

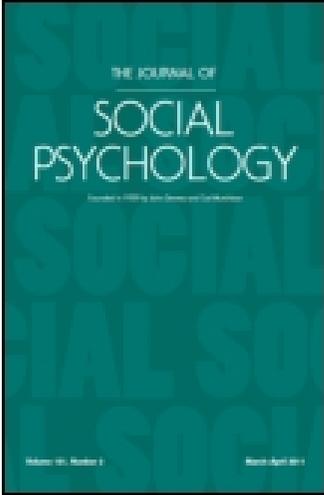
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Sources of Happiness: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT. Perceived sources of happiness among community residents in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and in the West were identified and compared. The authors performed a qualitative analysis to develop a typology and found 9 major categories among 180 reported sources of happiness. They were (a) gratification of need for respect, (b) harmony of interpersonal relationships, (c) satisfaction of material needs, (d) achievement at work, (e) being at ease with life, (f) taking pleasure at others' expense, (g) sense of self-control and self-actualization, (h) pleasure and positive affect, and (i) health. The results indicated that the Western conception of happiness places greater emphasis on intrapersonal or internal evaluation and contentment, whereas the Chinese conception of happiness places greater emphasis on interpersonal or external evaluation and satisfaction. The Chinese conception of happiness also has unique components, such as being at ease with life.

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING has been studied in a large number of disciplines over many centuries and has been defined in ethical, theological, political, economic, and psychological terms (Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1984). Given this paradigmatic diversity, it is not surprising that many terms have been used to label well-being, including happiness, objective well-being, subjective well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction. Of these terms, *happiness* is the most popular, both in research and in lay usage. Since 1973, happiness has been listed as an index term in *Psychological Abstracts International*.

What, then, is meant by happiness? People who are asked this question give two kinds of answers: (a) often experiencing a positive emotional state such as joy or (b) being satisfied with life as a whole or with parts of it. These are two possible components to happiness. However, happiness is not the opposite of

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unhappiness, depression, or psychological ill-health, although it is negatively related to those states and has somewhat different causes (Argyle, 1987; Lu, 1995). Andrews and Withey (1978) first postulated three possible components to happiness: (a) positive emotion, (b) life satisfaction, and (c) the absence of negative emotions or psychological distress. This conceptualization of happiness is receiving increasing support among researchers. However, there may be a fourth component that concerns self-fulfillment and other "depth" elements such as purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). A similar dimension of inner psychological experiences has been found to be produced by seriously engaging in leisure activities, getting on well with loved ones, or feeling overwhelmed by the beauty of nature (Argyle & Crossland, 1991; Lu & Argyle, 1994). The most general description of happiness would be *an internal experience of a positive state of mind*, which can be induced through various means.

One important distinction has been made between the emotional and cognitive aspects of happiness. In general, the former is seen as an emotional or feeling state, or preponderance of positive affect over negative affect (Bradburn, 1969), whereas the latter refers to a more cognitive or judgmental process (Veenhoven, 1991). Researchers in the area usually choose to study one of the aspects of happiness. Similarly, there have been a number of measures of happiness, although none has been widely accepted and most have included either the emotional aspect or the cognitive aspect of happiness (see Diener, 1984; Strack, Argyle, & Schwarz, 1991, for comprehensive reviews). One exception has been the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI; Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989), which was developed with an underlying conceptualization of happiness consisting of (a) life satisfaction, (b) positive affect, and (c) absence of negative affect.

The OHI asks participants to rate their experiences of 29 potential sources of happiness on a scale ranging from 0 to 3. To do justice to the positive nature of the happiness construct, the designers of the OHI positively skewed the rating scales (Diener, 1984). The OHI has good reliability and validity (Argyle & Lu, 1995). Researchers who performed factor analyses on the OHI with several groups of participants (young and old, male and female, students and community residents) found a relatively stable structure consisting of seven components of happiness: (a) positive cognition, (b) social commitment, (c) positive affect, (d) sense of control, (e) physical fitness, (f) satisfaction with self, and (f) mental alertness. This list conveys a sense of the intrapersonal focus of happiness, that is, internal evaluation and contentment. Social commitment is the only component that reflects the interpersonal sphere of happiness. There is, then, a bias toward individualistic values in the happiness research to date, and almost all research in the area has been conducted by Western scholars and with Western participants, except for a few cross-cultural studies that were performed using Western concepts and measures. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the Western conception of happiness, and consequently its scientific measurements, can be universally applied regardless of cultural variations; culture and value sys-

tems may have a profound impact on the conception of happiness and on perceived sources of happiness in life.

