

EXPLORING THE MEANING OF HAPPINESS AMONG RURAL POOR: A MIXED METHODS STUDY ON HAPPINESS IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the meaning-making of happiness among the rural poor in a provincial community in the Philippines. It first analyzed the extracted qualitative themes about the meaning of happiness from a lengthy focused group discussion of rural poor, and then quantitized the comparative themes by counting the number of categories in each theme. Reflective of Asian collectivist culture, findings showed that happiness revolved around a peaceful and united family and economic sufficiency came in second. Less intense meanings describes happiness as an emotion, a spiritual connectedness, and as good health. Findings are discussed in the light of well-being and the collectivist Filipino culture in the rural.

Keywords: happiness, meaning, rural poor, family

1. INTRODUCTION

Happiness is a concept understood by lay persons and scholars alike, albeit with diverse and contested meanings [1-2], partly due to the context specificity of this psychological phenomenon [3,4]. A survey of literatures have shown that happiness varies by culture (e.g. cross-cultural differences), by class (e.g. rich vs. poor), and by locality (i.e. rural vs. urban). This study explores what happiness may mean in a collective rural poor community in Philippines. By group collaboration, attitudes and attributions of co-constructors on the issue of happiness and its indicators are assumed to arise as consequences of their participation in that social life [5].

Cultural variation of happiness. Cultural differences are found between individualist-collectivist nations (e.g. Western vs Asian) in expressions of happiness and correlates and causes of well-being. In Culture and well-being, Diener [6], reviewed some summarized collection of findings from his own research and that of others. In terms of the attainment of certain goals, they found it to be more related to well-being in collectivist cultures than individualistic culture. For instance, goals for fun and enjoyment increases satisfaction among individualists, whereas, pursuing goals to please others increases Subjective Well-Being (SWB) more among collectivists. Self-esteem and freedom were better predictors of life satisfaction in individualistic nations. Collectivist ones rely more on social appraisals in computing life satisfaction than do individualists.

Causes of well-being differ in predictable ways across culture. In Wheeler's [7] study on collectivism-individualism in everyday social life, participants from the collectivist culture did show longer and higher interactions, whether in group or task interactions, while at the same time indicated greater self-and-other disclosure. The content of the self includes more group-linked elements in collectivist than in individualist cultures [8] and higher affective well-being [9]. Oyserman et al [10] found that cross – national differences are dynamically consistent due to the chronic and moment-to-moment salience of individualism and collectivism. For instance, well-being between Koreans and Americans [11] were culturally different as the former conceive well-being and spirituality through 'bottom-up' approach that focus on how external events and situations influence happiness, whereas the later uses 'top-down' approach that center in diverse variables within an individual and his culture. Accordingly, the arousing circumstances for happiness [12]

are radically and deeply constituted by local culture based on what a culture values and normalizes in relation to the good life and measure of well-being [13].

Class variation of happiness. A nation's well-being correlates modestly with national affluence. On the national scale, well-being is higher in wealthy societies than in poor nations saged by development issues. Nations with high well-being index [14-15] have material as well as psychological wealth that includes effective social and political institutions, high trust and low corruption. On the individual level, rich individuals seem happier provided they are richer than other people (social comparison) or that they spend their riches on experiences or other people'. Among the poor, the thought of one's neighbor having more seemed to cross off the effect of happiness, making the poor more miserable [16].

Variation of happiness by setting. Local context differentiates rural and urban happiness. Studies found that rural households report higher subjective well-being than do their richer urban counterparts [17]. Country residents expressed slightly higher levels of community satisfaction than did town or urban dwellers. Income was a relatively more important predictor of community satisfaction and happiness among urban than among country residents, while number of friends was relatively more important for rural residents [18]. Further, unemployed people suffer less unhappiness if they live in areas where many others are unemployed, and suffer more in communities where there is a strong social norm to live off one's own income [19]

