

# **Understanding Student Well-Being Within the Context of Materialism and Individualism**

by

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**Abstract:**

Western cultural paradigms have led to unsustainable environmental practices as well as a psycho-spiritual unrest (Fisher, 2012) being manifested as increasing psychopathologies such as depression and anxiety. This theoretical research study will examine the underlying 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural paradigms that have contributed to our current mental health and ecological crises and will propose the need for cultural rebuilding through education to address unsustainable environmental practices and the increase of psychopathologies.

*To my parents,  
for instilling in me the things that are truly important in life  
To Norm, Amanda and our canine companions,  
for being my daily reminders  
With love and gratitude*

## I. Introduction

### My Story

“Casserian Engeri” is the traditional African greeting of the Masai warriors. The greeting, which continues to this day, roughly translates to, “And how are the children?” Culturally, this greeting “acknowledge[s] the high value the Masai [place] on the children’s well-being”. The response, “All the children are well” indicates “that peace and safety prevail; the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the Masai people have not forgotten their reason for being, their proper function, and their responsibilities” (“And How...”, p. 1). As I reflect upon this greeting, I wonder what it would be like if we greeted each other in a similar fashion? How would we respond? Unfortunately, my own personal experience over recent years indicates that, specifically in the area of psychological well-being, that the children are not well.

I have noticed a concerning trend in my work as a school guidance counsellor. Over the last decade, the number of students exhibiting mental health issues such as depression and anxiety has become more prevalent, with the age of onset alarmingly younger. In my own personal experience, this distressing trend has manifested as an increased prevalence of anxiety and depression as well as self-harming behaviours (cutting, suicidal thoughts and ideation). I noticed that mental health issues that predominately manifested in later years were becoming alarmingly more common in younger elementary grades. Students would share their despair describing a multitude of ways they imagined that they could follow through with suicidal thoughts: slip under the water in the tub; swallow a handful of gravel from the playground; use a gun. Several years ago, I met with a six-year-old student who expressed to his teacher that he wanted to kill himself. Follow-up assessment indicated that that he not only knew what it meant

to die, he had a well thought out plan on how to proceed with suicide and had the means and access for follow-through. On another occasion, a nine-year-old boy shared how he strategically disassembled his pencil sharpener so that the razor could be used as a tool for cutting. Tragically, these are just a few examples of what was becoming an increasingly more common conversation that I was having with my students. I realized that I was not alone in my experiences when I was asked to attend the Tattered Teddies suicide prevention curriculum training. What was most disturbing about this professional development workshop was that it provided information and interventions targeted specifically to children under the age of twelve. Clearly, all the children are not well.

Despite greater public awareness campaigns, a decrease in stigmatization, more mental health training for educators and promotional mental health programming for students, we seem to be making little progress in the area of youth mental well-being. I was left with pressing concerns and many unanswered questions. Why are mental health issues such as anxiety and depression continuing to rise despite our best efforts? What determines a happy life? Should happiness be a goal? As a way to further my learning, I began sitting on divisional mental health committees and participated on sub-committees that worked to create divisional protocols for dealing with self-harm and suicidal behaviours among our youth. I became interested in the University of Manitoba's Masters Degree cohort in Education for Sustainability and Well-Being as a way to further expand my knowledge in the area of well-being and contribute to research in a field I cared passionately about. I wanted to better understand not only what was at the root of the declining youth mental health crisis, but also know what educators could do to reverse this troubling trend. It was through my studies in Sustainability and Well-Being that I first began to see a connection between our current mental health crisis and our precarious ecological situation.

## The Problem

Modern society has seen a rise in both mental health issues and ecological crises. Rising mental health issues worldwide are an increasing concern (World Health Organization; Government of Canada, 2006), with predictions indicating that by 2030 more people worldwide will be affected by mental health issues than any other health condition. Globally, scientists and environmentalists are warning that the planet is reaching a critical threshold tipping point regarding future sustainability as the viability of essential planetary ecosystems are being increasingly threatened. (Elgin, 2010; Klein, 2014; O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Orr, 2012; O'Sullivan, 1999). The global community is on an unsustainable trajectory that must be radically altered (O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Orr, 2012; O'Sullivan, 1999). There is a growing "realization that young people in school today will inherit a host of pressing - and escalating - environmental challenges and environmentally linked illnesses" (Stone, 2009, p. 4).

## Overview of Thesis Research

My study will suggest that the cultural constructs of materialism and individualism have not only contributed to a psycho-spiritual unrest (Fisher, 2012), but to destructive, untenable ecological practices. Capra (2016) suggests that the problems we are now globally facing "must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception" (p. 5). Our society continues to "subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world" (Capra, 2016, p. 6). This research will develop the thesis that the mental health and ecological crises can be seen as manifestations of a solitary underlying dilemma: a culture whose normative values are

inherently problematic. A major transformational shift in thinking is needed now as the very structure of our Western society's cultural constructs is undermining our emotional, physical and planetary health. The current world status is a reflection of the inherent harm that unexamined beliefs and thinking create.

## **II. The Mental Health Crisis**

### **A Global Mental Health Crisis**

Statistics suggest that declining mental health has become an alarming global concern (Public Health Agency of Canada Report, 2018; World Health Organization, Government of Canada, 2006). Current data indicates that globally, one out of every four individuals will experience a mental health concern at some point during their lifetime (Public Health Agency of Canada Report, 2018). With mental health issues worldwide continuing to rise, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) predicts that by 2030 more people worldwide will be affected by mental health issues than any other health condition.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified stress as the health epidemic of the 21st century (WHO as cited in Meyers, 2018). Health statistics suggest that 90% of all visits to primary care physicians are directly or indirectly related to stress (Meyers, 2017). Stress is a biological response to a stressor that brings about physical and psychological changes (Meyers, 2018). Once the stress response system is activated, cortisol levels rise to allow the body to respond to the stressor and the flight-flight system is activated. Stress is experienced when the demand on an individual is greater than their available resources to respond (Meyers, 2018). While the stress and ease responses are both a part of our biological adaptive operating systems (Meyers, 2017), evolutionary and cultural changes of modern society have contributed to a more sensitive and easily activated stress response system undermining overall health and well-being. (Meyers, 2018).

Adolescents and young adults present unique mental health concerns. Half of all mental illnesses worldwide begin at age 14 (PHAC, 2018; WHO, 2019). The period of adolescence is a

tumultuous time as individuals contend with a multitude of issues which include physiological and emotional challenges; complex adult and peer relationships and engagement in riskier behaviours such as alcohol and drug use (WHO, 2019). Monshat et al. (2012) suggest that “children today suffer from unprecedented levels of stress, resulting in anger, behavioral problems, depression, and anxiety as well as lowered self-esteem and confidence” (p. 90). Between 10% and 20% of young people will have had some form of an anxiety or mood disorder, or some form of a disruptive or substance use disorder by the age of 18 (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Seeley, 1993; Shaffer et al., 1996 as cited in Keyes, 2002, p. 9). The magnitude of this problem suggests that “mental health has become a vital concern in our schools and communities” (Carney, 2015, p. 1).

Depression has become increasingly more common in youth with research indicating that approximately 10% of youth will experience an episode of major depression before the age of 14 (Garrison, Schluchter, Schoenbach, & Kaplan, 1989). Depression is currently the third leading cause of disability among adolescents (WHO, 2019). A sense of hopelessness, especially among young people, in modern societies has manifested to “epidemic” proportions (Esfahani Smith, 2017, p. 22; Seligman, 1991, p. v). Esfahani Smith (2017) notes that in “the United States, the rate of people suffering from depression has risen dramatically since 1960, and between 1988 and 2008 the use of antidepressants rose 400 percent” (p. 22).

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds (WHO, 2019). The WHO reports that more than one million people worldwide die by suicide annually (CMAJ, 2011). The World Health Organization indicates that “global suicide rates have spiked 60 percent since World War II” with “the incidence of suicide among 15 to 24-year-olds trip[ling]... in the last half of the twentieth century” (Esfahani-Smith, 2017, p. 22). “In 2016, the suicide rate

reached its highest point in nearly thirty years in the general population, and for middle-aged adults, it has increased by over 40 percent since 1999” (Esfahani-Smith, 2017, p. 22).

### A Canadian Mental Health Crisis

The Government of Canada (2006) envisions that mental illness will have a direct effect on approximately 20% of Canadians during their lifetime. An individual’s mental health status has serious implications for their overall well-being across a lifetime (Butler & Pang, 2015). Positive mental health is correlated with more positive outcomes for both the individual and greater community as it is associated with a higher likelihood of school completion, more positive social relationships, higher levels of self-confidence and increased resiliency (Butler & Pang, 2014).

Within Canada, one in five children and youth will be impacted by a mental health problem (Carney, 2015, p. 1). Between 15% and 25% of Canadians experience at least one mental health problem or illness before the age of 19; with those affected having a higher likelihood than others of facing a second one later in their lifetime (Butler & Pang, 2014). More disturbingly, only one in six people under the age of 19 is properly diagnosed, and only one in five individuals under the age of 12 years receive adequate treatment (Butler & Pang, 2015).

Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental health problems for children and youth (Butler & Pang, 2015; CHMA, 2018). In 2009, 4% of youth (12 to 19 years) and 5.8% of young adults (20 to 29 years) in Canada were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. These rates were even higher among young women and in Aboriginal populations (Butler & Pang, 2015). Anxiety and stress are normal reactions to perceived danger or threat. Our stress response system is part of our evolutionary programming fundamental to species survival as it ensures safety as

well as motivation for adaptive action and change. While some anxiety is warranted for optimal functioning, an easily triggered threat response system can be problematic for overall well-being.

Self-harm and suicidal ideation rates have proliferated in modern society. Self-harm may be described as purposefully hurting oneself in order to process difficult feelings or thoughts (CMHA BC). Teen rates of self-harm range from 14%- 39% (CMHA BC). The Canadian Institute for Health Information (2014) indicates that the rate of intentional self-harm related hospitalizations in girls has increased in the past 5 years by more than 110%; with boys reflecting an increase of more than 35% ([www.cihi.ca](http://www.cihi.ca)). Actual Canadian self-harm rates may be as much as 50% higher than statistically reported by hospitalization rates as not all seek medical help (CMAJ, 2011). A 2009 Canadian adolescent survey revealed that approximately 8% of students stated that they seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year (City of Ottawa Public Health, 2012).

#### Technological Advances and Their Contribution to the Mental Health Crisis

Rapid technological advances and shifts in cultural values may provide some context for understanding the trend of decreasing mental health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one of the core tasks of this study is to unpack this link between particular dominant cultural values and the mental health crisis we are facing. This section elaborates on the connection between technological advances and the mental health crisis as one symptom of the dominance of problematic underlying dominant cultural values.

Human survival relies upon our capacity to adapt ourselves to our environment. Over the past century, technological advancements have allowed us to adapt our environment (Meyers, 2017). As a result, our technological and cultural environment has changed at a higher rate than

we can cope with biologically (Meyers, 2017). The stress response operating system “that evolved to protect ourselves from acute physical stressors has not been adapted since prehistoric times” (Meyers, 2017). While cultural changes may rapidly advance, biological evolution occurs slowly over many generations (Meyers, 2017).

Modern technological advances such as computers and smartphones have made work and communication more efficient but also ensured increased activation of the stress response as psychosocial threats become increasingly more common (Meyers, 2017). With less time in the biological ease operating system, energy reserves become depleted, leading to less physical and psychological well-being (Meyers, 2017). The agricultural, industrial and technological revolutions have evolved at an increasingly accelerated pace, having broad implications for every aspect of how individuals live and work. The vast changes brought about by modernisation over the last decade have resulted in adverse effects on health and well-being (Meyers, 2018). Technology and economic progress have contributed to a proliferation of unhealthy lifestyle practices and increased stress levels have contributed to an increase in physical and mental disorders such as stress, depression, and burnout (Meyers, 2018). Chronic activation of the stress response has also negatively impacted the brain as a notable decrease in brain size has occurred over the past 20,000 years (John Hawks, University of Wisconsin as cited in Meyers, 2018). Another study noted a greater amygdala activation in more frequent Social Network Site users (Ghose, 2015, as cited in CMHA, Ontario). In addition to increases in anxiety, the chronic stress levels of modern living also contribute to increases in memory loss (Ensell et al., 2012, as cited in Meyers, 2018). The rapid pace of evolving technology and automation is triggering greater existential anxiety manifesting as body-mind disconnection, feelings of hopelessness and numbness (Meyers, 2018). As automation becomes increasingly more prevalent in the

workforce, the human workforce is decreasing leading to an existential crisis as individuals search for other avenues for personal fulfillment and meaning (Meyers, 2018).

Researchers have identified the proliferation of technology and a continuously connected society as a trigger for less individual psychological well-being. Social Networking Sites (SNS), and web-based services that allow individuals opportunities to communicate through constructed profiles, have been on a steady rise in usage since their inception in 1997 with hundreds of sites now existing globally (CMHA, Ontario). Social media sites allow users to engage with others, share, and exchange information (ideas, photos, videos) (CMHA, Ontario). Questions have been raised regarding the links between frequent use of SNS and increases in mental health and addiction-related issues (CMHA, Ontario). SNS encourage users to compete for attention and engage in social comparison that is superficially based on a social system of “likes” or “shares”. “Social media apps are developed and engineered to be addictive, encouraging users to check in consistently” (Harris, [www.timewellspent.io](http://www.timewellspent.io), as cited in CMHA, Ontario). Researchers have noted similarities in neurological responses between compulsive SNS users and substance addiction (CMHA, Ontario). Technology platforms “are caught in a race to the bottom of the brain stem to extract human attention. It’s a race we are all losing” and one that is “tearing apart our shared social fabric” (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>). The result of this competition is a “human downgrading” experience resulting in addiction, social isolation, and misinformation.

Design techniques used in apps have one primary goal: to keep our attention indefinitely (Harris, as cited in CMHA, Ontario). A recent survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health revealed that 86 per cent of students in Ontario visit social media sites daily and about 16 per cent spend five hours a day or more on social media (Centre for Addiction and

Mental Health, 2016 as cited in CMHA, Ontario). High rates of SNS use has been linked with compulsive behaviours and symptoms similar to addiction for some users (Griffiths, 2013 as cited in CHMA, Ontario). Researchers have identified that certain patterns of use can alter mood, motivation, and concentration and result in dissociating and disinhibiting experiences (Carbonell & Panova, 2016 as cited in CMHA, Ontario). The need for social acceptance is a characteristic biologically programmed drive and one that Social Networking Sites (SNS) successfully manipulate (Irvine, 2009; Dallas, 2013 as cited in CMHA, Ontario). While researchers have identified that excessive SNS use can be problematic for young users, pre-existing factors such as low self-esteem, loneliness or depression may further exacerbate the problem. Risk factors for addictive SNS use need to be viewed through a bio-psycho-social lens that takes into consideration age, peer pressure, secure family/community attachments and pre-existing mental health issues (CMHA, Ontario). Social media platforms appear to provide support for lonely individuals; however, they also construct a distorted sense of reality that negatively impacts mental health. The increased use of social media may be a contributing factor to increases in isolation, stress, and depression (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>). Social media use may also adversely impact mental health by interfering with activities that foster resiliency. Research indicates that increased social media use may negatively impact mental health and well-being in young females because it allows for exposure to cyberbullying while allowing less time for resilient-inducing activities such as sleep and physical movement (Viner et al., 2019, as cited in CNN). Overall, research indicates a negative association between screen time and overall psychological well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Technological advances and growth among technology platforms have resulted in a fiercely competitive industry vying for consumers or “users” (Centre for Human Technology

<https://humanetech.com/>). While intentionally targeted distractions serve the purpose of keeping users engaged for prolonged periods of time; it has had ramifications on attentional and cognitive capacities (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Ward et al., 2017). Research indicates that the mere presence of a smartphone even while off can result in diminished cognitive capacity affecting attentional resources and working memory (Ward et al.; 2017; CMHA, Ontario; Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>). In addition to affecting attentional capacities, technology has also been implicated in a kind of “brain drain” (Viner et al., as cited on CNN). Societal ramifications of a competitive SNS system technically designed to attract interest is a loss of ability to focus without distraction creating new challenges for learning and socializing; especially for children (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>). Increased use of SNS has been connected to a greater sense of loneliness, depression, stress, loss of sleep and a higher risk of suicide (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>). It has been well documented that even tech company CEOs limit technology usage in their own homes (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>).

