

## Article

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## Contesting Moral Well-being: Two Narratives among Zulu South Africans

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**Abstract** | This article focuses on a frequently overlooked factor in people's estimation of their own well-being: whether they and their surrounding social networks deem their life circumstances to follow a moral trajectory. Because multiple standards of morality compete within societies, this element of well-being is subject to constant negotiation. Attaining well-being depends not merely on having a certain bundle of resources, connections, or circumstances, but on gaining a tenuous moral approbation. Well-being, then, is actually produced or reduced in sites where people publically negotiate the morality of their life choices. In this article, I examine one such setting of negotiation: church testimonies of Zulu South Africans. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I describe how testimonies—brief spontaneous personal accounts of changes in life circumstances such as employment and health—allow people to navigate the seemingly contradictory moral narratives saying that they should “help themselves” and also “wait on God and not take shortcuts.” I argue that churches are useful sites for attaining well-being in South Africa not only because they offer instrumentalist tools for acquiring resources and social networks, but also because churches offer malleability of personal narratives, which allows people to negotiate society's conflicting narratives of moral well-being.

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A middle-aged South African Zulu man who introduced himself as Joe<sup>1</sup> sat in a neighbor's living room flipping through my stack of notecards. He mulled over the line drawing on each card, as would dozens of other people I met as I conducted field research on the ways Zulu South Africans understood well-being.<sup>2</sup> His task, as part of a longer interview, was to choose a drawing that for him best represented the way to achieve a good life. Each card had on it a blue dot that represented a time when a person is not living a good life. Elsewhere on the card was a yellow star that represented a good life. In between were various arrows, shapes, or stick-figure drawings meant to represent paths people take to achieve a good life.<sup>3</sup>

Joe held up a notecard showing an arrow aiming diagonally up from the blue dot toward the star. Midway between the dot and the star, the arrow ran into a dotted line dividing the dot and the star. The arrow appeared to bounce off the dotted line and stop without reaching the star. Most people who talked about that card interpreted the dotted line as representing various obstacles blocking the path to a good life—a lack of resources, an immoral choice, or a broken relationship. Instead, Joe held this up as his picture of how he was already achieving a good life in his life as a husband, father, and farm manager.

This one, in the middle. If I'm here [indicating

the star at the top], I will start to undermine other people. I want to be here [indicating the middle at the dotted line]. People who have a lot of money, they usually undermine people without a lot of education. Though I wish to be on top, but that would only be a God thing. If God gave me that, I can be happy. I can accept that. But I can be happy here, too [indicating the middle at the dotted line].

In Joe's explanation of how to achieve the good life, he emphasized that a good life was not the same as having resources, as in "a lot of money." Instead, having a good life for Joe required acquiring and handling one's resources in ways that fit certain moralities. His statement, "that would only be a God thing," accomplished a remarkable feat in his conversation: it transformed his current place in life—a place that he himself admitted was not the "star" place that some people might want—into a place of greater well-being. It did so by deeming that place morally right. His assessment of the morality of his circumstances was not a foregone conclusion. In a later interview with someone else holding the same stack of notecards, I summarized what Joe had said. This interviewee shook his head in disapproval, saying that waiting for a "God thing" was a reprehensible way of "giving up." Joe's statement offered a controversial claim that his present circumstances were morally good, which deemed those to be circumstances in which he could "be happy." His statement in effect transformed his current life situation into what he considered the good life.

This accomplishment—transforming fixed life circumstances from not well-being to well-being by redirecting one's own and other's moral understandings of those circumstances—has dramatic implications for studies of well-being. Rather than identifying subjective measurable criteria for determining whether a person has well-being, this article points to the importance of social negotiations by which people determine whether their circumstances have the moral approval associated with well-being. Because multiple standards of morality compete within societies, moral approval is subject to a constant flux of negotiation. Attaining well-being, then, depends not merely upon having a certain bundle of resources, connections, or circumstances, but upon processes that negotiate a tenuous moral approval within given circumstances.