Western Concepts of Happiness. Generally, qualitative and quantitative assessment of life satisfaction, happiness and well-being were spearheaded by Diener and Seligman who developed differing theories and measures of subjective well-being. They are the dominant western reference of happiness studies. For Diener [20], happiness is a prime psychological construct used interchangeably with satisfaction, pleasure, meaningfulness of life etc. in his studies of SWB. SWB was coined as a blanket concept to encompass one broad domain of life satisfaction (LS), domain satisfaction (DS), and positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) [21]. SWB is defined as the people's subjective evaluation of their own life as a whole. For Seligman [22], happiness (i.e. well-being) is an entity, a real thing with several measurable elements, but none defining it, i.e. no single measure defines its structure but several things contribute to it; these are the five (5) elements acronymed PERMA for Positive emotion,

Engagement, positive Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishment, each having three properties. The properties include the following; 1. It contributes to well-being; 2. Many people pursue it for its own sake, not merely to get any of the other elements; 3. It is defined and measured independently of the other elements.

On poverty and happiness in the Philippines. Philippine studies on happiness are mostly descriptive and related to the poor living condition of the people. Indicators of happiness for Filipinos seem closely tied up to poverty per survey report [23]. Accordingly, severe hunger coincides with high unhappiness. This is interesting since Filipinos are said to be happy people and resilient despite the odds. In fact, the Philippines ranked 20th in the Happy Planet Index [24], an index of human well-being and environmental impact. Thus, situating happiness in the context of poverty in the rural may uncover interesting indicators, contextual and cultural determinants, of happiness from rural folks living with insufficient material possession, collectively and with conservative values.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study is qualitative+quantitative mixed methods design with an inductive theoretical thrust. It employed purposive sampling technique and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to capture the collaborative sense-making of the participants. The study has two supplementary phases: Phase I employed qualitative thematic analysis of the meaning of happiness, the context and the categories/indicators of happiness while Phase 2 provided the intensity of the identified categories of the construct thru descriptive quantification of the participants' responses.

The participants of the study were farmers, rubber tappers and fishermen of New Barile, Tampilisan, who are the typical rural poor in the province of Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines. Zamboanga del Norte, to note, has been cited by the National Statistic Coordinating Board [25] as the poorest province in the Philippines in 2009 along with some of its towns. There were 16 participants purposefully selected since they were recipients of the conditional cash transfer program of the government for indigents. Their selection was through self-admission of their low socioeconomic status prior to inclusion as recommended by the Local Leader with the facilitation by the Municipal Extension Agriculturist. The participants' consent was asked and the meeting with them was set in their barangay hall. Coming from the same community makes the group a homogenous case sampling [26] which maximized the trustworthiness and ecological validity of the qualitative study. The homogeneity of their group acted as 'natural assemblage' that ensures their acquaintance and non-threatened feeling by each other's presence to guarantee spontaneous collaborative interaction.

Data Collection Strategy

An FGD schedule was constructed with the main research question, "What is happiness to you?" to incite participants to collaboratively describe group meaning of happiness. The discussion lasted for one hour and 10 minutes.

For the measures, the responses during the FGD served as the verbal data for Phase 1 thematic analysis. The Phase 2 quantization employed concurrent analysis of the same data.

A set of materials was provided to the participants during the FGD such as one bond paper each, pens, pencils, and a box of colored crayons. For documentation and recording purposes, Digital Voice Recorders and camera were utilized and a number was assigned to each participant for anonymity.

The preliminary activities addressed clarifications to set the introduction of the purpose of the study, instruction for the discussion and norming (e.g., no right or wrong answer, honest opinion or feelings, informal dialect talk, talking one at a time, etc.). Also included is the solicitation of consent to record and the assurance of the confidentiality of the data. Follow up clarifications and probing questions were simultaneously asked. The FGD was closed by summarizing the participants' meanings, the activities that transpired, some remarks, tokens and thanking everyone for their participation. As a resident in a neighboring barangay I was able to relate and talked to the participants in their Visayan dialect.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. In Phase 1, the six steps thematic analysis framework for analyzing data proposed by Braun and Clarke was observed. This includes reading and re-reading the transcripts of the data, note taking, systematic coding of interesting attributes and reviewing and refining the labels/themes that best captures the categories. The themes made by the participants during their arbitrary first coding attempt were checked and considered in identifying and analyzing meaningful patterns in the meaning-making. It served as a form of reference check. The thematic data derived from the analysis was presented in tableaux and the subcategories appended. The themes were the wider discourses from the labeled indicators.