Leisure time is increasingly becoming more occupied by screen time. Comparatively, cell phones were rare just 20 years ago while today teens were online or on cell phones for seven and a half hours a day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010 as cited in Twenge, 2013). A 2016 study of 2 to 17-year-old children found lower psychological well-being proportionately tied to the number of hours of screen time with the association being most predominant in adolescents (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). High users of screen time (as indicated by 7 hours or more/day) were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, treated by a mental health professional, or have taken medication for a psychological or behavioural issue in the last

12 months. High users of screen time were significantly more likely to display poor emotional regulation; demonstrate an inability to complete tasks, demonstrated lower curiosity and had more difficulty making friends (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Moderate use (4 h/day) was also associated with lower psychological well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

*Millennials, GenY, or Generation Me* are the labels applied to this first generation of individuals to grow up with the Internet and social networking websites (Twenge, 2013). Easy access to technology has created an environment where individuals are continuously connected. Ironically, this continuous stream of connection has resulted in weaker social ties. This constant onslaught of technology has had ramifications for the quality of human social relationships and interpersonal human connection. While social media and modern may lead to more connections; the connections are weaker and shallower leading to a decrease in one's ability to relate to others in person, resulting in fewer people that can rely on in-person emotional support and practical help (Turkle, 2012/13; Twenge, 2013) and in lower levels of civic engagement (Twenge, 2013). Increased on-line time has been positively correlated with an increase in fighting, carrying weapons, apathy towards helping others; the fostering of shallow or weak social ties, increased narcissism, decreased empathy and a decline in civic and political engagement (Twenge, 2013). Unfortunately, this connectivity occurs at a distance resulting in less empathy and emotional connection and a higher risk of misinterpretation (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012; Turkle, 2011, 2012). The mere physical presence of a smartphone has been associated with decreased connectivity and conversation quality (Centre for Human Technology <https://humanetech.com/>; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Turkle, 2011). This unceasing stream of connectivity has created a distorted sense of “alone, together” which gives the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship (Turkle,

2012). The proximity of smartphone devices in both private and personal settings have created situations where the individual is in complete control over attentional focus; has the assurance they never have to be alone and will always be heard (Turkle, 2012). The result of this kind of superficial connection has resulted in a diminished capacity for being alone; being alone becomes a trigger for anxiety (Turkle, 2012). Turkle (2011, 2012) maintains that solitude is necessary in order for an individual to fully understand and develop a sense of self; which is a fundamental precursor to forming healthy attachments with others. Through digital communication, individuals miss out on the in-person feedback of body language, voice, tone, and silences (Schroeder et al., 2017; Turkle, 2012). When engaging in a disagreement, physical proximity allows for human connection that facilitates a greater understanding and acceptance of opposing perspectives (Schroeder et al., 2017; Turkle, 2012). Technology has resulted in the loss of spontaneous conversation; a precursor allowing for vulnerability and intimacy to flourish. Turkle (2012) maintains that technology has resulted in an “assault on empathy” with markers indicating a 40% decline in empathy among college students over the past 20 years. Interestingly, “[s]ocial media acts as a prism, amplifying existing tendencies...[w]hen the existing tendencies of a culture are toward narcissism, civic disengagement, and individualism, that is the reality social media will reflect” (Twenge, 2013, 17).

Rising mental health issues in modern cultures are both an individual and societal concern. Declining mental health is presently a global challenge requiring collective action (Public Health Agency of Canada Report, 2018). The languishing psychological health trend presents societal challenges as a country’s health systems, economy and productivity are adversely affected (PHAC Report, 2018; WHO, 2019). Given our precarious situation, there is an urgency for societal action that is grounded in an understanding of the best practices for

providing an effective counter-balance to existing problematic socio-cultural values and practices. This theoretical research study will examine the global mental health crisis through a socio-cultural lens and make recommendations in regards to best practices for psychological well-being. This study will move beyond detection, prevention and promotional mental health strategies and programming towards an understanding of the underlying fundamental issues at the root of the mental health crisis.

### **III. The Ecological Crisis**

We are approaching a state shift in the Earth's biosphere (Barnosky et al., 2012). State shift theory postulates that biological systems can rapidly transition from one state to another; a state shift being precipitated by either a 'threshold' or 'sledgehammer' effect (Barnosky et al., 2012). While the sledgehammer effect results in abrupt state change; threshold state shifts are brought on by incremental changes leading to critical thresholds (Barnosky et al., 2012). Many scientists believe we are currently at a planetary tipping point that may result in abrupt, irreversible state shifts in ecosystems (Barnosky et al., 2012; Bowers, 2002; Elgin, 2010; Fisher, 2012; Klein, 2014; O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Orr, 2012; Wright, 2004). Global-scale state shifts are currently being forced by human population growth, resource consumption, habitat transformation, energy production and climate change (Barnosky et al., 2012). "As a world community, we have a pressing time-sensitive dilemma to resolve. Human activities are responsible for inflicting irreversible ecological damage to the planetary interdependent web of life (Anatole et al., 1992). On a global scale, our societies are on an unsustainable trajectory that must be radically altered (O'Brien & Murray, 2015) for, "we have good reason to believe that this will be the closest of close calls" (Orr, 2012, p. 48). A profound fundamental transformation

of human practices is required in order for future planetary viability of life as we know it (Anatole et al.,1992).

Human beings have profoundly affected planetary health (Living Planet Report, 2018). Many scientists believe that human consumption rates and increased demands for energy, land, and water are responsible for ushering in a new geological era (Barnosky et al., 2012; Living Planet Report, 2018). As a result of these unprecedented ecological demands, the Earth is moving into the Anthropocene Era, one which marks the significant impact of humans on geological and ecological systems (Living Planet Report, 2018). Current environmental stressors are evidence of having entered this new Anthropocene Era; increases in ozone depletion, air pollution, and acid precipitation are all evidence of planetary critical stress (Anatole et al.,1992). Humans are continuing to perpetuate unsustainable and environmentally destructive practices resulting in adverse ramifications for the planet and all living species. Activities such as fossil fuel burning and deforestation, are contributing to increased levels of gases in the atmosphere and are affecting the climate on a global level (Anatole et al.,1992). The exploitation and pollution of water resources is having consequential implications for both food supply and essential human needs (Anatole et al.,1992). Current agricultural and livestock management practices are resulting in a loss of soil productivity; land abandonment and decreased food production capacity (Anatole et al.,1992). Tropical and temperate forests are rapidly being destroyed with predictions indicating that most tropical rain forest and plant and animal species residing within will be gone before the end of the next century (Anatole et al.,1992). The dire prediction that one-third of all species now living will be lost by 2100 has profound consequences for the health of all biological systems (Anatole et al.,1992). The extent to which individuals and the planet will be affected by this decline of bio-diversity is yet unknown as we

are interfering with “critical biological systems whose interactions and dynamics we only imperfectly understand” (Anatole et al.,1992, p. 1).

We are living through a period of time in our planet’s history referred to as *the Great Acceleration*. The Great Acceleration is a unique event in the 4.5 billion-year history of our planet that represents the exploding human population and economic growth that is driving unprecedented planetary change through the increased demand for energy, land, and water (Living Planet Report, 2018). The drive towards unlimited economic growth and destructive environmental practices is taxing and exhausting finite natural resources and risking irreparable damage to critical global systems. The Earth’s natural resource capacity is reaching its limits suggesting that restraints to both population and economic growth are necessary for a plausible sustainable future (Anatole et al.,1992). However, predictions of a tripling growth in population from present numbers (World Bank; United Nations as cited in Anatole et al.,1992) raise considerable questions regarding future sustainability. Spiralling human consumption levels have resulted in habitat loss due to agriculture and overexploitation threatening biodiversity and ecosystems (Living Planet Report, 2018). The Living Planet Report (2018) contends that humanity’s Ecological Footprint, a measure of our consumption of natural resources, has increased by about 190%. Currently, only one-quarter of land on Earth is free of human impact with predictions indicating a decline to one-tenth by 2050 (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2018 as cited in Living Planet Report, 2018). The modern era has seen an estimated loss of 87% of Wetlands (Living Planet Report).

Loss of natural resources and land degradation are problematic for many reasons. Land degradation is led by inappropriate land management practices driven by declining ecosystem capacity and rising regional or global demand for products (Living Planet Report). Land

degradation includes forest loss; which has been especially significant in highly biodiverse tropical forests (Living Planet Report, 2018). Increased forest loss has come as a result of local and commercial agriculture as well as urban growth, infrastructure expansion and mining (Living Planet Report, 2018). This ongoing land degradation has negatively impacted species, quality of habitats and functioning of ecosystems (Living Planet Report, 2018). The Global Soil Biodiversity Atlas recently issued alarm in regards to threats to soil biodiversity (as cited in Living Planet Report, 2018). With the soil encompassing one-quarter of all life found on Earth, soil biodiversity is essential for essential ecosystem mechanisms (carbon sequestration, greenhouse gas emissions, uptake of nutrients by plants) (Living Planet Report, 2018). Intensive agriculture, increased urbanization, and pollutions are all driving factors for soil degradation). (Living Planet Report, 2018).

Biodiversity, often referred to as the “web of life”, encompasses the variety of living things that make up an ecosystem (Living Planet Report, 2018). Biodiversity has been described as the “infrastructure” that supports all life on Earth and allows for “the stable functioning of our atmosphere, oceans, forests, landscapes, and waterways” (Living Planet Report, 2018, p. 22). Presently, we are seeing growing global declines in biodiversity precipitated by human activities (Living Planet Report, 2018). Agricultural intensification practices, urban expansion and changing climate have led to a decline in diversity as well as numbers and health of pollinators (Garratt, Breeze & Senapathi, 2018). The category of pollinators includes some 20,000 species of bees, insects, and vertebrates (some birds and bats) (Garratt, Breeze & Senapathi, 2018). A decline in pollinator population and diversity is especially problematic as “more than 75% of the leading global food crops benefit from pollination” (Garratt et al., 2018, p. 8). The Living Planet Index (LPI), an indicator of the state of global biodiversity and the health of our planet, shows an

overall decline of 60% in the population sizes of vertebrates; indicative of a 50% decrease in less than 50 years (Living Planet Report, 2018).

The comprehensive summary of the January 2019 United Nations Environment Programme's sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6) cautions "that the overall environmental situation globally is deteriorating and the window for action is closing" (GEO-6 key messages, p. 1). A healthy environment was noted as being both a prerequisite and a necessary foundation for economic prosperity, human health and well-being (GEO-6 key messages). The resounding scientific conclusion is a call towards an immediate global course corrective action. An immediate shift in current problematic practise is required in order to reverse negative ecological trends. The ramifications of past inaction are being currently being manifested as climate change, air pollution, land degradation, and water pollution; which are continuing to further drive biodiversity loss. Inadequate sanitation and polluted drinking water attribute to approximately 1.4 million deaths annually while pesticides, heavy metals, and plastics regularly appear in our food supply (GEO-6 key messages). Human beings and their activities are taxing the "Earth's ecological integrity and its capacity to meet human needs" (GEO-6 key messages, p. 1).

Human development and wellbeing are reliant on healthy natural systems (Living Planet Report, 2018). A decline in natural systems brings into question the viability of globalizing the Western consumer lifestyle as planetary restorative health will require drastic changes to current cultural and societal values and practices (Anatole et al., 1992; Bowers, 2002; Fisher, 2012). A complete transformation in thinking is required in order to address our ecological and well-being crises (Barnosky et al., 2012; Elgin, 2010, Fisher, 2012; Klein, 2014). The timeline for change is precarious as scientists have repeatedly warned of irreversible, detrimental consequences for

inaction (Barnosky et al., 2012; Elgin, 2010, Klein, 2014; Wright, 2004). Propositions for viable change include shifts towards long-term thinking founded in generational sustainability (Wright, 2004). Fisher (2012) advocates for revolutionary change precipitated by a questioning of modern society's values and practices.

Our current societal practices have resulted in detrimental and profound societal and planetary transformations. Berry (1988) notes that the “deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation” (p. xi). Our cultural “confusion” is rooted in a changing story that is inadequate for future survival (Berry, 1988, p. xi). Narratives are significant as they provide a lens through which the past is interpreted and the future is informed (Berry, 1988, p. xi). For survival as a species, it is crucial that this new cultural narrative includes the construct of shared human and planetary destiny (Berry, 1988, xiv). An anthropocentric orientation, founded in our spiritual and cultural traditions depicting human superiority and dominion, has led to a deviation from previously held worldviews which respected the integrity of the universe; “the law that every component member of the universe should be integral with every other member of the universe” (Berry, 1988, p. 202). This cultural shift in worldview requires both an awareness and awakening from our destructive cultural coding (Berry, 1988).

The world's most vulnerable populations are disproportionately burdening the detrimental effects of inaction (Living Planet Report, 2018). Transformative, systemic societal and cultural change is required (GEO-6 key messages) as maintaining the status quo of existing socio-cultural beliefs and practices will have irreparable consequences for the planet and all living beings. Action must move beyond sustainability policies towards a comprehensive shift in

world view that is founded in and informed by scientific, indigenous and local knowledge (GEO-6 key messages).

Finally, while it has become abundantly clear that humanity and our natural systems have a shared destiny; calls for change have remained largely ineffectual (Living Planet Report, 2018). What is required at this point in our human history is a galvanization of action brought on by an overall transformational shift in cultural values and practices. The creation of a sustainable future will rely on radical shifts in the status quo. Our current ecological crisis necessitates that all educational pedagogy be grounded in an awareness of our precarious situation. Understanding the role that culture plays in the proliferation of unsustainable practices is of utmost importance as our beliefs inform our actions. When viewed more broadly through a cultural lens, I posit that the mental health and ecological crises can be seen as manifestations of a solitary underlying dilemma – a culture whose normative values are both erroneous and inherently problematic.

## IV. Cultural Constructs

### Culture

How we define ourselves as individuals and as a culture is integral as our belief systems inform our actions. “The cultural tradition of a people - its symbols, ideals, and ways of feeling – is always an argument about the meaning of the destiny its members share”; [in essence, cultures] are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 27). Many of the cultural beliefs upon which the worldview of our modern society is based upon are simply socially agreed-upon constructs. Understanding culture’s role in the perpetuation of societal belief systems is essential. I propose that it is modern society’s unreflective acceptance of problematic cultural constructs that has led us to our current state of precarious psychological and ecological dysfunction. In order to illuminate the erroneousness of the dominant cultural paradigms upon which our modern society is based, it is imperative to have an understanding of the existing structures that allow for the proliferation of dysfunctional thinking.

Culture is defined as: “the beliefs, customs, etc., of a particular society, group, place or time; a way of thinking, behaving or working that exists in a place or organization” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>). Assadourian (2010) maintains that culture creates “the overarching frames that shape how humans perceive reality” (p. 7). While “human behaviour is rooted in evolution and physiology, it is guided primarily by the cultural systems people are born into and therefore, “most of what seems ‘natural’ to people is actually cultural” (Assadourian, 2010, p. 8). Communal thoughts shared and shaped over time by a society’s institutions eventually become prevailing cultural constructs and readily accepted cultural norms (Assadourian, 2010, p. 8). Essentially, culture is simply an agreed-upon set of

beliefs adopted by individual citizens and the community they reside in. These beliefs become dominant cultural paradigms that consciously and unconsciously inform our thinking and our actions. Over time, the “cultural norms, symbols, values, and traditions a person grows up with become” normal (Assadourian, 2010, p. 3) and “guide humans at an almost invisible level” (Assadourian, 2010, pp. 7-8). Societal practices and value systems ensure a perpetuation of a society’s dominant cultural paradigms.

Once cultural constructs become readily accepted societal beliefs, they become normative frames of reference that are reinforced and perpetuated through a society’s language and social structures. This cultural coding process is perpetuated over generations through language and symbol exposure (Berry, 1988; Bowers, 1994). Assadourian (2010) believes that “human beings are embedded in cultural systems, are shaped and constrained by their cultures, and for the most part act only within the cultural realities of their lives” (p. 3). The generational perpetuation of cultural constructs occurs through a process of education and systematic social indoctrination through which children reflect the readily accepted dominant paradigms of a given culture (Bowers, 1994; Brusdal & Frones, 2014). A society’s social structures further solidify dominant cultural paradigms. Education, media, government policies and economic systems all serve to further reinforce existing cultural constructs (Assadourian, 2010). Once solidified, cultural beliefs unconsciously inform our thinking providing “root metaphors” that become the “meta-schemata that frame the process of analogic thinking across a wide range of cultural experience” (Brown, 1978, p. 126). These socio-cultural beliefs not only inform our thinking, they influence and activate physiological responses (Moss, 2011, p. 223), triggering a kind of “biosocial resonance” (Moss, 1973, as cited in Moss, 2011) that creates “cultural communities [that] have rhythms of life and social interaction characteristic of them” (Moss, 2011, p. 224). Education

plays a powerful role in the preservation of culturally established norms as educational “systems are a major channel through which societies actively *perpetuate* – often unreflectively – the philosophical presuppositions that frame what a culture takes as good, true and beautiful” (Stein, Connell & Gardner, 2008, pp. 401-402).

### Dominant Twenty-first Century Socio-Cultural Paradigms

In order to thoroughly comprehend our most troubling societal issues, it is essential to discern the underlying belief systems that inform our thinking and actions. This thesis research will examine two prevailing modern cultural constructs: materialism and individualism. I propose that the constructs of materialism and individualism are socio-cultural constructs that have been strategically and systematically cultivated over time. Understanding how and why these cultural paradigms were established and integrated into society is integral as these beliefs advise and influence individual and societal behaviour both consciously and unconsciously.

#### Materialism

Materialism is the manifestation of a consumeristic cultural paradigm that has become dominant in modern cultures (Assadourian, 2010; Belk, 1985; Kilbourne et al., 2009; Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton, 1997). Materialism represents a culturally accepted value system subsumed by a set of “goals focussed on wealth, possessions, image, and status” (Kasser, 2016, p. 489). More specifically defined, materialism “reflects the extent to which an individual believes that it is important to acquire money and possessions, as well as to strive for the related aims of an appealing image and high status/popularity... frequently expressed via money and possessions” (Kasser, 2016, pp. 490-491). Materialism is defined as “a set of values and goals focussed on possessions” (Wang & Tan, 2017, p. 131). Materialism is reflective of explicit

expressive behaviour that is related to the purchasing of items (Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 261). A materialistic mindset is an outward orientation that places emphasis on the importance of amassing money and material goods for the purpose of maintaining a sense of identity through image or status (Wang et al., 2016). Materialism is not an innate human characteristic; it is a cultural construct that has been systematically and methodologically engineered over time. Evolving worldviews and important societal “advancements” contributed to the evolving of cultural values and further entrenchment of materialistic beliefs.