It is important to ask whether the happiness of Chinese people differs from that of Western populations. Because there is little empirical work on the happiness of Chinese people, we reviewed Chinese philosophical teachings to explore two related issues: (a) What is meant by happiness in a traditional Chinese culture? and (b) How can happiness be achieved?

The word *happiness* did not appear in the Chinese language until recently. *Fu*, or *fu qi*, is perhaps the closest equivalent of happiness in Chinese ancient writings. However, its definition, which is extremely vague, usually means "anything positive and good in life" (*Xin Hua Dictionary*, 1987, p. 127). Wu (1991) pointed out that longevity, prosperity, health, peace, virtue, and a comfortable death are among the best values in life, namely, *fu qi*. Roughly, the Chinese people's conception of happiness includes material abundance, physical health, virtuous and peaceful life, and relief from death anxiety.

Confucianism has been the dominant value system in Chinese societies and the most powerful influence shaping the Chinese culture and the conceptions of Chinese people for thousands of years. Confucian philosophy presupposes that the life of each individual is only a link in that person's family lineage and that an individual is a continuation of his or her ancestors. The same reasoning can be applied to an individual's offspring. Although this teaching does not necessarily imply belief in reincarnation, it does put one's family in the center of one's life and everyday existence. Unlike Christianity-dominated Western cultures, Chinese culture does not proclaim the pursuit of salvation in the next life as the ultimate concern; rather, it advocates that one should strive to expand and preserve the prosperity and vitality of one's family. To achieve this goal, one must work hard and be frugal to accumulate material resources, obtain respectable social status, suppress selfish desires, lead a virtuous life, and fulfill one's social duties. The emphasis on social interaction found in Confucianism provides a basis for understanding the Chinese conception of happiness.

Yang and Cheng (1987) divided the Confucian values, still well preserved in Taiwan, into four groups. Family factors include family responsibilities and obedience to one's elders. Group factors include accepting the hierarchical structure of society; trust in and obedience to authority; and commitment to the solidarity, harmony, and norms of the group. Job-orientation factors include education, skill learning, hard work, and frugality. Disposition factors include austerity, calmness, humility, and self-control. Putting these values into practice should lead to happiness in life.

Wu (1992) asserted that Confucian happiness is achieved though "knowledge, benevolence, and harmony of the group" (p. 31). Confucian philosophy stresses the collective welfare of the family, or clan (extending to society and the entire human race) more than individual welfare. Under this collectivist orientation, Chinese culture emphasizes sharing the fruits of individual success with the

group. Contributing to society is the ultimate happiness, whereas hedonistic striving for happiness is regarded as unworthy and even shameful.

Some views of happiness are shared by the Chinese people and Western populations, and some are uniquely Chinese. Both cultures view the ultimate state of life and the inner, positive nature of experience as part of their conception of happiness; thus, the nature of happiness and its state of experience are universal. The differences between the Western and Chinese views of happiness lie in the potential sources of happiness, or the means to achieve happiness. Western culture values individual striving, control, and achievement. According to Chinese philosophy, constant personal introspection, improvement, self-control, and practicing of moral virtues are important paths leading to meaning in life and, ultimately, happiness. Thus, happiness goes far beyond the individual sphere of life into the group, community, and societal spheres of existence. This view of happiness reflects collectivistic values and concerns. Researchers studying the happiness of Chinese people should consider more distinct sources of happiness that are not covered in Western measures such as the OHI. Our purpose in the present article was twofold: (a) to explore perceived sources of happiness among residents of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and (b) to compare them with those of Western populations.

Method

Participants

We interviewed 54 community residents of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Because previous research has indicated that sources of happiness may be heavily influenced by the individual's lifestyle or age group (Argyle, 1987), we limited our sample to adults between the ages of 18 and 60. The sample consisted of 26 persons aged 18–29 (48.1%), 16 persons aged 30–39 (29.6%), 12 persons aged 40–49 (22.2%), and 10 persons aged 50–59 (18.5%).