Quantitizing and analysis. In Phase 2, the data used the categories identified in Phase 1. First, the frequency of emergent themes was 'binarized' into 1 (with input in that theme) or 0 (none) that resulted to a frequency count. Counting based on the number of occurrences was plotted in each indicator along the corresponding theme. The frequency of the subcategories of the themes which were the prior codes was counted too. This served as the indicators. The indicators were further reduced to derive 5 generic themes/categories. Computation by percentage follows [26]. Analysis in Phase 1 was presented together with the analysis of Phase 2 to draw out a comprehensive result of the study, both presented as tableaux 1 and 2.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the study showed that happiness is contextualized according to how the poor lives. The concept "happiness" was clear to the participants who out-rightly supplied its English equivalent, exemplars and categories.

Phase 1: Thematic Analysis

Tableau 1 shows the most salient meanings clustered around five themes. Unity in the family was repeatedly raised in describing happiness that includes community relationship. Economic prosperity in relation to farm concerns was the second most commonly mentioned topic. Less mentioned is happiness as positive/negative emotion in response to life's

circumstances, spiritual attribution of happiness that reflects a strong sense of spirituality, an inherent desire for good health.

Table 1: Most salient meanings of happiness among rural poor: Codes and exemplars along life’s dimensions

Code/Themes	Exemplar Statement	Life’s dimension
Unity of family	(1) Unity in the family (2) Understanding (3) No internal strife/discord	Social dimension
Economic sufficiency	(1) We have abundant harvest of corn (2) If there will be abundant harvest, the housekeeper will be happy (3) The fisherman will really be happy if there is good weather and plentiful catch	Economic dimension
Positive and negative affect	(1) When we laugh we are already happy (2) I am sad because my in-law died (3) Brother Cris is sad	Emotional dimension
Spiritual connectedness	(1) The whole family is still alive (2) Happy if given a lot of blessing from God (3) What is most important to me is the gift of life	Spiritual dimension
Physical well-being	(1) Happy if we are physically healthy everyday	Physical dimension

Phase 2. Quantitative analysis

Tableau 2 shows the meaning of happiness according to effect size. Unity of the family has the most intense effect size (41.42%) followed by economic sufficiency (32.54%). The other dimensions like happiness as a positive and negative affect, spiritual connectedness and physical well-being have weak effect sizes of 13.18%, 11.83%, and 1.18%, respectively. See comparative pie graph in Figure 1.

The number of indicators for the meaning of happiness under the category of family unity and economic sufficiency are almost the same at 23 and 22, respectively. However, the number of times family unity was mentioned exceeded more than that of the economic concerns (15 times), thus the family posted a stronger effect of 41.42% as compared to the latter’s 32.54%. By computation, this would yield a substantial difference of 8.88%, which means that family unity is still a most intense indicator of happiness. On the other hand, Spiritual connectedness has one more indicator than Positive and negative affect but the latter has frequent occurrence than the former and thus a more intense effect size.

Tableau 2: Intensity effect sizes and frequency distribution of the thematic meanings of happiness among rural poor

Category Number	Themes (Categories)	No. of Indicators per theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Intensity (percentage of total) Effect
1	Unity of family	23	70	41.42
2	Economic sufficiency	22	55	32.54
3	Positive and negative affect	6	22	13.18
4	Spiritual Connectedness	7	20	11.83
5	Physical well-being	1	2	1.18
Total	5 Themes	59	169	100

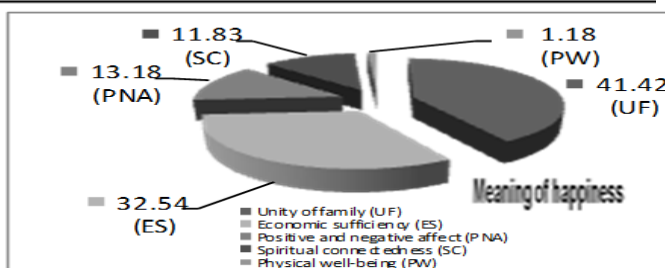


Figure 1.: Comparability graph of the meaning of rural poor’s happiness, according to effect size (by percentage)

Understanding Meanings of Happiness of the rural poor

Indicators of happiness for Filipinos seem closely tied up to family condition and poverty [27], but in this study, despite the participants’ relative poverty, they seemingly have strong family bond. Understandably, they emphasize the family and the value of unity since it somehow compensate for their lack of material wealth while extended, what Oishi [28] calls, their ‘relational riches’. This emphasis also reflects the participants’ laidback way of life unlike urban families who have multiple diversions and hurried concerns in life.