Materialism is not a new cultural construct as underpinnings of a materialistic mindset have been historically noted (Belk, 1985; Kasser, 2016). While evidence of materialistic tendencies existed in ancient civilizations, its most recent incarnation as “the chance to seek psychological well-being via discretionary consumption” is a modern construct (Mason, 1981, as cited in Belk, 1985). A materialistic cultural paradigm was carefully crafted over the last two hundred years as industrial growth, marketing, and modern technology solidified a consumeristic mindset (Belk, 1985). The most recent form of materialism originated in Europe as population growth, limited land availability and weakening church and community structures meant that:

a young person’s customary path of social advancement – inheriting the family plot or apprenticing in a father’s trade – could no longer be taken for granted. People sought new avenues for identity and self-fulfillment, and the question and use of goods became popular substitutes. (Assadourian, 2010, p. 11)

Societal practices favouring more leisure time over wealth and the accumulation of goods initially provided a counterbalance to the burgeoning materialistic mindset (Assadourian, 2010). However, over time, a systematic internalization of consumerist values became normalized and

readily accepted cultural behaviour (Assadourian, 2010). A paradigm shift occurred by the early 1900s as a

consumeristic orientation had become increasingly embedded in many of the dominant societal institutions of many cultures – from businesses and governments to the media and education” and “in the latter half of the century new innovations [television...the Internet] helped institutions to spread consumerism across the planet. (Assadourian, 2010, p. 11)

Societal sanctioned practices ensured a further entrenching of materialistic values. Physical and psychological obsolescence ensured the need for new products while workers working longer hours increased availability of disposable incomes while astute business and marketing practices and the liberalizing of credit allowed for the mindset of materialism to proliferate (Assadourian, 2010).

Existing modern cultural principles created the necessary conditions for materialism to flourish as a prevailing mode of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Fisk, 1973, as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 260). A system of competitive markets provided the necessary trajectory platform for launching more extreme manifestations of materialism. A system of competitive markets was made possible by the following conditions: the privatization of property, the presence of readily available buyers and sellers, and a vehicle for information exchange (Kilbourne et al., 2009; Weber, 1981; Collins, 1992). Collectively, the aforementioned practices allowed for the foundation of a competitive market system upon which normative cultural patterns of materialism could thrive. Within the framework of a competitive market system, possessive individualism and limited government were key principles that allowed for the proliferation of a materialistic mindset (Gray, 1995, as cited in Kilbourne, 2009, p. 263;

Locke, 1963). A belief in possessive individualism provided the necessary pre-conditions for determining ownership and the suspension of existing societal practices limiting property and capital amassment allowed for unrestricted personal gain (Carruthers & Babb, 2000, as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009).

The concepts of unfettered personal freedom and progress combined with increased consumption further contributed to exponential economic growth and the subsequent further entrenchment of a materialistic mindset (Kassiola, 1990; Kilbourne et al., 2009). Technology and a modern economic market system further solidified a growing materialistic construct. The market exchanges of the past differed significantly from the capitalist market systems of modern industrialized societies. The need for continuous economic growth fuelled a materialistic consumption model (Heilbroner, 1985; Kassiola, 1990 as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009; Polanyi 1944; Speth, 2008; Wood, 2002) and an impersonal market system for resource exchange provided the necessary component for a paradigm of materialism to thrive (Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 264). While “political liberalism provided the necessary conditions for materialism and economic liberalism provided the social organization, technology provided the means” (Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 264). Modern societal acceptance of a consumeristic orientation, combined with advances in technology, assured previously inconceivable levels of material prosperity and a shift in thinking that began equating social success with material gains (Kilbourne et al., 2009). Within this cultural paradigm framework, continuous progress and materialism were seen as aspirational goals as well as societal markers for social and personal success (Kilbourne et al., 2009).

The embracing of a consumeristic and materialistic mindset was prefaced by a fundamental shift in worldview. A societal ontological transformation was required in order for

materialism to fully take hold as pre-modern beliefs set limits on growth and development and the exploitation of natural resources (Fisher, 2012; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Kilbourne, 2009). The modern industrial society mindset is based on anthropocentric principles, brought on by the scientific revolution, which viewed nature as having inanimate, mechanistic properties (Berry, 1988; Bowers, 2002; Fisher, 2012). Within this cosmology, nature was seen as a resource to be manipulated for increased wealth and material gain (Merchant, 1980; Capra, 1982 as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 264; Berry, 1988). Industrialism, globalism and contemporary consumerism all convey constructs promoting the notion that “everything that can be made must be made, and then sold” (Berthoud, G., 1992, as cited in Bowers, 2002 p. 26). Ecological exploitation is justified within a market-based societal mindset that equates progress with materialism (Leiss, 1972, as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009). In contemporary modern society, the only limit to growth is nature’s capacity to be exploited (Daly, 1991, as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009). Individual competition emerged as a unique feature of industrialized, capitalist societies as members compete for resources and seek psychological well-being in the accumulation of material resources (Donaldson & Werhane, 1993 as cited in Kilbourne et al., 2009; Hobbes, 1950; Marx 1847/1995; Polanyi, 1944;). Interpersonal competition for material goods is a phenomenon of social institutions within market-based Western industrial societies (Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 265). Economic growth creates positive feedback loops ensuring the proliferation of competitive capitalism (Thurow, 1997 as cited in Moss, 2011). Without restrictions, a competitive market system creates large inequities in wealth distribution (Kilbourne et al., 2009).

A consumeristic mindset has readily adopted and integrated into modern culture (Kasser, 2006). Assadourian (2010) notes that “language and symbols, norms and traditions, values and

institutions – have been profoundly transformed by consumerism in societies around the world with the term “consumer” “now often used interchangeably with person in the 10 most commonly used languages of the world” (p. 8). Assadourian (2010) suggests that “[m]any people today recognize...consumerist symbols more easily than they do common wildlife species, birdsong, animal calls, or other elements of nature” (pp. 8-9). Government policies reinforce a consumeristic paradigm by promoting unnaturally low manufacturing practices and by absolving manufacturers of environmental and social responsibility (Assadourian, 2010). Unlimited economic growth is dependent upon the propagation of consumeristic cultural values. The adherence to rituals and traditions that revolve around consumerism have been incorporated into every aspect of modern culture (Assadourian, 2010, p. 13).

Capitalism, in combination with economic and government-sanctioned practices ensuring unlimited economic growth, has ensured that a culture of materialism has been fully entrenched in modern societies (Brusdal & Frones, 2014; Jackson, 2008). Material goods have transitioned beyond function towards symbolism (Brusdal & Frones, 2014) as they have come to represent social status as well as a vehicle through which individuals pursue happiness and a sense of identity and purpose (Jackson, 2008). Individuals “consume to be able to do things...consume to belong...consume to impress; consumption displays hedonism and egoism as well as altruism” (Brusdal & Frones, 2014, p. 1428). Within this cultural context, “[w]ell-being is not influenced by consumption; it is interwoven with it” (Brusdal & Frones, 2014, p. 1428). Materialism has influenced a profound societal shift in values. A contemporary philosophical orientation equates the accumulation of material goods with living the good life (Assadourian, 2010). Research indicates that developing a meaningful life philosophy has been replaced by a “cultural pattern

that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance primarily through the consumption of goods and services” (Assadourian, 2010, p. 8).

To summarize, the extreme manifestation of materialism is a uniquely twenty-first century cultural construct. Materialism represents a cultural orientation that equates personal and social success with the accumulation of material goods and services. Materialism is a dominant modern cultural paradigm that has become synonymous with progress and personal success. It is not an inherent human trait (Assadourian, 2010; Fisher, 2012); but a consumerist materialistic mindset that has been methodologically and systematically cultivated over centuries to represent a normalized way of being in modern cultures (Assadourian, 2010, p. 8). Evolving modern cultural beliefs and societal practices fortified a materialistic mindset. The scientific and industrial revolution contributed to the shifting of worldviews and value systems necessary for the emergence of a materialistic paradigm. While pre-modern societies held a more biocentric worldview (Fisher, 2012), the scientific revolution introduced an anthropocentric way of thinking that allowed for human desire for goods and services to supersede environmental sustainability. Industrial growth, governmental policies, marketing and modern technological advances provided further avenues for materialism to proliferate. Possessive individualism, limited restrictions on wealth accumulation and access to buyers and sellers have resulted in vast economic inequities allowing for more extreme manifestations of materialism to emerge. A materialistic mindset continues to not only thrive in modern cultures but is also “actively being reinforced and spread to millions of people in developing countries” (Assadourian, 2010, p. 3).

## Individualism

Individualism is another prominent modern cultural paradigm. Individualism is a “basic sociocultural operating system” (Moss, 2011, p. 17) reflective of shifting societal and cultural worldviews. Individualism is defined as the individualized pursuit of a personal agenda without consideration for others (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011). While individualism likely existed in pre-modern times, the advent of Western cultural American individualism had its theoretical roots in the perceptions of individual equality and democracy (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011). Traditionally, an individualistic and egocentric mindset was counterbalanced by active cooperative civic and social engagement. Over time, with volunteer engagement waning and cultural values shifting, more extreme forms of individualism emerged resulting in further alienation from a shared communal and co-operative community.

The philosophical underpinnings of individualism supported an individual’s right to pursue self-interests apart from the community (Bellah et al., 1985; Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011; Tocqueville, 1840). “Individualism relies on an atomistic understanding of the person as being metaphysically discrete and separate from other persons” (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). Within this realm, the individual is seen as the principle reality with society becoming a backdrop consisting of a collection of individuals (Christopher, 1999). “Society becomes the arena for autonomous and self-contained people” to act on and express “their own objectives, needs, desires, interests, potentialities, and rights” (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). This self-defining individual, free of societal restraints, autonomously sets and pursues individualistic goals (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011). The modern inception of individualism has its roots in American socio-political activism that advocated for equal representation within a democratic government (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011). Individualism, democracy, and political equity

were emerging paradigms that represented a sharp rebuke of the historically unjust tyrannical aristocratic rule (Bellah et al., 1985; Moss, 2011). These societal shifts in mindset provided a vehicle through which a culture of individualism could emerge. Aristocratic forms of governing were collapsing as new technologies and business opportunities created the middle class (Moss, 2011). At the time, individualism represented “a world of total freedom where each individual [could fully express] his or her true self without constraint or intrusions from others” (Moss, 2011, p. 109). Individualism was first identified as a Western cultural paradigm by French aristocrat Tocqueville in the 1830s while he pursued a study on the emerging democratic movement taking place in America (Moss, 2011). While Tocqueville identified individualism as a novel and promising approach, he also cautioned of the potential consequences of egotism (Moss, 2011, p. 100). Tocqueville described egoism as “a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world” (Tocqueville, 1840, pp. 202-203, as cited in Moss, 2011, p. 100). Tocqueville cautioned that the negative consequences of individualism could be buffered through alliances with structures that promoted cooperation among individuals (Moss, 2011, p. 101). Opportunities for participating in collective, cooperative organizations were abundant in early American life as individuals actively participated in communal activities such as barn raising and school building as well as engaging in religious and political activity (Moss, 2011). Tocqueville noted for individualism to work as a cultural construct, it relied heavily on society’s voluntary participation in societal organizations that promoted co-operation for the good of all (Moss, 2011). Moss (2011) refers to this form of individualism as “individualistic mutual aid” as it allowed for “people voluntarily coming together to pursue a goal of common interest to them”

(pp. 102-103). Moss (2011) notes that early American pioneers surviving and thriving independently contributed to the individualistic “mythology” (p. 103).

The utilitarian and expressive forms of individualism had a more self-centered focus. These more extreme forms of individualism emanated from John Locke’s advocacy for an individual’s rights (Moss, 2011). Utilitarian individualism was the foundational belief for seeing America as the “land of opportunity” with the emphasis being “the calculated pursuit of one’s own wealth and material interests, on advancement, on achievement, on success” (Moss, 2011, p. 118). The utilitarian individualistic mindset and the pursuit of materialistic gains were prolific during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and set the stage for the emergence of expressive individualism (Moss, 2011). Expressive individualism manifested in “romantic, poetic, artistic, and spiritual ways” allowed for individuals to decide what is best for them edged closer to the “forms of individualism that are self-destructive or self-deluding” (Moss, 2011, p. 120). The negative consequence of this form of individualism is a lack of shared culture. When everything is seen as “the product of each person’s interpretation of the situation”, the end result is a kind of “mythologizing of the individual into something sacred and self-contained” (Moss, 2011, p. 120).

The nineteenth century in America was labeled by Bellah et al. (1985) as “the era of the independent citizen” (p. 40) with more severe forms of individualism emerging (Moss, 2011). This era represented less political and social activism and more polarization and lobbying for special interests (Moss, 2011). The previous forms of individualism, which included biblical and civic engagement, successfully mitigated the adverse effects of individualism by assuring that individuals remained closely aligned with community (Moss, 2011). “Biblical individualism encouraged Christian church members to work together to help one another and to create a

community in which an ethical and spiritual life could be led” (Bellah et al., 1985, pp. 28-29, as cited in Moss, 2011, p. 116). Societal civic and biblical obligations ensured the necessary checks and balances on a self-serving mindset assuring that the paradigm of individualism remained counterbalanced by responsibilities to the community. The result of extreme forms of freedom is a life of “being left alone by others, not having other people’s values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 23). This ensuing form of freedom results in an “entire social world ...made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others’ demands” making it increasingly more difficult to “forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one’s freedom” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 23).

The construct of individualism required a counterbalance; a recognition that balanced the need for full autonomy with the awareness that a complete severing with community may result in a life without meaning (Bellah et al., 1985; Moss, 2011). In order to reconcile this dilemma, mythical protagonists depicting non-conformist individuals elevated to a hero status were created (Bellah et al., 1985; Moss, 2011). The mythical hero is portrayed as someone who possesses unique abilities, talents and courage that set them apart from the society they are living in (Bellah et al., 1985; Moss, 2011). The resounding underlying message of these mythical tales is that true virtue exists beyond an unethical, nefarious materialistic society (Moss, 2011). Moss (2011) suggests that the risk of seeking what is just and good outside the realms of society, is the revelation of a potentially destructive asocial individualism that borders on “madness” (p. 122). There are inherent dangers associated with extreme manifestations of individualism. A detachment from a shared sense of community is problematic in that it comprises our species

ability for adaption and change leaving individuals to reside in a “fantasy world only tenuously connected to reality” (Moss, 2011, p. 121).

As individualism began appearing in more extreme forms, it has resulted in social inequities. Through an individualistic mindset, “justice [may be seen] as a matter of equal opportunities for every individual to pursue whatever he or she understands by happiness” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 25). While laws ensured access to equal opportunities, a sense of social justice was being compromised (Bellah et al., 1985). A self-serving mindset has encouraged the belief that the individual “had not just the right, but the duty, to make as much money as possible” (Thurow, 1997, as cited Moss, 2011, p. 138). The societal and governmental sanctioning of an egocentric individualistic mindset has resulted in a system that allows for inordinately extreme economic disparities with the concentration of wealth in the top 1% of the population (Moss, 2011).

The root metaphor of the autonomous individual became a 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural construct that saw the “root metaphors of progress, anthropocentrism, and subjectively centered individualism” become accepted norms of modern culture (Bowers, 2002, pp. 22-27). A scientific atomistic worldview emerged reducing aspects of the natural environment to isolated fragments to be analyzed (O’Sullivan, 1999). A separated, mechanistic worldview challenged previously held beliefs of a holistic interrelated reality (Fisher, 2012; O’Sullivan, 1999). An anthropocentric mindset saw humans as alien and separate from their natural environment further entrenching the notion of the autonomous individual. This culturally accepted worldview fused self-identity with the values of a consumerist mindset (Bowers, 1994). A shift in worldview further strengthened individualism and the autonomous individual mindset. An anthropocentric, culturally accepted mindset reflected the belief that human beings were exceptional beings that

had dominion and control over all other living things (Bowers, 1994, 2002; Fisher, 2012; Moss, 2011). Within this framework, human beings were left fully autonomous, free to pursue individual pursuits and personal agendas without concern for others well-being. The only limits to an ever-expanding competitive global economy are the planet's availability of natural resources.

To summarize, individualism is a carefully engineered Western cultural construct that had its origins in societal attempts to create a more equitable and just social order. While individualism represents the egocentric pursuit of goals and values, it was balanced by civic and social obligations that supported and serviced the greater community. Over time, however, as societal community engagement began to decline, more extreme forms of individualism emerged that have had broad implications for economic equality, cooperation, and a sense of shared cultural community. Ironically, while the initial quest for individualism was founded in the pursuit of a more just society; extreme forms of individualism have resulted in inordinate social inequities in wealth (Moss, 2011). Furthermore, extreme forms of individualization have moved society further away from a shared sense of community compromising our ability for individual and collective adaptation and change.

## V. Debunking Cultural Myths

Culture provides a lens through which to perceive and make sense of our reality. Most of what we perceive as normative behaviours are really culturally sanctioned ways of being. Our culture provides the primary schemata for modern consciousness (Bowers, 1994) allowing for the indoctrination and perpetuation of certain beliefs. The roots metaphors of materialism and individualism are dominant contemporary cultural constructs that have become normative societal values. While neither paradigm is innate to the human species, both are 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural paradigms that have been systematically crafted over time in order to serve an anthropocentric, capitalistic narrative at the expense of both individual and planetary well-being. I propose that the cultural constructs of materialism and individualism are at the root of the mental health and ecological crises and that the root of the dysfunction is an entirely problematic cultural worldview. Thus far, we have been addressing both mental health and ecological issues at a presenting level resulting in solutions that are at best merely strategies for crises coping. In order for meaningful interventions, a shift is required from the superficial management of these complex issues to an in-depth examination of underlying cultural root metaphors. I postulate that the problematic underpinnings of both the mental health and ecological crisis is cultural; thus, the only way for meaningful, lasting change to occur is to understand and address both issues at a cultural level. Effective strategies for lasting change must include a challenging of the accepted cultural norms and the premises that both materialism and individualism are based upon. Identifying and understanding the problematic premises upon which our cultural worldviews are predicated allows for the opportunity to move beyond the current “industrial order [that] is locked into our present cultural coding as well as into our economic institutions” (Berry, 1988, p. 213). Understanding dominant cultural root metaphors is instrumental as calls for change to our

status quo will invariably be seen “as a threat to the very existence of the society” (Berry, 1988, p. 213). Substantive change must be based on a cultural shift towards a more holistic, inclusive and collaborative worldview.