The conversation with Joe unfolded in a neighbor's

home, but his statement served a purpose similar to that of another kind of speech I often heard in South Africa: personal testimonies in churches. In this article I examine church testimonies as rituals in which people exercise agency to mark their own behaviors and life circumstances as legitimate well-being. Specifically, people use these brief spontaneous personal accounts to navigate two common and seemingly contradictory moral narratives: one narrative that advises attaining the good life by "helping yourself," and another that insists the moral good life comes by "waiting on God." After first describing how these narratives are reinforced and pitted against each other across Zulu communities, I show how people giving testimonies in predominantly Zulu churches used their speeches to mitigate accusations that might come from either narrative and interpret their current situations as both morally and materially "good." The evidence suggests that churches are useful sites for attaining well-being in South Africa not only because they offer instrumentalist tools for acquiring resources and social networks,<sup>4</sup> but because churches offer malleability of personal narratives, allowing people to publically negotiate society's conflicting narratives of moral well-being.

My argument—that public negotiation of morality actually affects whether life circumstances are characterized as well-being—hinges on two premises that have become widely accepted but nonetheless remain worth mentioning. First, cultural, historical, and social settings influence the ways people answer myriad questions about well-being (Fischer, 2014; Robbins, 2015). As Sherry Ortner wrote, "Every culture, of course, embodies some vision of success, of the good life, but the cultural variation occurs in how success is defined, and given that, what are considered the best ways of achieving it" (1972, 1341). Cultural constructions shape people's ideas about what measures are effective for attaining well-being, what measures qualify as moral, and what combinations of end-goals make up well-being.

Secondly, the ways people answer questions of well-being are not homogeneous across a society. In any society, people use words and actions, consciously or unconsciously, to engage in on-going debates over conflicting moralities (Laidlaw, 2013). Gender, generational, ethnic, religious, and other group affiliations shape particular moral narratives, but narratives can be influential throughout society. Individuals face

internal conflicts over competing ethical frames, and they seek answers to moral questions through communal processes. David Graeber has pointed out that people determine what outcomes in life are most valuable according to the input of local “audiences”—that is, all those “whose opinion of you matters in some way” (2001, 76). Naomi Haynes relates this concept of “audiences” to Christianity, arguing that Christianity offers its adherents a “shared but contested social space, where lines of value are drawn but not fixed” (2014, S358). Thus people work out values and the boundaries of well-being within social contexts before a range of audiences, and for Christians, a congregation of local believers often constitutes one such significant audience.

Starting with these two points in mind in a discussion of well-being directs our discourse away from comparisons among cultural or religious groups imagined as relatively homogenous (Berger & Redding, 2010; Kitayama, Karasawa, Curhan, Ryff, & Markus, 2010). Since Weber’s foundational study of Protestant churches in the nineteenth century, many scholars have related well-being to Christianity by analyzing whether religious beliefs in certain contexts tend to produce capitalistic behaviors, material gains, or particular economic formations (Frahm-Arp, 2010; Gifford, 2007; Klaitz & McLean, 2015; Maxwell, 1998; Weber, 2002; Werbner, 2011). Instead, this article will focus on how people navigate conflicting possibilities of well-being within the internal moral complexity of a society. My focus here is not on the economic consequences of Christian practices, but rather on their interpretive significance. In Geertzian terms, church testimonies are “deep” settings; they allow people to tell their own stories, imposing meaning on their own lives by combining dramatic shape, metaphoric content, and social context in ways that render “ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible” (1972, 23).

In order to explain how well-being is contingent upon negotiations over competing strains of moralities, I focus here on two moral narratives that come into conflict in Zulu communities. Both moralities emerged out of the complex history of Southern Africa that includes colonialism, resistance, and globalization. People did not identify one or the other narrative as more “Western,” “African,” or “Christian.” All the examples I give of each narrative come from Zulu South Africans who self-identified as Christian and regu-

larly attended churches in the same township. Both narratives were also reinforced across society: among spiritual healers, grandparents, youth, school teachers, workplace managers, and in media.