Happiness through harmony and unity in the family: Collectivist orientation

Family life is the reference point for group idea of happiness. Participants repeatedly referred back to the family as the reason in the group’s meaning making of happiness. Accordingly, happiness is “unity in the family”. The family plays an important role in the participants’ construction of happiness because it is their source of enjoyment, “he enjoyed playing with grandchildren”, and pride “our children received ribbons in school”. The family also contributes to financial capability and in pitching household chores “her parents are happy because they can still ask her errands”. When a woman was prodded to speak “what can you say about happiness”, she answered “unity in the family” and added, “and understanding”. The other constructed meanings seem to be ancillary to the attainment and maintenance of a harmonious and unified family. This fact is consistent with most local and foreign researches [29] that points to the Filipino’s close family ties, strong relatedness with others and construal of self with the family. This influence is evident among Filipinos who are by nature collectivists [30]. The Filipino is a family-oriented and is concerned with the promotion of harmony and order in the family [31]. To the rural poor, the family entails a corporate nature as one body. Membership in the family entails a relationship that is founded on understanding and unity. This was repeatedly emphasized in the participant’s “happiness’ can be clustered under unity” initial categorization of the meanings. This finds support from the NSCB poll, which shows Filipinos’ happiness comes from family and religion, not sex [32].

Complete happiness that can only be found in the family has an offshoot definition of ‘marriage as happiness’. The lack of happiness for the unmarried ones was stressed by one participant; “Complete happiness is when she gets married!” This is not surprising since according to Oishi [33] humans are relational, particularly in terms of marital and intimate relationships. The family is a general reference relationship, while marriage is a specific type of social relationship that is enduring and highly institutionalized [34]. Thus, on the average, married people are happier than singles, and that cohabitating couples are not as happy as the married. Anyway, cohabitation without marriage is a rare phenomenon in the rural. Well-being researches noted that happy people have satisfying relationships. Accordingly, a stable/secure intimate relationship such as in marriage is beneficial for the well-being [35]. In this study the participants also expressed that dissolution of relationships would be damaging.

Happiness thru material sufficiency as requisite of a happy family. Along the nexus of family happiness woven by unity is the general agreement among participants that financial sufficiency is necessary. This is exemplified by the statement “*When you have sufficient income*”, and a supporting comment of yet another participant “*because there will be disharmony when there is no rice....there will never be unity*”. Still, another seconded “*That is really true*”. Rice in their example is a concept that stands for food; for the daily provision for the family, and how it might consequently result to unhappiness. This reflects a collective definition of happiness that links the need for economic sufficiency to the welfare of the family. Accordingly, material aspect influence well-being of those living in poverty [36].

Participants’ defined happiness from an economic perspective in line with farm productivity. They are most happy when they have good farm and livestock, less farm calamities and harvest well. This economic happiness seems also influenced by aspiration and social comparison as one participant quipped that “*in farming, that our bananas will bear big fruits like that of our neighbor*”. This reflects a perceived similarity that is more important than the actual similarity relating to happiness [37]. Regardless of the actual income, it is the material aspirations that determine happiness [38].

Contrary to the common maxim that money can buy happiness, in the context of the participant’s discourse, money was not constructed for its purchasing power and they did not claim nor hinted the need to get rich. The participants did not mention aspiration for affluence, but just to have a good harvest and meeting their needs, whether expected or unexpected ways. The participants’ disinterest on getting rich but strong emphasis on a united family suggests that happiness operates along the simplicity of life in the rural. That is, once the basic need for food has been met and the family is together and well, life is already good and happy. This kind of rural contentment has also been observed among Chinese peasants who find peace living in thatch huts [39] which suggests that the lower living conditions in the rural are not adverse to a healthy SWB. Further, contentment (a result of happiness), that seems pervasive in rural living [40] is paired with inactivity and free activation. This perhaps explains why rural poor seemed not driven to further develop their living conditions because their contentment does not urged them to do anything more except to maintain life as is.