The modern constructs of materialism and individualism have been adopted as normative socio-cultural narratives. I propose that the mental health and ecological crises can be seen as manifestations of a solitary underlying dilemma – a culture whose normative values are inherently problematic. I propose that the socio-cultural constructs of materialism and individualism are at the root of both the psychological well-being and ecological crises. In the following sections, I will specifically outline how the constructs of materialism and individualism have resulted in a psycho-spiritual unrest that is being manifested in problematic psychopathologies leading to less individual and collective well-being. I will further suggest that these problematic cultural paradigms are at the root of our current ecological crises.

#### How Materialism Contributes to the Mental Health Crisis

Materialism is a cultural paradigm expressed as the accumulation of material goods or services for the purpose of maintaining a sense of identity (Wang et al., 2016). While all individuals participate in materialism, it is “the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences or relationships that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic value” (Shrum et al., 2013, p. 1180). The individual pursuit of an extrinsic value and goal orientation mindset results in a diminished capacity for well-being. Richins and Dawson (1992) outlined the following key identifying factors of materialism: *centrality* (extent to which material possessions are a central focus in one’s life); *happiness* (accumulation of material possessions are seen as a driving force of life satisfaction); *success* (an over-identification with possessions as markers for

success) (as cited in Tsang et al. 2014, p. 62). While the materialistic quest to find happiness and meaning in the acquisition of material goods is an accepted 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural paradigm, the underlying premise that more stuff equates to greater happiness has been consistently proven by research literature to be a false narrative; in fact, a consistent negative co-relation between materialism and well-being has been established (Dittmar et al., 2014). Externally orientated materialistic aspirations and values are often at odds with more intrinsically motivated goals that foster psychological well-being. Furthermore, in this continuous drive to pursue happiness through materialism, the very structures that support subjective psychological well-being such as family, friendships, and community are being compromised.

In a materialistic mindset, more stuff is equated with greater well-being and the accumulation of goods is seen as a direct route to happiness (Richins, 1994). Fisher (2012) describes “the dominant interpretation of human nature today [as] that of *Homo economicus*” (p. 83). In this view, humans are self-interested consumeristic individuals with limitless wants (Fisher, 2012). The underlying tenants of materialism have been consistently challenged and disputed by existing literature (Assadourian, 2010; Jackson, 2008; Levine, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2001), suggesting societies that promote a materialistic culture report less individual subjective well-being and happiness (Kasser, 2016; O’Brien, 2010). An explanation for this may be that happiness and subjective well-being appear to be the end result of an individual’s successful attempts at having their basic psychological needs met (Sheldon, 2011). Research has consistently revealed that a mindset that seeks meaning and purpose through the acquisition of goods and services leads to less psychological well-being. Societies that value economic growth and a capitalistic orientation encourage the message that money, possessions, status, and image are important factors to happiness and well-being (Wang et al., 2016). However, the cultural

construct of materialism has failed to deliver on its elemental premise that more stuff equates to greater psychological well-being. Research consistently demonstrates that an increase in materialism is positively correlated with a decrease in subjective well-being (SWB), which is seen as a reflection of individuals' affective and cognitive life assessments (Wang et al., 2016). Materialistic individuals' pursuit of extrinsic goals of money, status, and recognition often comes at the expense of having unmet intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness that are fundamental to psychological well-being (Levine, 2006; Wang et al., 2016). Furthermore, research indicates that materialism has contributed to a deterioration of the very structures that support subjective well-being such as family, friendship and community which are all key aspects of psychological well-being (Jackson, 2008).

In nations where materialism is considered to be an accepted cultural paradigm, key aspects of well-being have been on the decline with incidences of anxiety, depression, substance use and suicide on the rise (Assadourian, 2010; Jackson, 2008; Levine, 2006; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). The adoption of a materialistic mindset has had ramifications on society's prosocial values (Kasser, 2006) with research indicating that materialism contributes to decreases in empathy (Kasser, 2006) and generosity (Kasser, 2006; Richins, 1994). Materialism also nurtures and fosters a competitive mindset, resulting in more "conflictual friendships" and a willingness to objectify and manipulate others for personal gain (Kasser, 2006, p. 203). Characteristic traits such as benevolence and universalism are often in conflict with a materialistic mindset orientation (Kasser, 2006).

Research indicates that having a materialistic mindset is positively associated with a decrease in mental health and well-being (Kasser, 2015). A mindset of materialism affects one's mental health by exacerbating social isolation (Pieters, 2013), depression and anxiety (Kasser &

Ryan, 1993, 1996) and compulsive behaviours (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014). Materialistic individuals also report lowered self-esteem (Christopher et al., 2009; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Tsang et al., 2014) as well as higher substance use and evidence of riskier behaviours (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Tsang et al. 2014). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) postulates that basic psychological needs encompass feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). An extrinsic value orientation is associated with a greater likelihood of having unmet psychological needs than an intrinsic value-based mindset (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Wang et al., 2016). In lieu of pursuing intrinsic goals such as health, sense of community and personal growth, the focus of materialistic individuals is on superficial values and goals such as wealth, popularity, fame and physical attractiveness (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Pandelaere, 2016). Consequently, materialistic individuals report feeling lower states of connectivity, autonomy, competence, and gratitude (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Tsang et al., 2014).

Materialistic individuals identify both emotionally and socially with the social status that the accumulation of goods brings. While the underlying premise of materialism is increased happiness and well-being, seeking happiness in the acquisition of material goods sets the individual on an endless cycle of anticipated happiness and the eventual dissatisfaction resulting from hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Lowenstein, 1999; Pandelaere, 2016). Richins and Dawson (1992) and Solberg et al. (2004) refer to a “GAP theory” to explain how the cycle of unrealistically high satisfaction expectations of consumer purchasing leads to a diminished sense of both well-being and positive emotions (as cited in Tang et al., 2013, p. 63). The constant cycle of spending to impress others followed by adaptation to purchase leaves one with a sense of “chronic wanting”, which is pernicious to well-being (Pandelaere, 2016). As well, seeking

extravagant purchases to impress others affects one's own ability to enjoy simple pleasures in life leading to chronic life dissatisfaction (Pandelaere, 2016). Finally, materialistic individuals are more likely to spend excessively in order to impress others and are consequently more likely to suffer financial burdens (Dittmar et al., 2014; Richins, 1994; Wong, 1997).

### How Materialism Contributes to the Ecological Crisis

There is a “personal, social and ecological cost of valuing materialistic pursuits” (Kasser, 2002, 2006). Materialism, and the pursuit of an extrinsic value system, is one of the cultural constructs that are at the root of the ecological crisis. A materialistic mindset goes beyond “just satisfying physical or physiological needs” (Kasser, 2006). This over-reliance on material goods comes at an ecological expense to the planet. The cultural myth of materialism was able to flourish due to our pre-existing biological inclination towards insatiability. This biological inclination has been successfully manipulated by industry in order to meet the needs of continued economic growth and is supported by government policies and capitalistic interests. Society's over-dependence on material goods as a path to happiness has come at a significant cost to the planet's ecosystem. With untethered economic growth and a growing global economy, the sustainability of current practices is untenable. At this point in our history, what is required is a re-examination of “the assumptions upon which the Western mind-set is based” (Bowers, 2002, p. 28).

Research suggests that a materialistic mindset and extrinsic value system are contributing factors to our current ecological crisis (Kasser, 2006). The foundational belief of an extrinsic value system is that one's value and well-being are determined by one's status; linking increases in material goods and services with greater well-being (Jackson, 2008). This over-reliance on the acquisition of material goods in the pursuit of well-being has contributed to a greater ecological

footprint (Kasser, 2006). Furthermore, materialistic individuals are less inclined to see the inherent value of natural habitats and are less likely to be ecologically conscious or to engage in ecologically friendly activities (Kasser, 2006, Shwartz, 1996; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Our evolutionary programming contributes to a materialistic mindset. Evolutionary psychologists contend that our desire for more has been “hardwired through evolution” as there is “an evolutionary advantage to never being satisfied” (Jackson, 2008, p. 54). A species’ primary concern is survival and reproduction and as a result, humans are naturally programmed to pursue situations that make those two things more likely to happen (Irvine, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Lipton, 2005). Thus, as a species, our insatiable quest for more is something that we have been biologically programmed as part of an evolutionary process (Irvine, 2009). While “our evolutionary programming helped us flourish as a species, it has in many respects outlived its usefulness” (Irvine, 2009, p. 590). In our current times, there is no limit to satisfying our quest for more. Ironically, what has started as a protective evolutionary mechanism for survival is being manipulated by industry and marketing to ensure a relentless pursuit of material goods. Consumer psychology and marketing research has created a blueprint for a “science of desire” in an attempt to procure mindless spending by consumers without concerns for the social or environmental implications of a materialistic culture (Jackson, 2008, p. 48). Marketing and advertising once confined to television and print have expanded to include public transportation, sports stadiums, schools and washroom toilets (Kasser, 2006). Unfortunately, hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Lowenstein, 1999) ensures that spending to satisfy an underlying insatiability results in a chronic state of dissatisfaction, ultimately contributing to both psychological and ecological harm as individuals remain stuck on a satisfaction treadmill (Irvine, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Kasser, 2006).

Government and industry objectives support a consumeristic culture to promote an agenda of unlimited economic growth. Maintaining the false narrative that more stuff equates to greater well-being is in a nation's best interest as gross domestic product (GDP) continues to be a marker for assessing success (Jackson, 2008; Kasser, 2006). A consumerist materialistic mindset had been systematically nurtured over the past 200 years by government and industry (Kasser, 2006), fueled by the belief that the more people have, the better off they will be (Jackson, 2008). Government leaders place priorities on economic progress and increased consumption passing laws that maximize shareholder profits (Kasser, 2006) and subsidize and incentivize industrial growth at the expense of environmental damage (Jackson, 2008). A commitment to the idea of a continued progress trajectory without limit is problematic for "its contemporary proponents do not see its terminal qualities" (O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 49). Meeting the unlimited needs of a self-serving capitalistic industry has become both dangerous and detrimental to our survival as a species.

Current consumption patterns are not sustainable on a planet with finite resources (Jackson, 2008; Klein, 2014; O'Brien, 2010, 2013, 2016; Orr, 2012; Wright, 2004). The notion of unlimited industrial growth and the exportation globally of a consumerist, capitalistic mindset is cause for concern as we are living on a finite planet with limited resources (Jackson, 2008, Lazlo, 2012). "Ecological markers suggest that in the early 1960s, humans were using about 70 percent of nature's yearly output; by the early 1980s, we'd reached 100 percent; and in 1999, we were at 125 per cent sealing the road to 'ecological bankruptcy'" (Wright, 2004, p. 129).

Research supports the notion that valuing an extrinsic, materialistic value and goal orientation results in less psychological well-being and a larger ecologically damaging footprint (Kasser, 2006). In a materialistic consumer-driven society, "consumption and happiness are

inextricably linked” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 5), confusing the “path to the ‘good life as the ‘goods life’” (Kasser, 2006, p. 200). As a consumerist culture, “we are being socialized to consume to the point of experiencing affluenza” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 41). A continuous growth economy mindset has ensured an unsustainable chronic pursuit of materialism at the detriment of both individual well-being and planetary future viability (Winter, 2004, as cited in Kasser, 2006, p. 203).

### How Individualism Contributes to the Mental Health Crisis

The socio-cultural operating system of individualism is an underlying factor in the mental health crisis. A self-serving, individualistic goal orientation often operates at the expense of one’s own and others’ well-being (Mead, 1961, Moss, 2011). This self-serving posture leads to adversarial, competitive relationships with others and as a result, individualism and competition may be an underlying factor of many of society’s problems (Moss, 2011). Evolutionary biologists would suggest that an individualistic and autonomous orientation runs contrary to what humans have been biologically programmed for, as our survival as a species relied on our ability to live in community with others (Irvine, 2009; Lipton, 2005).

The conceptual underpinnings of individualism are not supported by evolutionary biologists (Bowers, 1994; Irvine, 2009; Lipton, 2005). Biologists suggest that our traits give us the best opportunities for “adapting to [an] ever-changing environment using our unique intelligence, communications, and culture” (Moss, 2011, p. 62). One of the flaws of individualism is the loss of an individual’s adaptive capacity. Individuals seeking their own self-serving goals in a culture “results in the loss of adaptive capacity as a community and as individual people” (Moss, 2011, p. 110). Having a large number of “a population lingering aloofly on the fringes of society while feeding off its products, services, and energy...undermine

the community's adaptive success" (Moss, 2011, p. 107). It is difficult to "build a viable, stable, adaptive society or community with self-centered individualists who pursue their own goals without regard for the consequences of their actions for others" (Moss, 2011, p. 107).

The fundamental flaw in atomistic underpinnings is that "nature sustains life by creating and nurturing communities" consequently, "organisms cannot exist long in isolation" (Bowers, 1994, p. 11). In essence, "animals, plants, and micro-organisms live in webs of mutual dependence" (Bowers, 1994, p. 11). On the "extreme end of individualism is a world without shared culture, where every person pursues their own survival at all others' expense" (Moss, 2011, p. 109). Biologists contend that our evolutionary programming drives us to seek interdependent relationships to secure physical and emotional well-being (Irvine, 2009; Stone, 2009; Noddings, 2010). A 2010 Canadian study into happiness statistics and subjective well-being indicates that a strong sense of belonging is a crucial contributor to one's well-being (Anieleski, 2012).

Modern society is characterized by institutions that promote individualistic pursuits at the expense of others' well-being (Jackson, 2008). The cultural paradigm of materialism, based on the pursuit of extrinsic values and goals, has created a culture that encourages individualism and competition at the expense of biologically adaptive and socially accepted behaviours (Jackson, 2008). The result of such a mindset is polarized and self-serving interest groups, which are willing to engage in on-going relentless conflict to have their needs met (Jackson, 2008; Moss, 2011). The egocentric focus of an individualists' perspective interferes with the ability to engage in meaningful interdependent relationships and has led to "an industry of counselling, therapy, and self-help for the lonely, isolated individualist" (Moss, 2011, p. 108). Cultures are "complex social systems that are extraordinary social adaptive tools" (Moss, 2011, p. 61). Humans have

been evolutionally programmed with the adaptive psychological traits that fostered social connection, compassion, and empathy. Individualism runs contrary to our evolutionary programming to seek co-operative, interdependent relationships.

Research indicates that having a self-centered oriented mindset is a contributing factor to suicide rates. Durkheim (1971) found that suicide “flourish[ed]” in society’s that promoted highly individualistic values” (as cited in Esfahani Smith, 2017, p. 56). Excessively individualistic societies promote an egocentric orientation that undermines a sense of unifying collective consciousness. Durkheim’s (1971) research indicates that interdependency and reliance is a psychologically protective factor that is statistically related to fewer suicides. “[W]ithout the constraints and traditions of the community...society devolve[s] into a purposeless and normless state that he [Durkheim] called *anomie*, where people feel directionless and despairing” (Esfahani Smith, 2017, p. 57). Esfahani Smith (2017) contends that current 21st century lifestyles and social trends have created a challenging societal problem as technological advancements have created a culture of more screen time at the expense of cultivating authentic relationships with others.

Researchers have noted that there are social and emotional ramifications to the adoption of an individualistic mindset. A cultural paradigm of individualism has undermined community engagement and subsequently affected the quality as well as quantity of social relationships. Putnam (2000) and Moss (2011) contend that the culture of individualism has resulted in a steady decline of group participation in virtually all areas of social engagement since the 1960s. This decline has resulted in a disintegration of strong interpersonal relationships in both number and quality (Moss, 2011; Putnam, 2000). A “rich social web” (Moss, 2011) in existence prior to the sixties has given way to “one shot, special purpose, and self-oriented,” social connection

(Putnam, 2000, pp. 183-185, as cited in Moss, 2011, p. 124). A self-serving cultural orientation has also led to permission to pursue one's happiness without consideration of the implication of this behavior on others; resulting in overtly offensive social behavior (Moss, 2011). This blatant disregard for others is being reflected in an increase in the following social problems: "high divorce and crime rates, decline in personal integrity and responsibility, increase in interpersonal conflicts, inadequate care and socialization of children, loss of loyalty in interpersonal and group relations, disrespect for 'authority' and dissolution of standards of morality that serve the common good" (Moss, 2011, p. 114). Bellah et al. (1985) note that "it is only in relation to society that the individual can fulfill himself and that if the break with society is too radical, life has no meaning at all" (as cited in Moss, 2011, p. 121).