I refer to the two conflicting narratives as the “Rely on God” narrative and the “Help Yourself” narrative. The two narratives lie at opposite ends of a spectrum of ways of evaluating individual agency: the one condemns what people deem too little individual agency and the other condemns too much agency. My purpose in distinguishing these two narratives is to establish that there are real conflicts among Zulu Christians over what constitutes morality, and consequently what constitutes well-being. As I then go on to show, people navigated these conflicts using church testimonies.

### The “Rely on God” Moral Narrative

In the “Rely on God” narrative of well-being, people downplay their own individual agency and accredit their successes to supernatural forces, whether through the Christian God, ancestral spirits, luck, or fate. In this narrative, people who are patient and willing to be content with a lower “level” of material and social attainment are made out to be moral people, experiencing well-being regardless of their material circumstances. “Waiting on God” is considered instrumental to—or even more valuable than—eventual material success. As in Joe’s comments, the good life includes not only a possible future attainment granted through “a God thing,” but also the present, so long as one relies on God rather than excessive striving. In some cases, people predicted that exercising too much agency trying to achieve a higher “level” without waiting for God would cause an eventual economic downfall. With this moral narrative, people see their journey toward the good life as motivated by forces external to themselves. This is an especially valuable interpretation for people in less-than-ideal circumstances, since it gives current circumstances a framework of purpose, morality, and even present well-being.

Conversations I had with a woman named Duduzile exemplified the Rely on-God narrative. She had recently quit a job because of relational tensions with coworkers, and her income came from her mother’s pension money and a small business based out of her home. When I first asked Duduzile to talk about what the good life meant, she explained, “I just want to live

the normal life. Yeah, not the expensive life. I enjoy the normal life. And I like to have peace, and accept myself as I am.”

I asked if she thought others in her neighborhood thought similarly or differently in their ideas of a good life, and she replied:

I accept the life I live. And I'm happy with the life that I live and I enjoy in whatever circumstances I'm facing. So I'm trying by all means to take care of myself and have peace, yeah, and peace of mind. I don't want to look for things that I can't afford to have it. But I accept the normal life. Even if I can have lots of money, ... I don't want [it], I don't want that high class, that expensive life.

As I got to know her, I often heard Duduzile express the idea that well-being stemmed from a mindset of contentment without overt striving. She related what she called her “peaceful life” directly to her belief in God's ability to provide adequately. In conversations about crime, home ownership, and managing a business, she often made statements like, “We give God all the power to own everything in this house and our lives.” On the occasion her 45<sup>th</sup> birthday, I stopped by her house as she prepared to host a party. As she talked about what the occasion meant to her, she said what she had learned looking back at life was that people should rely on God for everything.

You should never think that you can do things on your own. If you say that, God will sit back and let you do things on your own. But you need his help—he knows the past, the present, and the future, and who are you to say you can do things better than God?

I commented that this seemed the opposite of a phrase I had often heard in South Africa, “God helps those who help themselves.” I had heard the phrase cited as Biblical on at least two occasions, even though it does not appear in the Bible. She disagreed adamantly.

I don't believe in “God helps those who help themselves.” He needs to take control in everything. He knows the future. He knows everything. So how can we help him? We can't help him. We can't even help ourselves. If I say I've got my own power, he will just stand and wait for me and

not use his power for me, because I say I've got enough power myself.

Many others expressed similar beliefs that patience and reliance on higher powers, rather than individual striving, were the moral and effective means of achieving the good life. People often recounted successes preceded with phrases like “luckily enough,” “fortunately,” or “thanks be to God.” In this narrative, quick acquisition of wealth was morally suspect. As one pastor put it, “the devil is a runner.” Certain spiritualists (*izangoma*) in the township were rumored to offer magical means of acquiring wealth quickly, and Christians generally condemned these methods as witchcraft or devilry. For many Southern Africans, “fast” wealth is associated with a disregard for God, withholding wealth from others, and witchcraft (Ashforth, 2005). Naomi Haynes summarized similar views among Zambian evangelical Christians: good money comes slow and bad money comes fast (Haynes, 2017). In 1972, anthropologist Max Gluckman noticed condemnation and envy of excessive ambition among Zulu people: “Excess, in performance or ambition or exercise of authority, is believed also to be a moral fault, and it may be ascribed to evil occult power” (1972, 33). According to this Rely on God narrative, moral well-being requires patiently allowing God to choose one's level of economic success and social status.

