Kasser (2001) not only confirm that maturity, measured by various indices, increases with age, but it also mediates an increase in well-being. They show, for example, that with age, the individual tends to have a better understanding of himself, can transcend his ego through spirituality, and can also perceive more unity and cosmic order. They also observe an increase in self-determination and intrinsic orientation (in comparison to extrinsic orientation). All of these studies help to explain why one tends to be happier with age. Ardelt (1997) confirms that life satisfaction among the elderly is closely linked to wisdom (measured by various indices including tolerance, empathy, and compassion). Works on the presence of, and the search for, meaning in life show that the elderly report more meaning in their lives, while the young are more often searching for meaning (Steger et al., 2009). Having meaning in one's life is positively linked to well-being and happiness, and negatively linked to depression (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger et al., 2009). All of these studies suggest a linear and positive relationship between age and selflessness, as well as a linear and negative relationship between age and self-centeredness. One can expect an increase in a selfless type of functioning and a decrease in self-centered functioning with age.

VI. Applied Perspectives and Concluding Remarks

What are the implications of the proposed model at the applied level? How does one free oneself from being involved with purely hedonic pursuits? How can authentic happiness be attained?

According to Self-Determination Theory, well-being is closely related to the fulfillment of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Ryff and Singer (2008) emphasize six factors that are involved in eudemonia and that favor eudemonic well-being and health: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy. Waterman (1993) emphasizes the importance of participating in activities that make people feel alive, engaged, and fulfilled (see also Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). These few examples illustrate the varieties of factors that have been proposed as affecting happiness and its attainment. Rather than focusing on psychological qualities that foster happiness, the present model takes into account the nature of the self, and the self based psychological processes that are basic to our psychological functioning. We argue that our psychological functioning is determined by the structure of the self, and that authentic happiness can be obtained when selflessness, rather than self-centeredness, occurs. It is important to take into account the fact that when methods of attaining pleasure are suggested sometimes fluctuating happiness will result. For example, by indicating to an individual that authentic happiness can be obtained by the cultivation of selflessness (e.g., altruistic behaviors) and the avoidance of self-centeredness (e.g., egoism, materialism), it is possible that the individual will become involved in the approach/avoidance aspects of the hedonic principle. It is important to realize that the search for happiness sometimes involves a self-centered orientation. Therefore, prescriptions (approach), and proscriptions (avoidance) should be used with caution. To the extent that some activities (e.g., mental training and meditation) can lead to self-decentering, they represent a valuable solution in helping people to both reduce their self-centered tendencies, and live a quality of life filled with inner peace, fulfillment and serenity, as opposed to a life filled with ruminations based on hopes and fears and impulses of attraction and repulsion. In the long run, because of its self-reinforcing nature, this kind of happiness would involve selflessness. Decentering activities, by virtue of their indirect nature, would seem to provide productive effects on happiness. While more research is needed, we hope that the point of view presented in this paper will help scholars, practitioners, and other people, approach the pursuit of happiness in a more articulate way.

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