Individualism encourages a culture of competition revolving around antagonistically structured relationships that promote conflict (Moss, 2011). Moss (2011) suggests that we, as a society, have "saddled ourselves with two inherently socially and personally damaging and maladaptive sociocultural operating systems" (p. 108). Egotistical and competitive individuals are extrinsically motivated to strive to be the most accomplished at any task (Moss, 2011). Inherent in the cultural constructs of individualism and competition is the promotion of "adversarial" relationships fostering a sense of distrust and perceived danger (Moss, 2011). Moss (2011) suggests that anger and "free-floating hostility, generated by our competitive culture is a major trigger for physiological responses" (p. 139). A culture of competitive individualism ensures there are no genuine winners. Winners begin to equate their self-worth and value upon their ability to successfully defeat others. Perceiving others as potential threats requires a high level of vigilance and distrust (Moss, 2011), which is "a recipe for neurosis" (Kohn, 1998, p. 12). Society's strong identification with competition has resulted in a generation of younger children

with increased pressures to excel and compete (Honore, 2004). Today's youth are bombarded with messages that *more* and *faster* are worthy pursuits (Honore, 2004, p. 249). Honore (2004) states that in "the 24/7 global economy...the pressure to stay ahead of the pack is more ferocious than ever, leading to what experts call 'hyper-parenting', the compulsive drive to perfect one's children" (p. 250). "In a cut-throat world, school is a battleground where the only thing that matters is coming top of the class" (Honore, 2004, p. 250). Governments have readily adopted a "doctrine of intensification" resulting in increased academic pressure (Honore, 2004, pp. 250-251). The intensification has spread to other areas of children's lives, resulting in the over-programming of extra-curricular activities. Over-programming and competition are affecting student well-being with "[k]ids as young as five suffer[ing] from upset stomachs, headaches, insomnia, depression and eating disorders brought on my stress" (Honore, 2004, p. 251).

Finally, narcissism and depression flourish in individualistically oriented cultures (Moss, 2011). The narcissistic patient has become the dominant personality disorder since the 1960s (May, 1991, as cited in Moss, 2011). A narcissist "is self-absorbed, lonely, and isolated" demanding instant gratification, having limitless wants and feeling perpetually unsatisfied (Moss, 2011, p. 128). This orientation has resulted in pervasive loneliness (May, 1991, as cited in Moss, 2011). Rates of depression in the US have increased tenfold since World War II (Moss, 2011). May (1991) attributes this increase in depression to "the break down in the family, the community...the consequence of our increasingly unrestrained self-centered individualism" (as cited in Moss, 2011, p. 128). Recent studies have noted that an increase in mental illness among high school and college students in comparison to previous generations was associated with a "decreased concern for meaning among the students and an increase in social detachments across society" (Esfahani Smith, 2017, p. 58). Eckersley and Dear (2002) examined the "societal factors

predicting the incidence of youth suicide, [and] found that it was associated with several measures of individualism, like personal freedom and control” (as cited in Esfahani-Smith, 2017, p. 58).

Goleman (2012) suggests that “human brains are wired to feel empathy and concern for other living things” (p. 12). An integral feature identified in well-being is a shift from self-identification to one of interdependence with others and the environment, a shift that is described as a journey or process to a state of connectedness, wholeness and balance that acknowledges interdependence with all living beings (Hart, 2002, Weil, 2011). The movement towards wholeness, centered in less rigidity, ego-identified thinking and deeper connections with others, is seen as a central feature towards actualizing human potential (Vokey, 2011). “When we turn to nature, we find that healthy communities of living, organisms are diverse, have a strong network of relationships, and are resilient. Life in nature does not survive in isolation” (Goleman, 2012, p. 13). Individualistic concepts and underpinnings are counterintuitive to our biological programming and are thus inherently problematic. The relentless pursuit of egotistical endeavors runs contrary to our evolutionary adaptive programming that encourages the physiological and psychological protective factors of interdependence. Individualism and the competitive, capitalistic mindset are “not working for our collective adaptive benefit” (Moss, 2011, p. 144). While competitive societies promote self-serving individualism, recent scientific findings suggest that “our first, quickest impulse is to cooperate, not compete” (Simon-Thomas, 2012, p. 1). The premise upon which the cultural construct of individualism is based upon is fundamentally flawed as it functions counter-intuitively to our biological programming towards a culture of connectedness. As a result, individualism leads to less well-being, compromises evolutionary adaptive capabilities and results in a destructive cultural orientation of competition

and self-indulgence. The cultural paradigm of individualism has contributed to the current mental health crisis by continuing to perpetuate false narratives promoting self-seeking, ego-driven behaviours at the expense of one's own as well as others' well-being.

### How Individualism Contributes to the Ecological Crisis

An individualistic cultural orientation that promotes a competitive and self-serving mindset has had disastrous ramifications for our planet's ecological systems (Bowers, 1994; Moss, 2011). A cultural construct of individualism left the individual free to indulge in self-serving aspirations without regard for ensuing ecological devastation. A cultural identification with an individualistic mindset has its foundations in the acceptance of an anthropocentric mindset that saw humans as superior and the earth as resources to be manipulated (Berry, 1988; Moss, 2011; Fisher, 2012). The result of such a cultural orientation is the creation of destructive positive feedback loops, which in the absence of ethical planetary guidelines are resulting in ecological devastation.

In a competitive, capitalistic and individualistically oriented environment, industry growth and consumption of goods is seen as limitless and ever-expanding (Moss, 2011).

Embedded:

within the ...mythology of competitive capitalistic free enterprise market economics there is no limit on the size and number of homes, cars, televisions, phones, sports equipment, toys, clothes, increasingly elaborate tools, personal computers and accessories, beauty and hygiene products, products to clean our homes, furniture and decorations, and so forth we are expected to consume.

(Moss, 2011, p. 143)

Furthermore, planned obsolescence requires us “to wastefully abandon still useful products and buy new ones” (Moss, 2011, p. 144). Inherent in an individualistic and capitalistic mindset is the concept of anthropocentrism, which renounces our “integral role as a member of the earth community” reducing our natural environment to disposable resources (Berry, 1988, pp. 203-208). The scientific revolution contributed to an anthropocentric mindset by perceiving the natural world through atomism and a mechanistic orientation in lieu of holism and interdependence (Berry, 1988; Bowers, 1994; Fisher, 2012). This mindset has allowed the consumption of our natural resources to continue at an alarming rate despite “threats to the biodiversity of our ecology, necessary for our survival” (Moss, 2011, pp. 141-142).

Individualism and competition are cultural mindsets responsible for the creation of “extreme economic inequalities, insatiable greed...and positive feedback feeding frenzies” that encourage destructive ecological practices despite the negative consequences (Moss, 2011, p. 132). Competition is inherent in an individualistic mindset that equates winning with success. Economist Keynes notes that while that our basic wants are not insatiable, those based on comparison and desire to be superior are insatiable (as cited in Moss, 2011). Competition sets up a reward system that produces positive feedback loops that generate “feeding frenzies” and pursuit of “gross excesses” as there is no off-switch (Moss, 2011, p. 140). Missing are the negative feedback loops that are “fundamental to the functioning and internal control of any living system whether an organism, ecological system, or social system” (Moss, 2011, p. 140). Alarmingly, once a positive feedback has been initiated, “nothing will stop them until the organism, ecology, or society is glutted with the loop’s products, exhausted by the increasing energy demands of the positive feedback loop, or the environmental resources used in the loop are totally consumed” (Moss, 2011, p. 141). Because of their inherent destructive capacities,

positive feedback loops are rarely seen in the ecosystem (Moss, 2011). Overconsumption and destruction of our natural resources and habitats are examples of the devastating results of positive feedback loops. Despite “threats to the biodiversity of our ecology, necessary for our survival”, consumption of our natural resources continues at an alarming rate despite (Moss, 2011, pp. 141-142).

Individualism allows for unconstrained personal freedom. In an industrial capitalistic culture, success is measured in terms of economic growth without consideration of the repercussions for individual and planetary well-being (Leonard, 2012). “The majority of the world’s population,...is being urged to accept the modern idea that ‘everything that can be made must be made, and then sold’ and that this view of everyday reality is being ‘unshakably structured by the omnipotence of the techno scientific truth and the laws of the market’” (Berthoud, G., 1992 as cited in Bowers, 2002 p. 26). Bowers (2002) contends that in an individualistic mindset, environmental disasters are seen as “economic activities that contribute to the gross domestic product” (p. 28). Insatiable consumer demands are affecting our natural biological systems (Bowers, 1994). The fulfilment of short-term human desires come at the expense of an exploited environment and intergenerational responsibility (Fisher, 2004; Stone, 2009). Senge et al. (2008) suggest that there is a limit to unethical growth and development that is beginning to shut down the earth’s ecosystems; inevitably this becomes a “win-win or lose-lose” situation (p. 177). Thus far, the environmental crisis has been the result of short-sighted focus on individual rights and growth and development of the economy without regard to the “unanticipated consequences” of human behaviour (Goleman, 2012, p. 15). Goleman (2012) contends that it is now time to enforce a new litmus test for future industrious endeavors:

“when an activity threatens to have a damaging impact on the environment or human health, precautionary actions should be taken regardless of whether a cause-and-effect relationship has been scientifically confirmed” thus placing “the burden of proof on the producers to demonstrate harmlessness and accept responsibility should harm occur” (p. 15).

Anthropocentric thinking conflicts with the reality of nature’s interdependent life systems (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011) of which humans are a part of. It is necessary that we challenge the accepted cultural myths of an individualistic, competitive mindset as dysfunctional as well as a key contributing factor to both the mental health and ecological crises. As a society, there is a need to reconsider the premise upon which our cultural paradigms of individualism and competition are based upon as they are leading us toward an unsustainable and destructive trajectory. Of additional concern is the fact that our modern society’s value orientation is being transported to developing countries with increasingly more cultures adopting an anthropocentric consumerist paradigm (Bowers, 1994). Within the framework of continuous progress, ecocentric cultures are viewed as primitive (Bowers, 1994). The very premises upon which modern society’s individualistic and materialistic paradigms are based need to be reconsidered as they are leading directly to ecological devastation and raising questions about the viability of maintaining existing practices (Bowers, 1994). Ecocentric cultures differ from those oriented in anthropocentric ideals in that they are oriented towards an ecocentric worldview; they include an inclusive a sense of community that extends to the ecological community; they have an orientation of bio-conservatism and include sense of time and responsibility in decision-making (Bowers, 1994). Within ecologically- centered cultures are the “moral insights of the community about how to live in sustainable relationships with the patterns of natural systems and the other inhabitant of the biosphere” (Bowers, 1994, p. 63). This kind of “healthy culture” is

grounded in face-to-face communication where work, conviviality, human necessities and inescapable bonds to the earth are clarified through a language that is more sensitive to the consequences of relationships for present and future generations, and more responsive to intergenerational communication.

(Bowers, 1994, p. 63)

In summary, I propose that the modern cultural paradigms of materialism and individualism have not only contributed to a psycho-spiritual unrest (Fisher, 2012) but to destructive and untenable ecological practices. Individualism and materialism are not intrinsic human qualities; they are cultural constructs that have been systematically engineered over centuries to become normative cultural reference points for modern society. Upon closer examination, it is clear to see that both narratives have been instrumental in cultivating cultural myths that are contrary to both psychological well-being and ecological sustainability. The underlying perception in a consumer-driven society is that the accumulation of material goods leads to greater psychological well-being. This notion has been consistently de-bunked with research alluding the opposite to be true. As mental health issues continue to rise, researchers predict that it will soon be the leading worldwide health issue (World Health Organization, 2001; Government of Canada, 2006). Society's pursuit of happiness through the accumulation of material goods has resulted in less well-being for both individuals and the planet. Similarly, modern society's other dominant cultural paradigm, individualism, has also led society towards compromised psychological well-being and a perilous ecological trajectory. The root metaphors of the autonomous individual included the precepts of anthropocentrism, unlimited progress, and egocentrism. These faulty elemental constructs have been responsible for both compromising our cooperative evolutionary adaptive capabilities and perpetuating ecologically unsustainable values

and practices. Immediate action is required as scientists contend that the planet has reached a critical point regarding future sustainability (Elgin, 2010; Klein, 2014; O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Orr, 2012; O'Sullivan, 1999). I posit that the mental health and ecological crises can be viewed as manifestations of a solitary underlying dilemma: a culture whose normative values are inherently problematic. A major transformational shift in thinking is required as the very structure upon which our modern societal constructs are founded are undermining our emotional, physical and planetary health. Despite modern narratives, human beings live in a universe of attachment and interdependence that includes other people as well as our ecological biosphere (Stone, 2009, p. 11).

If these normative values inherent in our current dominant culture are at the core of our mental health and ecological crisis, we need to reorient the normative value system that underlies our current cultures. In the next chapter, I suggest what such a re-orientation should focus on in order to address these two crises.

## **VI. Cultural Re-building: Purpose, Meaning, and Well-Being**

### Tenants of Psychological Well-Being

The “difficulty of our times is our inability to awaken out of [our] cultural pathology” (Berry, 1988, p. 205). Our dominant cultural paradigms are influential, compelling forces informing individual and collective thinking, values, and practices. What is required is a radical cultural shift in thinking towards paradigms that foster greater well-being. Understanding the very foundations upon which well-being is founded is a necessary step towards redefining ourselves as a culture in ways that are psychologically and ecologically adaptive for our species. One of the disturbing characteristics of our modern culture has been the alarming steady decline in over-all psychological well-being (Carney, 2015; Esfahani Smith, 2017; Government of Canada, 2006; Monshat et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2011). Our modern cultural beliefs have contributed to less psychological well-being and thus require re-consideration. What is needed at this juncture is a paradigm shift towards constructs that support greater individual and planetary well-being. In order to advocate for healthier cultural constructs, it is necessary to explore and define the tenants of positive psychological well-being.

Despite historical philosophical musings as to the role of flourishing in human well-being, contemporary society has come to equate positive health with an absence of illness paradigm. This modern Western health orientation was likely rooted in the scientific revolution that began fostering a mind-body dualistic paradigm (Ryff & Singer, 1998). This new scientific orientation and the ensuing technology that followed created an increasingly widening divide between health and philosophy “resulting in conceptualizations of health that were primarily about the body” eventually leading to modern-day conceptions of health (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 2). “The central objective of the medical model thus became that of returning the body from

states of negative functioning back to neutral” with little attention to the role of positive health (Ryff & Singer, 1998). The WHO (1948) definition of health as a “state of complete physical mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 28) has exempted cultural, political and social forces from responsibility leaving modern medicine to shoulder the responsibility to be the “final magic-healer of human misery” (Callahan, 1973, p. 81, as cited in Ryff & Singer, 1998). The treatment of health alone cannot “advance the positive health agenda” (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Historically, concerns for human health have primarily been focused on illness (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Western world focus of health care may be seen as disease treatment and management (Bowling, 1991, as cited in Ryff, & Singer, 1998). Ryff and Singer (1998) suggest that it is crucial to move towards “construing health as states of well-being rather than ill-being” (p. 2). They contend that positive health is “not...a medical question but rather is fundamentally a philosophical issue that requires articulation of the meaning of the good life” as any other attempts towards defining positive health risks “producing[ing]...deeply impoverished conceptions of human functioning” (p. 2).

What does it mean to be well psychologically? Falkenberg (2014) suggests that the “generic notion of what humans generally aim for when exerting their agency: [is] to live well, to live a good life, to live happily” (p. 78). If we assume the notion that all beings seek well-being or the “good life”, the question then becomes: What are the foundational practices that promote positive psychological well-being? Given the state of modern society’s psycho-spiritual distress (Fisher, 2012), identifying the qualities elemental to positive psychological functioning is of crucial importance. Our defining principles of what constitutes the “good life” drive “our decisions and actions at the individual, socio-cultural, and socio-political level” (Falkenberg, 2014, p. 78). While definitions of well-being tend to be broad and multi-dimensional, they do

share key characteristics as well as important divergences. Identifying core tenants for positive psychological well-being will provide a clearer vision for change and provide a culturally restorative path forward.

Well-being can be construed as a journey towards “optimal experience and functioning” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 141). The term *well-being* has been referenced in the literature synonymously with terms such as “happiness”, “the good life” or “flourishing” (Falkenberg, 2014). As a school counsellor and educator for the past 34 years, my experience has been that what parents most desire for their children is happiness. The question is not whether this is a worthy desire, but rather, what is it we mean by “a happy life”? The word happiness has its origins in the root *hap*, which means “by chance”; the implication being that a hapless person is someone who is luckless (Kraut, 1979). While original definitions of happiness specifically characterized happiness as having and “luck or good fortune” (Kraut, 1979, p. 183), the contemporary Oxford Dictionary definition of *happiness* identifies happiness as the “state of being happy”. When considering the original definition of happiness, one’s wish for a child’s happiness becomes a “hope that the child will achieve the things he values, and find these things rewarding; but also...that the child’s range of choices will not be restricted by unfortunate – that is unhappy circumstances” (Kraut, 1979, p. 183). While modern societal interpretations of well-being often equate the emotion of happiness with well-being, positive affect may not be a true indicator and defining feature of well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In fact, contrary to contemporary belief, happiness or positive affect has been shown to have little significance “as a defining feature of human wellness” (Ryff & Keyes, 1995, p. 725).

Historically, psychology’s focus has been primarily on the identification and treatment of existing psychopathologies (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This therapeutic orientation largely ignored the

importance of promotional well-being and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001). A shift in priorities occurred by the 1960s towards the inclusion of a more proactive, preventative orientation towards well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The 1960s reflected a time period identified as “the human potential movement” during which there was increased interest in psychological growth and health (Ryan & Deci, 2001). More recently, positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) ushered in a similar evolution. Psychological health paradigm shifts have notably coincided with societal eras of material prosperity and the recognition that affluence and material possessions did not necessarily correlate with increases in happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The two different philosophical paradigms of hedonism and eudaimonism provided a reference point for inquiry into the “distinct views of human nature and of what constitutes a good society” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 143).