### The “Help Yourself” Moral Narrative

In stark contrast, in the Help Yourself narrative, people emphasize the morality of embracing individual agency to improve one's own life. A middle-aged woman named Simangile, who like Duduzile strongly identified as a Christian, expressed the concern that is central to this narrative: people should not just rely on “a mysticism about money.” Simangile complained that too many people describe her career saying, “You're so lucky, you're so lucky,” instead of, “the choices you have made have been so wise.” For her, the moral means of seeking well-being meant making individual choices and taking initiative to secure well-being by one's own agency.

As an example of how this narrative played out, a man in his late twenties named Thulani explained his view of achieving success: “It's up to a person what he want to become. ... Here in South Africa you can be whatever you want.” His listed the steps in his own career



thus far: high school, a two-year degree program, a government internship, a few months of unemployment, and his current job. He cited “gaining experience,” “learning systems,” “taking things seriously,” and “prioritizing” as the reasons he had succeeded. He had recently accepted a job advising young people in the local government unemployment office, where he advised people using this Help Yourself narrative. When I mentioned I had heard other people say that it’s important to wait on God for circumstances to change, he responded:

I don’t believe in that one, no. God gave us hands, mind, eyes, ears. So I believe you must work very hard in order to get what you want. I can’t run away from the fact that there are obstacles. You have to push to break through that wall. . . . Challenges are there to prune us, shape us. Challenges are not there to kill us or ruin our future. In this world nothing comes easy, you have to fight, fight, fight. The reason why I am where I am today is because of the attitude. If you want to be someone better in life, after five or ten years, you need to change your attitude.

Like Duduzile, he believed success came based on having a particular “attitude.” For him it was an attitude that prompted one to overcome obstacles, whereas for her it was being content despite seeming imperfections.

Everyone who participated in the research task of selecting cards representing paths to a good life could quickly identify “wrong” ways of achieving the good life. Their accusations most often focused on the differences between these two narratives. From the Rely on God narrative came accusations that others were being immorally manipulative by “taking shortcuts” in attempts to skip ahead to outcomes that God had not yet prepared for them. From the Help Yourself side came accusations that others were “lazy” and needed more “hard work” to “push through” to achieve a good life.

As mentioned earlier, individuals sometimes espoused elements of both narratives. In the conversation with Joe, in addition to his statement that greater material good should only come as “a God thing,” he made comments that would seem to fit the Help Yourself moral narrative. “If I want to be on top,” he said, referring to his hopes for the coming years, “I have to work

hard.” Thulani also mixed in Rely on God statements with his general support for the Help Yourself narrative. He wrapped up his account of his career saying, “At the end of the day, I think it was the plan of God.” The two narratives prescribe seemingly opposed moralities of attaining and defining well-being, and yet both narratives coexist in society, even intermingled within individuals’ own ideas. As I show in the next section, people harness this ability to alternate from one morality to another in order to moralize a wide variety of circumstances as constituent of well-being.

### Testimonies: Describing Circumstances as Well-being using Both Narratives

If having the good life depends upon seeing one’s life as moral, and seeing one’s life as moral depends upon having the approval of others in one’s social “audience,” then attaining well-being requires garnering tenuous moral approval according to one—or likely more—of the conflicting moral narratives in society. Church testimonies offer a setting with valuable flexibility for gaining that moral approval.

The ritual of testimony-narration takes place in the audience of other believers, a group of individuals mutually vested with significant authority to assess each other’s morality. Testimonies are not the only church interactions that reposition congregants’ moral standing; in tithing, for example, people position themselves as mutually-obligated benefactors participating in social relationships (Klaitis & McLean, 2015; Premawardhana, 2012). Church testimonies, however, offer a uniquely valuable combination of self-narration, communal participation, and weekly regularity that weaves into people’s lives opportunities to shape their own moral standing and well-being.