Emotion, Spirituality and Physical wellness: Happiness with more Individualistic meanings? The least salient and weak meaning of happiness are those about (positive and negative) affect and spiritual connectedness. Further, happiness that pertains to physical well-being was not picked up in the discussion and showed negligible effect size among meanings of happiness. These three definitions seem given at the individual level that the participants did not construct them collectively.

The subjective nature of emotion has been established among cultures [41] and in the study, the participants’ emotions were reflected as situational responses to their conditions in life such as when Cris said, “*I am not happy because my wife’s sibling died*”. The recency of the event that happened in the morning prior to the study had overwhelmed him. Interestingly, this could be an extension of how the rural poor

consider a family that even included extended family, such as the in-laws - a part of the relational network of consanguinity and affinity. On the positive effect, happiness could simply be an emotional product of engagement with the family because “*He took pleasure toying with his grandchild*”. However, this category has weak effect on their meanings of happiness and represents a fusion of specific emotions with fewer indicators. This might be because they are mature and their laconic responses are plain and dispassionate.

Spiritual connectedness in the study does not mean religiosity, but on how participants appealed their relation to an unseen Being as giving them something to be happy about, exemplified in the statement, “*it seems He grants you that, and sometimes if you have problems it is solved through prayer, that’s it!*” The acknowledgement of the spiritual connects one to the source of their happiness and a positive excuse to hope. Their attribution to God and resignation to fate seems understood by everyone since they are all Catholics with the same religious beliefs. The women were the ones who quickly attribute to God their happiness since “*we are still here: alive. That our whole family is still alive*”. This meaning has a weak intensity effect, but demonstrate how spiritual sensitivity relates to familial concerns.

Physical health was not tackled by the group collectively, although none disagreed because it seems an individual’s concern. By a percentage to the overall effect, it barely account for over 1% of the intensity of the participants’ indicator of happiness. The insignificance of this ‘individualist’ meaning of happiness might be explained in part by the claim of Chopel [42] that happiness is not a function of individual, SWB (the typical Western bias) but of relationship harmony, where people relate and mutually contribute to each other.

Notable among the other lesser meanings of happiness where its connection with the participants’ construction of the core importance of the family. Economic sufficiency, for instance, seems to derive its importance in a supportive role to the maintenance of a harmonious and united family while Positive affect, on the other hand, were associated with how the members find pleasure relating to the family. The family did not only figure out as the most salient factor, but also emphasized peace and unity as the type of values that should characterize it. The dominant discourse reverberate the need for oneness and cooperation that encompasses even the family member’s plans in life. It draws attention to the family as a single unit with one overarching goal, whereas all other external goals contribute to making the family united and strong. This result reflects preponderance of the relational aspect over material and individual concerns such as physical needs and momentary feelings.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Both qualitative and quantitative findings did not only yield a high similarity but provided explanatory link and support to each other. The quantitative result produced objective evidence that strongly points to the family as the core category, farm concerns as the second most important with the rest exerting less power in determining shared meaning of happiness among the rural poor.

The salience of family in this study reflects a collectivist orientation typical of a Filipino culture that concurred with numerous findings [43]. The rural poor's collective construction of happiness is never far from the Filipino's self-concept that is deeply identified with social rootedness and family-centric. The salience of happiness in the family is what Fiske [44] calls a culturally contingent psychological process. To the rural poor, to be happy is to be with the family. To be happy with the family is to have a harmonious relationship. A harmonious relationship builds a strong and unified family unit. Material sufficiency is a corollary meaning of happiness that is very essential to the establishment and maintenance of a united and peaceful family. Other indicators of happiness are not intense to influence the overall happiness, yet they gravitate around the value of family happiness. These meanings seem to be individually-based definitions of happiness that did not fit in to the collaborative meaning-making of the participants. This finding upheld the family as landmark 'cultural' value among Filipinos conjectured to be influenced by their upbringing about happiness embedded in the family and the salience of collectivists' construction. Result of the study argues for cultural implications to policy and program implementation that may capitalize on the various positive aspects in the lives of the rural poor. As Oishi [45] contends, authorities should think about group happiness, not just about happy individuals, as organizations like family have more influence to the development of a society.

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