Contemporary research on well-being primarily stems from two fundamental perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to happiness. These two philosophical conceptions of happiness are prominent in happiness theories (Huta & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1984). Much of the modern research on happiness has predominately focused on hedonia, which equated happiness with the experiencing of positive emotions (Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001). An alternate, Aristotelian eudaimonic perspective on happiness suggests that “happiness was about striving toward excellence and positive functioning” (Keyes, 2002, p. 10; see also Huta & Ryan, 2009). Through an eudaimonic operating lens, happiness is measured to the degree in which an individual is able to attain goals deemed as worthy to the individual (Kraut, 1979). Huta and Waterman (2014) contend that “both concepts are central to the study of well-being” (p. 1425) as they represent “efforts in ethical philosophy to answer questions regarding the nature of a good life or a life well-lived” (p. 1427). Furthermore, Huta and Ryan

(2009) contend that eudaimonic and hedonic principles collectively may contribute to the greatest overall psychological well-being.

Aristippus, a 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek philosopher, first prophesized that the experience of maximal pleasure was the goal of life (Huta & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Contemporary references to the term *happiness* are equated with hedonic happiness (Waterman, 1984). Hedonic happiness is described as a subjective affective state with the objective being to minimize discomfort and maximize happy and pleasurable experiences (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Huta & Ryan, 2009; Kraut, 1979; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). The focus of a hedonic orientation is the intentional pursuit of positive emotions and the avoidance of negative, unpleasant emotions (Huta & Ryan, 2009; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman & Royzman, 2003). Through this orientation, *well-being* is defined in terms of maximizing pleasure and consequently human happiness and minimizing pain. Most recent hedonic psychological research used subjective well-being (SWB) assessments as evaluative indicators of well-being (Diener & Lucas, 2000 as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2001). Diener (2000) contends that subjective well-being “is defined as a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life” (p. 63). Happiness is assessed through the following SWB criteria: an individual’s self-reporting of life satisfaction, presence of positive mood and absence of negative mood (Diener, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The flaw in an exclusively hedonistic perspective is that “locating well-being in our feelings (experiences of emotions) and our enjoyment (attitudes toward certain experiences) means to locate our well-being in episodic experiences or our attitudes toward episodic experiences” (Falkenberg, 2014, p. 83). Through this lens, well-being becomes a subjective construct contingent upon life circumstances; an orientation that many philosophers cautioned would not be conducive to living the good life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

They caution instead, that happiness is not “an end in itself but a by-product of other more notable pursuits” (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Utilitarianists and 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment Era philosophers (Mill, 2009) articulated that happiness is found in actions that bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and consequently, may not necessarily be limited to one’s experience of personal pleasure. Ryff and Keyes (1995) allude to other aspects of positive functioning (p. 725) such as: whether one’s life has a sense of purpose; the extent to which one is flourishing (realizing their given potential); one’s depth and breadth of social ties and one’s sense of agency (p. 725).

A broader definition of a happy or “good life” encompasses the notion that happiness is based less in the transient emotion of happiness and more in the kind of life that would make a person happy (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman & Royzman, 2003). Greek philosopher Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 2001) had considerable misgivings of a hedonistic happiness orientation, advocating instead for an eudaimonic approach that emphasized human flourishing. Aristotle posited that happiness is found at the end of one’s life as they reflected on the extent to which they engaged in virtuous acts that served the greater good. Aristotle’s eudaimonic theory is contingent upon fulfillment of desires that are seen as worthy and virtuous endeavors and has come to be identified as a theory of self-realization. (Huta & Ryan, 2009; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Kraut, 1979; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). Happiness, through a eudaimonic perspective, views one’s well-being as contingent upon the extent to which one’s “nascent abilities and capacities can be developed to become a more fully functioning person and citizen” (Keyes, 2002, p. 10). Eudaimonic philosophers note that the journey towards the fulfillment of personally identified worthy goals may at times be challenging and difficult, thus making distinctions between happiness and well being (Huta &

Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Waterman, 1993). Thus, from a eudaimonic perspective, one cannot equate the transient, subjective experience of happiness with greater overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 146). Eudaimonic philosophers note that not all worthy individual pursuits result in positive experiences or outcomes; while other endeavors may result in pleasurable affect but detrimental outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Eudaimonia is seen as the individual pursuit of the daimon which serves as a “North Star” point of reference guiding and directing individuals towards self-realization (Waterman, 1993). According to Aristotle, the “*daimon* refers to those potentialities of each person, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in living of which each is capable” (Waterman, 1993, p. 678). While positive emotions such as happiness may be experienced in the pursuit of experiences deemed worthwhile, they are seen as the by-product, or reflection of success, not the goal (Huta & Waterman, 2014). An objectivist’s view on happiness, modeled on Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia, contends that individual realization of unique, innate capabilities is required in order to live their best life (Kraut, 1979). Through an objectivist’s lens, an individual’s positive affect is a less important determining factor in whether one is living the good life. Living the “good life” is about an individual’s satisfaction with the extent to which they are experiencing the realization of their innate goals and capacities (Kraut, 1979).

The philosophical underpinnings of many developmental theorists such as Erikson (1963, 1968), Maslow (1968, 1970), Rotter (1966), and Kohlberg (1969) are founded in eudaimonic principles (Waterman, 1999). The aforementioned theories provide a basis for the Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-being developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995). Ryff and Keyes (1995) contend that the underlying tenants of positive psychological functioning could best be understood through a theory-based formulation that represents wellness as “trajectories of

continued growth across the life cycle” (p. 720). Through this lens, Ryff and Keyes (1995) postulate that psychological well-being includes the following dimensions of wellness: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance (p. 727). The psychological well-being model (PWB) identifies the underlying tenants of emotional and physical well-being and contributes compelling evidence-based research that adherence to the eudaimonic principles of PWB “can influence specific physiological systems relating to immunological functioning and health promotion” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2001). Waterman (1993) sees the identification and realization of worthy goals as an integral aspect of positive psychological well-being. Personal constructs “embodying eudaimonic values” such as “sense of personal identity, self-actualization, an internal locus of control, and principled moral reasoning” (p. 690). The PWB eudaimonic model allows for defining the specific characteristics of well-being while the SWB allows for individual subjective reporting (Diener et al., 1998, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2001). While many different theories exist in regards to optimal functioning, many “share philosophical assumptions regarding the role of self-realization as a component of optimal psychological functioning” (Waterman, 1993, p. 678).

The Self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000) is another eudaimonic based happiness theory positing the importance of individual self-realization in positive psychological functioning (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2001). The SDT model alludes to the importance of need fulfillment in psychological well-being and highlights the following three psychological needs as integral: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The realization of the aforementioned needs is seen critical “for psychological growth (e.g. intrinsic motivation), integrity (e.g. internalization and assimilation of cultural practices), and well-being (e.g. life

satisfaction and psychological health)” as they outline the fundamental underlying meaning and purpose driving human behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2001, pp. 146-7). According to SDT, the satisfaction of these underlying psychological needs results in both eudaimonic as well as SWB (Ryan & Deci, 2001). A fundamental characteristic underlying individual psychological well-being is an individual’s ability to realize and develop their unique talents and abilities. Through this lens, “[p]ersonal growth is seen as the continuous pursuit of existing skills, talents, and opportunities for personal development and for realizing one’s potential” (Keyes, 2002, p. 11).

Huta and Ryan (2009) consider that hedonic and eudaimonic philosophical orientations, though traditionally viewed as contrary and separate, may together lead to a sense of overall greater well-being. Their research indicated that hedonic pursuits served an emotional self-regulatory function contributing to immediate or short-term happiness. However, hedonic experiences on their own failed to result in long-term positive affect (Huta & Ryan, 2009). Eudaimonic experiences, however, had the opposite result. While no immediate or short-term positive affect benefits were noted with eudaimonic experiences, there was a noted increase at the 3-month mark, indicating a delayed cumulative effect on positive affect (Huta & Ryan, 2009). Hedonic experiences related positively to characteristics such as *carefreeness*, while eudaimonic activities resulted in more *elevating experience* and more *meaning*. Both experiences promoted *vitality* and *life satisfaction*. Huta and Ryan (2009) found the greatest benefits to psychological well-being could be achieved through the inclusion of hedonic experiences within a eudaimonic life orientation as the two are seen to serve complementary functions.

Fredrickson’s (2001) Broaden and Build Theory further contributes to research implicating the experience of positive emotions in well-being suggesting that “positive emotions are vehicles for

individual growth and social connection” and as such contribute towards “building people’s personal and social resources” (p. 224), resulting in better future lives.

To summarize, happiness and life satisfaction are merely one aspect of well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Psychological well-being is a complex phenomenon encompassing aspects of both hedonic and eudaimonic principles (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Well-being can best be understood as the fulfillment of underlying psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Human beings are social beings and the capacity to function well in their social world is integral to well-being (Keyes, 2002). Through this greater social well-being lens, a state of flourishing may be seen as the realization of individual potential as well as the contribution to the greater community (Carney, 2015). While happiness-driven hedonic pursuits are seen to lead to short term benefits; needs-fulfilling eudaimonic pursuits are more likely to result in the fulfillment of the good life as they cultivate more purposeful, meaningful life experiences (Baumeister et al., 2013; Kraut, 1979). Happiness, through this orientation, is perceived as the result of having actualized one’s full potential (Achor, 2010; Vokey, 2011).

#### The Role of Purpose and Meaning in Well-being

Despite scientific and technological societal advancements, feelings of hopelessness, depression, and loneliness are pervasive in our modern culture (Esfahani Smith, 2017). Materially, modern societies are more affluent than they have ever been; however, they are floundering spiritually. Hopelessness has reached epidemic proportions (Esfahani Smith, 2017; Seligman, 1991); depression has become the third leading cause of disability among adolescents (WHO, 2019), and self-harm and suicidal ideation rates among youth are escalating (CMHA, BC; cihi.ca). Worldwide, suicide has become the second leading cause of death (WHO, 2019) with one million people dying annually by suicide (CMAJ, 2011). Research indicates that this

spiritual un-ease is being driven by an existential lack of meaning and life purpose (Esfahani Smith, 2017). The absence of religious, spiritual and philosophical guidance historically afforded to past generations has left the individual on an autonomous journey towards discovering the tenants of living a good life. The underlying universal truth of many spiritual teachings is the awareness that we are more than biological, physical beings; that there are “phenomenological aspects of life that are immaterial” (Lombard, 2018, p. 16, as cited in Paulson et al., 2018). Frankl (1992) identified meaning as an innate human need having protective, adaptive properties. While modern culture is obsessed with happiness and comfort; it is devoid of meaning and purpose (Esfahani Smith, 2017). The antidote to the “existential vacuum that many people are living with” is meaning (Esfahani Smith, 2018, as cited in Paulson et al., 2018, p.17).

Meaning is seen to emerge from four specific life dimensions: *belonging*, *purpose*, *storytelling* (a narrative we tell about our life and how we understand the world) and *transcendence* (the idea that there’s something beyond the physical to connect to) (Esfahani Smith, as cited in Paulson et al., 2018). Philosophers, researchers, spiritual leaders have historically debated the underpinnings of what constitutes a worthwhile life. Whippman (2013) suggests that the pursuit of happiness is a recipe for neurosis. Traditional schools of wisdom would concur with Whippman’s sentiment; seeking pleasure for its own sake doesn’t really make you happy in the long run. The pursuit of happiness is a misguided quest as philosophers have noted that psychological well-being is “the by-product of a life well-lived” (Ruff & Singer, 1998, p. 5). While a hedonic happiness orientation may result in the experience of positive emotions, it is based in a more self-interested, self-absorbed existence that is reliant upon present moment needs satisfaction (Baumeister et al., 2013). Ironically, Western society’s cultural quest for personal happiness has resulted in overall less psychological well-being suggesting that the

pursuit of happiness may not be a viable goal in and of itself (Baumeister et al., 2013). This contemporary focus on the pursuit of happiness runs contrary to research outlining the detrimental ramifications of a happiness-focused orientation (Mauss et al., 2011).

Given the state of psychological dis-ease in modern Western cultures, there is a timely need for identifying the philosophical underpinnings of positive psychological well-being. As individuals grapple with existential questions such as, “What is the meaning of life?”, researchers question the relationship between living a meaningful life and the quality of our health and well-being (Paulson et al., 2018). Irvine (2009) suggests that while “schools of philosophy are a thing of the past, people are in as much need of a philosophy of life as they ever were” (p. 69). A 2010 study of high school and college students attributed declining generational mental health to a “decreased concern for meaning among the students and an increase in social detachments across society” (Esfahani Smith, 2017, p. 58). Esfahani Smith contends that *meaning* refers to a sense of *coherence* and understanding. Individuals who believe their lives have meaning,

believe that their lives have purpose and worth, or significance...they believe that their lives are coherent...they understand who they are...where they came from...why they are the way they are - they have a narrative that helps them explain their identity. (Esfahani Smith as cited in Paulson et al., 2018, p.11).

This outward pursuit of meaningful endeavors allows for the fostering of deep social connections, which relate positively to both happiness and meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013; Ryff & Singer, 1998). While meaningfulness is associated with doing for others and happiness is associated with doing things for self; feeling connected and contributing to others aligns positively to both happiness and meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013).

The fields of psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology have made recent contributions to the understanding of the role that meaning and purpose have in happiness (Paulson et al., 2018). The biological response to the meaning of life question is survival and procreation, while the human philosophical construct is embedded in the engagement of purposeful worthy pursuits and societal interactions (Paulson et al., 2018). The pursuit of happiness may be seen as a biological needs-fulfilling pursuit; while a meaningfulness orientation is perceived as a distinctly cultural, human endeavor (Baumeister et al., 2013). While “humans may resemble many other creatures in their striving for happiness...the quest for meaning is a key part of what makes us human” (Baumeister et al., 2013, p. 516). Positive psychology distinguishes the pursuit of a happy life from the pursuit of a life of meaning (Esfahani Smith, 2017).

Becker (1992) identified meaningful opportunities and meaningful activities as integral underlying criteria for the good life. Meaningful opportunities entail an autonomous ability to choose and actively pursue inherently worthy endeavors (p. 20). While the pursuit of meaningfulness has been linked to self-expression and doing positive things for others may also result in increased stress and a decrease in situational happiness, individuals with a eudaimonic orientation tend to have a greater ability for self-regulation, which may work to mitigate challenges brought on by stress and disappointment (Baumeister et al., 2013). The temporal nature of meaningful pursuits may serve as a buffer to situational challenges as they provide a wider contextual purview weaving past, present, and future (Baumeister et al., 2013). While *change* and *speed* are indicative qualities of 21st century living, meaning contributes a counterpoint, a sense of stability (Baumeister et al. 2013). Meaningful pursuits and activities provide cohesion and structure to lives as well as a purposeful life narrative (Baumeister et al.,

2013; Bellah et al., 1985).

Historical philosophical underpinnings and contemporary researchers alike have alluded to the fact that psychological well-being is an on-going dynamic process (Becker, 1992; Ruff & Singer, 1998,). Philosophers have long sought answers to the following questions: “What is the meaning of existence?” and, “How can I lead a meaningful life?” (Esfahani Smith, 2017). Bellah et al. (1985) contend that this search is one towards “finding the story or narrative in terms of which one’s life makes sense” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 81). There was a time when the guidance of a philosopher was seen as an important part of schooling (Irvine, 2009). Philosophers provided valuable tools for discovering both worthy pursuits and paths (Irvine, 2009). Without an existential roadmap for understanding worthy pursuits, individuals have been guided by cultural norms that prioritize financial success over the fulfillment of underlying psychological needs of purpose and community (Esfahani-Smith, 2017). Within materialistic modern societies, purpose and meaning are seen as exterior versus interior pursuits; leading ultimately, to lives devoid of meaning (Rogers, 1980). As much as individuals extol personal autonomy and self-reliance, the good life is found in communion with others (Bellah et al, 1985). It is through the devotion to challenging but worthwhile tasks to something larger than ourselves that our lives take on a meaningful perspective (Esfahani Smith, 2017). Philosophically and psychologically, “interpersonal flourishing is a core feature of quality living across cultures across time” (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Western cultural narratives have reinforced the construct of individualization at the expense of interpersonal relationships and greater community interests. Humans have an innate evolutionary drive and inclination towards cooperation and community as our survival as a species depends on it (Irvine, 2009; Singer, 1998). Extensive empirical research alludes to the benefits of having a rich social network of interdependent relationships throughout one’s life

(Ryff & Singer, 1998). Furthermore, positive social connections have been implicated in having a buffering effect on stress having both psychological and physiological positive impacts.