All but one of the six black South African churches I attended during this research included a weekly time for testimonies.<sup>5</sup> Testimonies usually happened mid-way through the church service, often before the sermon and mixed between singing, giving offerings, and prayers. Generally three to five people would volunteer without prior arrangement. They gave extemporaneous accounts of events in their lives such as career changes, financial or health crises, and life events such as marriages, births, and deaths. The testimonies varied in length, occasionally rivaling sermons in length. Speakers often began or ended testimonies

by leading the congregation in a song, and congregation members participated throughout the testimony with affirmative words like “amen” and by echoing the speakers’ declarations of praise to God. At times testimonies included thanks for congregants who had helped them through challenges. Testimonies were often among the most emotional portions of the service; often one or more speakers cried, along with listeners.

In the examples of testimonies I describe here, three noteworthy things were happening. First, the speakers actively defended themselves against accusations that could potentially come from *both* of the moral narratives described above. Secondly, the speakers repositioned seemingly negative circumstances into positive situations. The experiences people described often included an actual loss in material resources or opportunities—not going to school, not getting a job, or a sickness worsening—and yet the circumstances were re-imagined as manageable, if not actually positive. Third, the congregation participated in the ritual in ways that encouraged empathy and agreement. The effect was that speakers renewed their own and others’ approbation of their current circumstances.

As an example of a testimony accomplishing these three purposes, a man named Bongani at one service described the process whereby he went from preparing to become a doctor to becoming a pastor. He began by describing his “passion” during high school to become a doctor and how he worked hard studying science and mathematics to succeed in this plan. Here listeners would recognize the narrative of individual pursuit. In the next step of his account, though, he showed the shortcoming of that Help Yourself narrative. “I did not succeed in my plan,” he said simply, without explaining why. Listeners from the township would be familiar with the kinds of obstacles he might face: perhaps scoring too low on an entrance exam, having too little money to cover entrance fees or transportation, or having to care for family members. He did not need to describe these obstacles; his point instead was to recast his situation as God’s plan. He explained:

I wished to be a doctor. But it never happened according to my plan. Because now as I’m talking I was supposed to be in [university], studying medicine... but instead of being a doctor of the people, now I’ve become the [doctor] of the souls. Amen!

The congregation responded, “amen,” reinforcing his interpretation of the events. At this point in his testimony, he had shown how individual pursuits (trying to become a doctor) were fragile, and one would do better to rely on God, expecting God to change an individual’s plans. In the final sentences of his testimony, though, he returned to the idea of “passion,” now pointing to a way in which his experience also followed the moral narrative of individual pursuit.

I will become a pastor, and I’m passionate about it. As long as it’s the will of God, I’m ready to do it. I’m ready to die for Christ, because it’s what God has called me to do.

Here “passion” and driving pursuit of a goal became a morally acceptable narrative again. His testimony had effectively merged the two narratives, showing that passionate agency is good, just so long as it falls within a willingness to wait on God’s plans. Along with a few echoed “amen” moments during the testimony, the congregation sang after each testimony that day, including a song with the words, “Let the weak say I am strong; let the poor say I am rich ... it’s what the Lord has done in me.”<sup>6</sup> Another song between testimonies repeated the phrase (in Zulu), “My prosperity is in the Lord.” Throughout the testimony portion of the service, difficult circumstances and disappointments were recast as morally right and not only bearable but desirable.

At another church service, a middle-aged woman gave a lengthy explanation of a dream. The dream, according to an interpretation another church member had told her, meant that she should not pursue her goal to start a higher education program. She had already received a rejection letter for the school, but this she now recognized was God’s plan. According to her dream interpretation, continuing schooling was causing her to forget God and discontinue her important work for God. Thus her moral path of not attending school now involved both relying on God (trusting God’s will that she discontinue education), and also not being idle (continuing unpaid work with the church). Just after her testimony, another man stood up and commented extensively on this woman’s testimony about the dream. He used a common metaphor of doors being opened or closed. At times, he said, it looks like a door will be opened, but then you arrive and there is nothing at the door, which means you are being tested to see if you are really faithful. You might

have all things, he said, and be “filthy rich” (in English), but without salvation these are “nothing.” “I may go to bed hungry, I may have no job, but I have Jesus and one day he will make all things right,” he emphasized. In agreement with the woman, he interpreted her present circumstances as moral and in effect preferable to being “filthy rich.”