A contemporary cultural mindset exemplifies a materialistic worldview devoid of inherent meaning or purpose (Christopher, 1999). Within this orientation, individual defining characteristics are separate, unique and alone (Christopher, 1999). However, “diverse philosophical and ethical systems convey that to be lived well, lives must have purpose, embodied by projects and pursuits that give dignity and meaning to daily existence, and allow for the realization of one’s potential” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 7). Purpose can best be described as a motivating forward projecting goal involving contribution to others (Esfahani Smith, 2017). Ryff (1989) posits that purpose, directedness, and intentionality are key components of a purposeful, meaningful life. This underlying striving for a sense of purpose is implicated in various human development research. Dowd (1990) notes that purpose and meaning are instrumental fundamental tenants for achieving self-realization, while Antonovsky (1987) alluded to the importance of purpose in achieving life coherence and meaning (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Frankl (1992) identified purpose as a critical distinguishing feature of human wellness (as cited in Ryff & Singer, 1998). Individuals who reported having a sense of purpose in their lives also report increased meaning, resiliency, and motivation in accomplishing goals (Esfahani Smith, 2017). Work may be viewed as a vehicle through which an individual expresses and actualizes talents and experiences a sense of purpose while contributing to the greater whole. Purpose and meaning, which are essential core elements of psychological well-being, are dynamic on-going processes requiring intentional commitment and pursuit (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Ryff and Singer (1998) ask the question of whether the philosophical underpinnings regarding what constitutes the good life culturally are universal in nature. Contemporary

psychological and subjective-well-being constructs collectively need to be viewed through a historical and cultural context (Christopher, 1999). Our understanding of what constitutes the foundation for psychological well-being are culturally embedded presuppositions (Christopher, 1999). The Euro-American cultural roots of both PWB and SWB support an individualistic paradigm; an autonomous socio-cultural orientation that runs contrary to many other world cultures (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011). In fact, “the very notion of psychological well-being is itself a Western concept” brought on by philosophical underpinnings of Cartesian dualism (Christopher, 1999, p. 143). Lock (1982) noted that “there is no mind/body dichotomy in East Asia medicine and no concept of mental health as distinct from physical health” (p. 220, as cited in Christopher, 1999). Well-being, as seen through the prevailing Western socio-cultural lens of subjective well-being, is seen as an individualistic endeavor extolling the virtues of autonomy and freedom (Christopher, 1999). Our modern cultural preoccupation with hedonic happiness is a reflection of our cultural individualistic constructs (Ferguson, 1990; Christopher, 1999 as cited in Ryan et al., 2008). Understanding and “gaining some awareness of the cultural roots of our own understanding of psychological well-being is a first step toward critically assessing our own presuppositions and perhaps revising our own theories” (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). Thus far, conceptual underpinnings of what constitutes the good life have been examined through a Western cultural lens. The Western cultural defining paradigm of individualism runs contrary to many collectivist cultures (Christopher, 1999). In collectivist cultures, living the good life or individual flourishing is exemplified by the extent to which the individual successfully engages in the promotion of community (Christopher, 1999; Moss, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 1998). The needs of the community supersede an individual’s with the “highest moral good” being the “serving of the common good with one’s material and spiritual resources”; within this

orientation, “each significant event in the individual’s life is at one and the same time an important occasion in the life of the whole community” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, pp. 5-6). A collectivist cultural orientation is indicative of the moral virtues of beneficence (finding “contentment in facilitating the well-being of others”), forgiveness, and a sense of community justice (Ryff & Singer, 1998). A collectivist cultural focus places high priority on community and its preservation and thus any activity is “justifiable only in so far as it contributes to order and harmony” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 6). While an individualistic orientation allows for the freedom to pursue autonomous goals, it also relies on an individual’s own resources when defining their own sense of self-worth, leading towards a need for self-promotion (Christopher, 1999). Collectivist cultures benefit psychologically from the ability to see themselves as interdependent entities with the greater collective providing protective psychological factors (Christopher, 1999). While individualistic and collectivist cultures appear to be at extreme ends of a continuum, they allude to the existence of some common underlying universal truths in regard to what constitutes the good life. Both cultural orientations allude to the importance of the pursuit of worthwhile purposeful goals and the importance of meaning; they also both convey the critical need for strong social networks (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Finally, from the perspective of psychological well-being, the question of whether or not our lives have purpose or meaning is one of great significance. The psychological dis-ease of contemporary society cannot be solved by pharmaceutical prescriptions alone, as no amount will “be able to undo the profound effects of existential *nihilism*” (Lombard, as cited in Paulson et al., 2018). What is required is a shift from a strictly hedonic material-want needs satisfaction orientation towards one that supports the eudaimonic orientation of meaning. I believe that it is necessary to consider the important roles that hopefulness, purpose, and meaning have to a

healthy mindset. The *good life* is one embedded with a sense of purpose and meaning as well as connection and contribution to the greater whole. We are in the process of a major transformational cultural shift (Esfahani Smith, 2017, Fogel, 2000; Goleman & Senge, 2014). A much-needed cultural shift from materialism to meaning has begun to take place “on an historically unprecedented scale - involving hundreds of millions of people – and may eventually be recognized as the principal culture of our age” (Easterbrook, 2004). This modern socio-cultural transformation is a movement away from post-industrial extrinsic materialistic values towards the intrinsic values of meaning and purpose (Esfahani-Smith, 2017). The search for meaning has been characterized as an inherent human motivating drive (Esfahani-Smith, 2017). Helping students come to a true understanding of the important role that meaning and purpose have in well-being may serve as catalyst to precipitate the change required for cultural re-building. The cultural shift being recognized is one towards the pursuit of a life infused with meaning and purpose (Goleman & Senge, 2014). Fogel (2000) suggests “that we are in the middle of a “fourth great awakening”, which is defined by an interest in “spiritual” concerns like purpose, knowledge, and community over “material” ones like money and consumer goods” (as cited in Esfahani-Smith, 2017, p. 192). This “new purpose economy” (Hurst, 2014) focusses on the importance of an individual’s sense of purpose and contribution to the greater whole. It replaces previous agrarian, industrial and information economic models (Hurst, 2014 as cited in Esfahani Smith, 2017). A social recovery would require fundamental paradigm shifts in our traditional concept of work. Vocations will need to be redefined as intrinsic callings founded in a sense of purpose and contribution to the greater community versus a route for personal aggrandizement (Bellah et al.,1985).

In summary, the current psychological well-being crisis of contemporary societies may be seen as a call for meaning. Modern society's socio-cultural defining narratives of materialism and individualism have resulted in societies that are abundant in material goods but lacking in the underlying principles of psychological well-being. Having life purpose and meaning not only provides a forward trajectory for one's life, it provides a coherent narrative through which one's life story makes sense. While purpose may be seen as an individual pursuit, it is within the context of interpersonal relationships and one's contribution to the greater whole that true psychological well-being is achieved. From the perspective of psychological well-being, pursuits which are grounded in a sense of purpose and meaning not only give one's life a sense of coherence and direction but also provide the underlying resiliency required for managing adversity along the way.

What is school education's role during this cultural shift? The cultural transformation that I referenced in this section would require a movement away from traditional modes of instruction towards a more holistic curriculum that would include seeing individual talents and abilities through the lens of purpose, meaning and contribution to others (Esfahani Smith, 2017). The next chapter will look at school education's role in cultural re-building. I will suggest a re-visiting of educational aims in order to ascertain that our goals are congruent with psychological and ecological well-being. I will outline historic barriers to educational change and will suggest that school education is uniquely positioned to be the vehicle through which profound cultural orientational shifts may occur.

## VII. School Education's Role in Cultural Re-building

The central purpose of education is *learning*. But what should be the focus of the learning? I believe that the learning school education provides should include both civic and social development that divulges essential values and knowledge essential for both individual and planetary thriving (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Given our current state of individual and planetary dis-ease, a critique and examination regarding the aims and purposes of schooling are timely. What is needed most at this juncture in our history is a dismissal of the problematic faulty cultural beliefs upon which our Western culture is based. With individual and psychological and ecological well-being at critical junctures, society requires the expedient change and course correction that could only be accomplished through a widespread evolved consciousness movement (Bellah et al., 1985; Lazlo, 2012). Education is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of the transformational cultural change required. Education could simultaneously illuminate false narratives while steering educational aims and goal-setting towards evidence-based well-being practices. In this chapter, I discuss school education's role in much needed cultural re-building. I will initially begin by discussing the challenges that cultural re-building faces, then, secondly, I will examine how school education is particularly suitable for addressing required cultural re-building and how this suitability should shape our understanding of the purpose of school education. Finally, I will outline in general terms how school education can go about addressing its re-oriented purpose.

### Cultural Re-Building Challenges

I posit that the unconscious adherence to faulty cultural narratives has ensued for a multitude of factors; the speed of 21st century living; the advantages of maintaining the status quo; and finally, a sense of societal immobilization. As a society, we have veered so far off

course that a course correction may appear to be implausible. The precipitation of much needed cultural change has been hampered by our societal immobility to take action. The reality of our current situation has rendered us essentially *immobilized* as a species. The process of change is notoriously difficult for human beings invoking feelings of fear, insecurity, and anxiousness. The acknowledgement of the perilousness of our current situation activates our biological evolutionary stress response system narrowing our options for response to fight, flight, freeze. I posit that individuals in modern societies are stuck in freeze. While we have advocates for change warning that we are in a global emergency requiring immediate action (see Chapter 3 and also Lazlo, 2012), the sentiments of alarm and pessimism trigger evolutionary stress responses leaving individuals immobilized. This state of ecological alarm also stifles the very creativity required for reflective and positive action (Klein, 2014; O'Brien, 2013). Denial becomes a coping strategy rendering us incapable of seeing beyond our present and immediate situation. Research has identified the evolutionary purpose of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and the fight/flight response as being one of self-preservation. Fighting against an entire cultural and systemic way of thinking and being appears inconceivable, isolating and threatening. While fear “makes us run...we need somewhere to run to” for “without that, the fear is only paralyzing” (Kline, 2014, p. 28). Ironically, when action is what is most needed for our species survival, we are stuck in perpetual inaction.

What has more recently begun emerging is research on the important role of positive emotions. Positive emotions may play a unique role in creating the conscious planetary paradigm shift required for change. While negative emotions narrow our course of action, positive emotions inspire creativity, resiliency, motivation, and productivity (Achor, 2010; Fredrickson, 2001). Fredrickson (2001) contends that positive emotions have the power to improve emotional

well-being, build psychological resilience and broaden options for creative responses. The broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions can be “construed as fundamental human strengths that yield multiple, interrelated benefits” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 7). In short, while negative emotions narrow responsive capacities, positive emotions expand plausible courses of action, igniting thoughtful and creative responses (Achor, 2010). Ultimately, brain research is showing that positive emotions allow for greater inventive, creative, problem-solving capacities (Achor, 2010). Current psychology and neuroscience research are showing that our brains are hard-wired to perform their best when they are positive (Achor, 2010). In the context of cultural transformative change, positive emotions could play a crucial role in our survival as a human species as Fredrickson (2001) contends that positive affect spurs one to take adaptive action. Klein (2014) suggests that “the real trick, the only hope, really is to allow the terror of an unlivable future to be balanced and soothed by the prospect of building something much better than many of us have previously dared to hope” (p. 28). Our current state of psychological disease rooted in hopelessness, depression, and anxiety is not conducive to ushering in creative, adaptive problem-solving solutions.

### The Purpose of School Education

Educational institutions have traditionally reinforced existing socio-cultural beliefs and practices thus contributing to the perpetuation of false cultural narrative constructs. The current psychological well-being and planetary crisis indicate that a re-examination of educational aims is essential. Maintaining the socio-cultural status quo comes at great cost, as both individual psychological well-being and planetary ecological devastation hang in the balance. In this post-modern time, it is imperative that we educate children in a manner that encourages the development of “a level of critical consciousness that is now generally absent in our culture”

(Eisner, 1979, p.104). Moving forward, educational aims and goals need to be directed towards both restorative healing practices and a new way of being.

What is the purpose of education? Tyack and Cuban (1995) contend that the central purpose of education is *learning*, “construed as rich intellectual, civic, and social development” embedded in the “values and knowledge that citizens want to pass on to the next generation” (p. 136). While it “has always been one function of philosophers of education to critique the aims of education in light of their contemporary cultures”, during times of unprecedented accelerating change, questions of revisiting aims talk has increasing import and relevance (Noddings, 2009, p. 426). I believe it is incumbent upon educators to “continually reflect upon, discuss, and evaluate what we are doing to see if our objectives and procedures are compatible with our aims” (Noddings, 2009, p. 427). The current state of individual psychological well-being and ecological devastation justifies a re-examination of educational aims in order to ascertain that our goals align with underlying tenants of individual and planetary well-being. I believe that thus far, school education’s voice has been notably silent, allowing cultural paradigms such as materialism and individualism to remain unexamined despite the toll on individual and planetary well-being (Assadourian, 2010; O’Brien, 2010/2015). Without critical analysis of the underlying tenants of the industrial order, faulty cultural paradigms have continued to be perpetrated and unexamined. Since our past and present cultural paradigms have led us to our current unsustainable situation, a culturally creative, new way of thinking and being is required in order to transform existing cultural paradigms to ones that better serve humanity and the planet (O’Sullivan, 1999). Within this framework, students become “cultural creatives” setting the foundation for transformative change for the next level of civilization (Lipton, 2009). This is less about preparing students for the challenges of the coming decades and more about ushering in a

novel way of thinking and being that is transformative on its own. Noddings (2009) ponders the following question: “If our goal is to give all children the opportunity to learn what they need to succeed in society the question is...how do you define success?” (p. 437). Post-modern educational conversations have revolved around “consumer-good vs common-good” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 140). Educational goals understood through the moral orientation of common-good “can be understood as a kind of trusteeship, an effort to preserve the best of the past, to make wise choices in the present, and to plan for the future” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 142). There “are evolutionary reasons to believe that society will be stronger if education serves to enable people to work together to achieve higher purposes that serve both the individual and the collective good” (Fullan, 1991, pp.11-12).

My personal belief is that there is both an urgency and necessity at this point in our world’s history for all educational curriculum philosophies to be grounded in the pragmatic realities of our time. While the educational goals of the past have been predicated on serving industry and economic growth, what is most needed at this time is a movement towards restorative healing practices. What are the aims and purposes of schooling in the twenty-first century? In a time of globalization and climate change, I argue that students will require a fundamental grounding of morality and ethics and an awareness of the interdependencies and interconnectedness of all human and non-human beings and the ability for critical awareness. Educational goals must take into consideration our overriding goal, which is to produce fully functioning human beings. This quest must also include an understanding that the “good life” is an intrinsic rather than extrinsic pursuit. Educators will be required to make the paradigm shift from an atomistic to a more ecological view of the child. While unity of educational aims and purposes designates our North Star, it does not “imply uniformity of curriculum or programs”

(Noddings, 1983, p. 232). Students, as unique, diverse and culturally creative citizens will lead the way “not only as future global citizens but as vital contributors to the makeover of education” (O’Brien & Murray, 2015, p. 1).

Our current state of psychological dis-ease as a culture suggests the need for understanding the underlying tenants of psychological wellness (Cowen, 1991). Our modern socio-cultural characteristics of psychological well-being will be essential for driving the necessary governmental and educational paradigm shifts (Ryan & Deci, 2001). While historically, the field of psychology focused primarily on identification and treatment of existing psychopathologies (Christopher, 1999; Cowen, 1980, 1991), contemporary PWB research concedes that the concept of psychological wellness is not a fixed state but a flexible, dynamic process existing along a continuum (Cowen, 1991; Ruff & Singer, 1989). Education is uniquely poised to be a powerful agency for ushering in transformative wellness inducing change (Cohen, 1991). Educational experiences can provide the required skills and knowledge base as well as provide the essential defining opportunities that serve to empower a sense of competency, efficacy, and agency (Cohen, 1991). As an educational system, our challenge is to move beyond a transmission of knowledge towards a deliberate, intentional development of crucial underlying psychological well-being tenants (Cohen, 1991).

What is most required at this juncture is a shift from hopelessness and despair towards a concept of individual and planetary well-being. With ever-increasing curricular demands and competing agendas, schools may be missing crucial opportunities to teach students the fundamental life skills required to thrive. Our cultural response to pervasive, destructive practices must be grounded in our values and beliefs. While there are many competing

educational agendas, I argue that the underlying notion of creating fully functional human beings should be something all can agree upon.

### Re-orienting School Education

Education is a vehicle through which socio-cultural beliefs are consciously or unconsciously perpetrated; it is not a neutral process (Shaull, 2012).

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education is either used as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes “the practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history. (Shaull, 2012, p. 15).

The proliferation of dysfunctional cultural beliefs continues to be consciously and unconsciously reinforced and perpetuated through our modern lifestyles and cultural structures. Education is a vehicle through which the critical conscious awakening required for change can occur. Laszlo (2012) contends that the current global crises “calls for fundamental, system-wide change, for *conscious change*”. Culturally creative programming would advocate for educational aims and goals to revolve around the shaping of more restorative practices and values. Education can be a powerful agent and vehicle through which cultural healing can occur.

Schools would be seen as institutions and agents of change to the extent to which objectives, goals and overarching aims of educational institutions work to counterbalance the mitigating negative socio-cultural influences. We are successful as an educational community in being a vehicle for restorative healing change to the extent to which we are consciously programming and supporting practices that provide a forceful counterbalance to existent negative cultural values and practices. Educational goals, aims, and practices need to directly align with best practices for PWB and ecological biosystems awareness. These goals should be overarching and broad crossing all age levels and subject matter. It is less about prescriptive programming and more about our intentional daily restorative educational practices. Culturally creative programming could be seen as our intentional, daily efforts at providing opportunities that not only serve as a counterbalance to detrimental existent socio-cultural values and practices but also serve to illuminate and expose faulty narratives creating opportunities for subsequent cultural change. Through this process, students and educators will lead the way as being agents of a new cultural movement and way of being founded in principles of psychological and ecological well-being practices.