In the context of the church service, congregants never criticized speakers. That did not mean that speakers always succeeded in gaining their fellow congregants’ approval of their life choices. Giving a testimony was a performative act that came with risk that the audiences would not be convinced. A testimony that did not gain the empathy of the congregation could produce jealousy, judgement, or shame. In one conversation outside of church, I encountered a woman who complained that she did not like attending church because people giving testimonies were not honest; they talked about their lives in ways that always made their lives look good.

While individuals giving testimonies could not know for certain that church audiences would accept their performed interpretations of the morality in their life circumstances, speakers had a unique opportunity to garner approval by intermingling elements from both narratives. They did so using call and response, participative singing, and symbolism and words that evoked familiar responses of approbation among congregants. The setting allowed space for people to craft their own narrative and potentially dismiss rumors or criticisms by telling the details they chose and offering their own moral assessment.

## Conclusion

Scholars of many disciplines, at least since the time of Socrates, have debated over the combinations of circumstances that will most likely produce well-being. Some have focused on hedonic happiness, the sort that offers momentary and physical pleasure. Others have stressed the need for eudaimonic happiness, the sort that emerges over time through a mix of moral and objective factors.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I emphasize not that a particular set of physical circumstances produces well-being, or that particular moral narratives best describe well-being. Rather, I point out that particular opportunities to interpret the circumstances and narratives in our individual lives and society can affect well-being.

In the examples here, Zulu Christians negotiated social approval of their moral standing amidst two seemingly contradictory narratives—one that prescribed patient reliance on God, the other that emphasized personal responsibility. Importantly, they had access to a setting that offered them agency to shape and interpret their own stories before audiences that were ritually inclined to be sympathetic to their interpretations. People did not need to fully reconcile opposing narratives or choose a single narrative because the setting offered ambiguous space for social approval. Having such opportunities for positive public interpretations of moral and material standing woven into social life may actually increase the likelihood that people positively assess their well-being.

The implication of this research is that opportunities to craft narratives matter. Research that seeks universal determinants of well-being has tended to overlook the ways in which persuasion factors into well-being. Given that well-being depends in part upon gaining others’ moral approval, and that multiple narratives of morality compete within societies, then well-being is actually to some extent produced (or reduced) in sites where people publically negotiate the morality of their life choices. Church testimonies offer a setting in which such negotiations occur, as they offer ritualized regularity, group participation, and individual story-telling flexibility even within the limits of the genre of testimony-giving. Comparable settings that fulfil some or all of these opportunities likely exist elsewhere, and this research suggests that such settings are worth noticing in our pursuit of human flourishing.

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## Endnotes

[1] All names in this article are pseudonyms. Like many Zulu people, “Joe” had both a Zulu given name and an English name, which he offered when we first met.

[2] In this article I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork I conducted from 2014–2015 and in the summer of 2017 in Howick and Mpophomeni, a medium-sized town and township in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Research included over one hundred transcribed and coded semi-structured interviews and participant observation in homes, workplaces, and churches.

[3] In some interviews, I first gave people the assignment of drawing their own dot, star, and path between them. The notecards Joe flipped through included drawings I had compiled from other South Africans as well as my own drawings based on research conversations.

[4] Research shows that South African churches do also tend to offer ways for people to access material resources, such as through sharing goods and widening trust networks for job searches or small business development. (Frahm-Arp, 2010).

[5] Churches studied included one Assemblies of God church, one Zionist, and four African-Initiated churches that were each either independent of denominational ties or part of networks with a few other churches in that region of South Africa. The Assemblies of God church included testimonies only occasionally.

[6] Lyrics are by Hillsong, “What the Lord Has Done in Me” (1999).

[7] See Joel Robbins (2015) for an extended overview of theoretical debates on happiness.