Effecting change relies on an understanding of both educational institutions and the culture of teachers (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 113). Historically, change through curriculum reform has thus far been ineffective (Fullan, 1991; McCulloch & Hopkins, 2005; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Traditional structures and cultures of schooling are systemic in nature and thus incredibly resilient and stable forces for reinforcing the existing status quo (McCulloch & Hopkins, 2005). The conservative nature of traditional schools means that it is embedded in a socio-cultural reflection of past beliefs and values making it resistant to radical change (McCulloch & Hopkins, 2005). The basic “grammar of schools” mentality is a durable, values

and cultural orientation that has been created and reinforced over the years by previous powerful reforms initiated by political agencies and societal educational expectations (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). “School reform is...a prime arena for debating the shape of the future of the society. Such debate is a broad civic and moral enterprise in which all citizens are stake-holders” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 136). While cultural course correction through educational reform is unlikely to occur at the institutional level, educational change research does allude to the likelihood of success if change occurs from the inside out (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Research suggests that *meaning* matters as teachers are incredibly receptive and adaptive to changes that they *believe* in (Fullan, 1991; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Essentially, “[t]he ultimate goal of change is when people see themselves as shareholders with a stake in the success of the system as a whole, with the pursuit of meaning as the elusive key” (Fullan, 1991, p. 193). Educators, parents and the larger community will need to recognize and address the ramifications of adherence to faulty cultural narratives as engaging commitment for a corrective course of action will require the participation and engagement of all invested stakeholders. In fact, no complex social reform has worked without engaging in local capacity-building (Fullan, 1999). In a postmodern society, there is a resolute need for educational reform that is united in greater moral purpose (Fullan 1999). It is the quest for moral purpose objectives that will drive the need for ameliorating current and future psychological lives of students as well as contribute to the ideologies that will be foundational for ecologically healing practices. The advocacy for educational reform is made plausible by a broader examination of existing educational aims and by invoking change from within (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Hopes for sustainable changes rest upon a clearer focus on the problems and the ramifications of suggested reforms for the ameliorate of individuals, teachers, schools and greater community (McCulloch & Hopkins, 2005). In the following section, I will outline

cultural concerns as well as identify specific steps that school education can take to address these issues. My objective will be to provide educational guidance with both the processes of illuminating and debunking cultural narratives as well as outline objectives that will facilitate a movement towards greater psychological and ecological well-being practices.

## **Educational Recommendations**

**Identify and debunk problematic cultural myths.** Materialism and individualism are modern cultural narratives that have been systematically crafted over several generations to become increasingly more extreme in both doctrine and manifestation. These narratives have been adopted as normative ways of being. More importantly, these cultural narratives serve as the lens through which we perceive our reality. Identifying and debunking the cultural myths associated with materialism and individualism is an important first step towards cultural healing.

I suggest addressing the following key points:

- Challenge the cultural myth that more stuff makes people happier. Share that the materialistic pursuit of extrinsic goals comes at the expense of having unmet psychological needs.
- Understand the underpinnings of an individualistic premise. Individualism is a culturally crafted modern socio-cultural operating system that requires a societal counterbalance as a check on rogue autonomous behaviour. In the absence of strong civic and social engagement, individualism results in competitive, adversarial relationships, and the polarization of self-interest groups. Individualism is not a sustainable cultural paradigm as it runs contrary to our innate, evolutionary programming for cooperation and empathy.

**Understand the fundamental tenants for PWB.** The socio-cultural operating system of individualism is an underlying factor in the psychological well-being health crisis (PWB). An individualistic cultural orientation that promotes a competitive, self-serving mindset has had disastrous ramifications for psychological (and ecological) well-being. Our PWB diminishes as increasingly more extreme manifestations of individualism are being culturally adopted. Human beings are evolutionarily programmed to seek co-operative, interdependent relationships. This interdependence serves both a psychological and a physiological protective factor. Community severing has resulted in inordinately extreme economic disparities, social inequalities and a life without a sense of meaning or purpose. Furthermore, the increasing distance from a shared sense of community compromises our species' adaptive abilities. To counteract cultural programming, we need to support students in understanding the fundamental tenants for PWB and provide the cultural counterbalance required for restorative healing and thriving. There are physiological and psychological protective factors in interdependence and human beings are wired for empathy and compassion (Goleman, 2012). Individualistic concepts and underpinnings are problematic as they are counter-intuitive to our own biological programming. When an individualistic orientation is combined with 21<sup>st</sup>-century technological advances and lifestyles, mental health further suffers.

PWB programming includes:

- Educational programming that values and encourages cooperation over competition.
- Intentionally seeking opportunities for strengthening friendship, family and community connections. To what extent do daily educational practices and goals foster opportunities for authentic relationships building among students, staff and the greater community?

- Fostering a school and community culture of reciprocity and generosity of spirit (Levine, 2007). To what extent are we identifying and developing student strengths (intellectual, psychological, physical) within the context of their contributions to the greater whole?
- Encouraging the viewing of issues through an “ecological” lens versus an autonomous one. In modern societies, individuals are conditioned to perceive all through an individualistic “I” lens.
- PWB comes as a result of having the innate needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (connection) satisfied. A strong sense of self is required for living in a world where we feel we have little control (Levine, 2007). Students need to develop the interior resources necessary for coping with life challenges (physical and emotional self- regulation).
- Educational goals and aims for greater well-being need to be inclusive of the science-based perspective for fostering sustainable happiness: social connectiveness and greater good (Lyumbomirsky, 2007). Our 21<sup>st</sup> century “unbridled pursuit of happiness is often at the expense of other people and the natural environment” (O’Brien, 2010, p.5). An examination of the underlying principles of sustainable happiness and well-being reveals the importance of deep social relationships (O’Brien, 2010). Despite mass media messages equating consumption with well-being, happiness research supports a very different orientation (O’Brien, 2010).

**Look at the role that meaning and purpose have on well-being.** A fundamental characteristic underlying individual psychological well-being is an individual’s ability to realize and develop their unique talents and abilities. Researchers contend that it is through an

individual's engagement with life and the development of unique capacities that true well-being flourishes. Society is undergoing a shift from "material want" to "meaning want" as more people seek a sense of purpose (Easterbrook, 2003). We are entering a post-materialism phase where meaning and purpose will be valued over material acquisition (Easterbrook, 2003). Schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need "to legitimize multiple models of excellence" (Noddings, 2015, p. 200). Believe that all students have unique talents, strengths, and abilities and encourage self-awareness and the setting of goals as they will foster a sense of purpose and interdependence.

To foster an understanding of meaning and purpose:

- Support students in the development of a strong sense of inner self that includes discovering their genuine interests, talents, and abilities. Recognize activities that bring about a sense of flow (a sense of engagement and productivity). Find the student's internal motivators.
- Value effort, curiosity and intellectual courage (Levine, 2007).
- Celebrate diversity in all its forms. Discuss how our diverse strengths strengthen the classroom community and society at large.
- Define a meaningful life as one that is "defined by connecting and contributing to something beyond yourself" (Smith, 2018, p. 11) and discuss how this contributes to overall psychological well-being.
- The Future Project ([www.thefutureproject.org](http://www.thefutureproject.org)) is an organization that supports teachers and students to think about the contributions they want to make to society and create a plan to achieve it.

**Students require an internal locus of control and skills for self-regulation.** A strong sense of self is required for thriving in a world where we feel we have little control (Levine, 20017). Students need to develop emotional literacy and capacity for managing distressing emotions. Support students in nurturing the skills that allow for an inward focus for coping with challenges.

- Students need to learn strategies for impulse control and self-management (see Appendix A).
- Students require an understanding of the human capacity for experiencing a range of emotions as well as tools for self-regulation.
- To get out of the freeze, positive emotions need to be developed.

**Teach the responsible use of technology.** Technology in and of itself is not inherently bad, however; the time dedicated to Social Network Sites (SNS) and technology use may come at the expense of having unmet psychological needs.

- Stress limited times on SNS discussing the research alluding to the ramifications to PWB with higher use times.
- Emphasize the important role of self-care (vs self-soothing) in PWB (exercise, sleep, eating healthy foods).
- PWB is reliant on an interior vs exterior value system orientation. Spending inordinate amounts of time on SNS leads to an extrinsic value orientation and a comparing of one's "insides" to someone else's "outside".
- Time spent on SNS and with technology comes at the expense of having unmet psychological needs for authentic social connection.

- Teach students to be critical consumers when it comes to technology use and marketing campaigns.

**Shift from a self-identification to a more “ecological” orientation focus.** Consumerism and an individualistic, materialistic cultural mindset have resulted in detrimental, unsustainable consequences for both individual and ecological well-being (Assadourian, 2010). What is required at this juncture is a shift from self-identification to one in which deeper connections with others and the environment is seen as an important aspect of flourishing (Vokey, 2011).

- Students require a deep understanding of how human beings are a part of an interdependent and interconnected ecosystem upon which we rely on for our survival (Assadourian, 2010).

How do living things, including human beings, exist in relation to one another in their common habitat? Since human beings are presently having an enormous impact on the planet earth...ecology as a science has close connections to ecology as a philosophy and as a social movement. (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 284).

- The process of cultural re-building can be facilitated by an educational, pedagogical paradigm shift from an atomistic view of the child towards a more ecological view (Bowers, 1994). The metaphor of an ecology is a more appropriate way of understanding how students participate and engage with their environment (Bowers, 1994). The view of the atomistic individual is a notion that has been challenged by both social and evolutionary scientific perspectives (Bowers, 1994, p. 64). A shift from an atomistic to ecological view of the student has the potential for profound implications for self-image and community relationship development (Bowers, 1994). Acknowledge

our interdependency as a classroom, school, greater community, and broader world community. Employ a systems-learning approach outside of the sciences.

- Educators need to identify and support a broader understanding of the notion of intelligence. Understanding that intelligence is not only an individual attribute but one that also exists in nature and is a fundamental feature of ecological biosystems (Bowers, 1994).
- Our current ecological crisis necessitates that all teachers be environmental educators and educational pedagogy be grounded in the awareness of our precarious situation. This journey towards a deeper understanding of wholeness is a process towards a state of connectedness and balance that acknowledges interdependence with all living entities (Hart, 2002, Weil, 2011).
- Re-orient values towards a moral orientation that considers the common good

## VIII. Conclusion

Research confirms what my own personal experience as an educator for the past 34 years suggests; that there has been a steady decline in the overall state of student psychological well-being. While my thesis inquiry initially focused on understanding the reasons for this decline in well-being, my research revealed associations between the dire state of our environment and our own individual well-being. I began to perceive society's declining personal well-being and the planet's ecological devastation as manifestations of a singular underlying problem, a cultural one. The adopted cultural norms of individualism and materialism have encouraged the proliferation of untenable, unsustainable practices and come at a tremendous cost to human and ecological well-being. Understanding that the mental health and ecological crises are at their core cultural dilemmas helps to develop an understanding of how educators can best program to effect real, lasting change. Our reality is simply a physical manifestation of our current belief patterns. Since our beliefs inform our actions, the true power for effective and lasting change exists in the challenging of our belief systems. Materialism and individualism are not fixed states; they are constructs that have been systematically crafted over time to serve a particular narrative. Mental health issues and ecological crises continue to rise despite our best efforts because of the underlying mitigating force of dysfunctional cultural beliefs. As the incidences of mental health issues continue to rise in developed nations and environmentalists vehemently sound the alarm on our planet's ecological inability to sustain current consumption patterns, modern society remains immobilized in cultural myths that no longer serve well-being. What is required is a radical shift in thinking and a course correction towards psychological and ecological restorative values and practices. Failing to do so would perpetuate ideologies and practices that are unsustainable simply because they are predictable, create stability, and have become traditions

(Eisner, 1979, p. 105). Thus far, educators have been tackling both the PWB and ecological crises at a manifesting level. What is required is a shift from the inside out. What are the aims and purposes of schooling in the twenty-first century? Primarily, a curriculum that is grounded in the pragmatic realities of our time. There is an urgent need to usher in restorative, healing cultural narratives that will pave the way for an enlightened human existence that is anchored in sustainable PWB and ecological practices.

In planning for student well-being, I believe that it is necessary to consider the important role that hopefulness, purpose, and meaning have to a healthy mindset. An educational movement towards facilitating a greater understanding of the tenants of PWB could be the catalyst needed for change. Falkenberg (2014) contends that while the “well-being of students has always been a concern in school education” efforts have been “grounded in a more narrow rather than a more comprehensive and holistic conceptualization, and is generally not seen as the overarching goal of school education” (p. 77). The underlying tenants that support psychological well-being need to be intentionally taught and supported within the school and greater community. “Well-being is often seen as linked to external conditions for learning rather than the focus of learning” (Falkenberg, 2014, pp. 77-78). When well-being becomes the focus of learning, philosophical conversations about what it means to live ‘a good life’ can happen.

## IX. Epilogue

My thesis journey began as a quest to understand the reasons why, despite our best intentions, modern society continues to see declining trends in the area of psychological well-being. While the last two generations have seen consistent advancements in many areas concerning social welfare; it has not corresponded with increases in happiness (Easterbrook, 2003). As I researched modern socio-cultural norms and the ramifications of adherence to more radical forms of individualism and materialism, I became increasingly aware that the enculturation of both paradigms continues to result in declining psychological well-being. My thesis topic often generated an expressed interest from others in both professional and social settings, with the discussion inevitably leading to the following commentary, “What is going on?” The posing of the question itself indicated a sense of mutual exasperation; evidence that they too were trying to make sense of our current psychological well-being predicament. As I continued to delve into my thesis research from a broader cultural perspective, some realizations began to emerge. I believe that while it’s not one single thing; it *is* a lot of little things that have resulted in a modern culture that is seriously *off track*. What defines the good life? Is being happy a goal? I believe that human beings are a complex species and that a life well-lived will likely include a full spectrum of emotions. As a first-generation Canadian, I have been fortunate to have heard countless narratives of my parents’ upbringing in Italy prior to their eventual journey as young adults to Canada. Having been denied access to an education past grade five, my father’s journey to Canada as a single young man was precipitated by the wish that someday his future children would have access to education. Many years later, having reaped the benefits of their sacrifice, hard work, and steadfast determination, my parents struggle to understand how subsequent generations who appear, from their perspective, to have so much are experiencing

such emotional distress. My parents wistfully acknowledge that while they had nothing growing up, they were *happy*. Having entertained their most memorable anecdotes, I can attest that while their upbringing lacked in *material want* their lives were rich and abundant in *meaning*. Their upbringings were not without significant challenges and hardships, however, their united, deep and abiding faith in something greater than themselves provided the necessary fortitude to overcome obstacles with grace. While absent in modern-day luxuries, their existence was rich in webs of deep, social connections comprised of family and community. They lived by the premise that what was best for the family was also ultimately what was best for the individual. Their interconnected and interdependent lives provided the necessary foundations for both survival and thriving. It has become increasingly clear to me that my parents grew up within a cultural construct that supported psychological well-being. Research contends that the interdependency of familial and societal ties fosters resiliency by providing the necessary anchors for navigating life's inevitable challenges (Easterbrook, 2003). The modern socio-cultural construct of individualism runs contrary to our very own human programming as neuroscience and evolutionary biologists support the theory that we are biologically programmed for love, connection and attachment as our survival as a species relied on our ability to live in community with others. A severing of community not only compromises an individual's adaptive ability but also results in a life without meaning. It is within and through these deeper necessary human connections that a sense of purpose and meaning are found. My parents' overriding purpose and commitment to something broader than themselves provided the necessary grounding, and resiliency required to navigate considerable life challenges. What I know for sure is that a life well-lived is not devoid of struggle and challenges as struggle is often inherent in the process of pursuing a life of meaning and purpose. Mental health thrives when our quest becomes an

existential one to better understand *who we are, why we're here, and what we have to contribute* (Palmer, 2007). Psychological well-being is not an achievable goal in and of itself; it is the consequence of living *the good life*.

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**Appendix A**  
**PWB Resources**

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The Hawn Foundation. (2011). *The MindUP curriculum: Brain-focused strategies for learning and living*. New York: Scholastic.

Katz, J. (2012). *Teaching to diversity: the three-block model of universal design for learning*. Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press.

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## **Appendix B**

### **Ecological and PWB Resources**

#### ***Education for Sustainable Happiness and Well-being***

O'Brien describes the concept of sustainable happiness as "happiness that contributes to individual, community, or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment, or future generations" (O'Brien, 2010). Sustainable happiness programming has been incorporated into post-secondary courses at Cape Breton University and a sustainable happiness certificate is offered at Dawson College in Montreal. The online course in sustainable happiness is available for the general public at <https://sustainablehappiness.world>

#### ***Sustainable Happiness and Health Education Teacher's Guide K-6***

<https://sustainablehappiness.world/resources>

#### ***Sustainable Happiness and Health Education Teacher's Guide for Manitoba,***

Catherine O'Brien, PhD

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a9d42c6aa49a12b3dd03ceb/t/5ae149c4f950b7671d6d84e9/1524713927175/SH-Teachers-Guide-MAN.pdf>

#### ***The Science of Happiness*** (edx course)

Positive psychology principles and science-based happiness practices for a meaningful life. Explores roots of authentic well-being. Created by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. Explores the notion that happiness is inextricably linked to having strong social connections and contributing to something larger than yourself—the greater good.

<https://www.edx.org/course/the-science-of-happiness-4>

***Resources for Well-being and Sustainability Practices***

Resource Links: <http://sustainablehappiness.ca/resources/>

Entrepreneurial Teachers for Sustainability and Well-Being:

<http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Entrepreneurial-teachers-for-sustainability-and-well-being.pdf>

***Entrepreneurial Teachers for Sustainability and Well-Being:***

<http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Entrepreneurial-teachers-for-sustainability-and-well-being.pdf>

***Sustainable Wellbeing, Creativity and Innovation:***

<http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/obrien-and-murray-may-2015.pdf>

***Happiness and Sustainability, Together at Last!! Sustainable Happiness:***

***Who Is Teaching Us About Sustainable Happiness and Wellbeing? C. O'Brien***

<http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Who-Is-Teaching-Us-About-Sustainable-Happiness-HCS.pdf>

***Sustainable Happiness, Living Campus, and Wellbeing for All:***

[http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SH-LC-WBA\\_May\\_2016.pdf](http://sustainablehappiness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SH-LC-WBA_May_2016.pdf)