Among those interviewed, 34 were men (63%) and 20 were women (37%). One person was illiterate (1.8%), 9 had completed primary school (16.2%), 14 had completed junior school (25.2%), 8 had completed high school (14.4%), and 22 had a college education or above (39.6%). The average educational attainment of the participants was high school graduation, which is close to the national average.

Procedure

To reflect the exploratory nature of the study, we adopted a qualitative approach. The second author conducted semistructured interviews at a large square in the center of town, a popular location for leisure pursuits and public meetings. Data reported here are mainly responses to two questions: (a) "What is happiness?" and (b) "What sort of things will make you happy?" No time limit

was set; instead, we applied the saturation principle, and the researcher terminated an interview when the respondent stopped providing new information.

Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed; then, possible sources of happiness were extracted and recorded on a separate list to form the final transcript for analysis. Altogether, the respondents supplied 180 sources of happiness. We had preset the desired level of analysis by developing a classification scheme to organize the reported sources of happiness into meaningful categories. To achieve this objective, we formed a research group consisting of three psychologists and one sociologist. After reading the transcript many times, interpreting meanings, looking for themes, and organizing these themes, each researcher developed a tentative classification plan. The research group then engaged in a thorough discussion, comparing and revising these tentative plans. Eventually, the group reached a consensus on a master classification scheme consisting of nine categories. This discussion and revision process was necessary to achieve intersubjectivity, hence ensuring acceptable reliability and validity for the study.

Results and Discussion

The nine-category classification scheme for sources of happiness was as follows:

1. Gratification of need for respect, for example, "being praised and respected by others" or "being looked up to."
2. Harmony of interpersonal relationships, for example, "having a warm family" or "offspring having high achievements."
3. Satisfaction of material needs, for example, "having enough money to spend" or "making lots of money."
4. Achievement at work, for example, "work offering a sense of achievement" or "being creative at work and achieving goals."
5. Being at ease with life, for example, "submissive to fate" or "understanding meaning of life."
6. Taking pleasure at others' expense, for example, "having a holiday, while others are working hard."
7. Sense of self-control and self-actualization, for example, "achieving one's goals in life" or "trying one's best and getting desired feedback."
8. Pleasure and positive affect, for example, "a relaxed mood" or "nothing to make one angry."
9. Health, for example, "no illness."

We compared the empirical data on sources of happiness with the Chinese philosophical teachings, especially Confucian values. First, we used interpersonal interaction as a framework and found that happiness was manifested by gratification of the need for respect through others' positive recognition of one's conduct or success. The conception of happiness as harmony in interpersonal relationships conveys a desire for solidarity and loyalty, especially within the

family or clan. Satisfaction of material needs and achievement at work are two means of serving one's family and glorifying one's clan.

Second, the Chinese philosophical ideal of a virtuous life and peace in understanding the meaning of life were also evident in our data. Sense of self-control and self-actualization refer mainly to practicing moral virtues through self-monitoring and self-improvement. Being at ease with life, which may reflect a depth component of happiness, corresponds to the traditional Chinese philosophy of submission to, rather than control over, the environment. It also represents the desirable end-state of life, namely, harmony among heaven, earth, and people.

Third, in Chinese society, longevity has always been regarded as a *fu qi*, almost as a virtue. Health as a source of happiness reflects this traditional value.

There were some discrepancies between the traditional philosophical teachings and values and the modern conception of happiness in Taiwan. In a traditional society, aspirations such as glorifying one's family or clan and benefiting society could be fulfilled through an official career—typically after extensive study and passing many examinations. In modern Chinese society, especially in a heavily industrialized society like Taiwan, the same underlying motive and value still exist, but specific goals have shifted from careers in government service to careers in business. Hence, the pursuit of money and material affluence was salient in this classification of sources of happiness.

Another unexpected finding was that taking pleasure at others' expense was considered as a source of happiness. In fact, the phenomenon is within most people's realm of experience; downward social comparison is a common form of interpersonal judgment. A Chinese idiom dubs it *angry at others' haves, laughing at others' have-nots*. Of course, this darker side of happiness is not to be found in idealistic teachings of the Chinese philosophers. It does, however, underscore the importance of comparing theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence.

We found some age differences in terms of sources of happiness. The sources of happiness that were mentioned most frequently were pleasure and positive affect for respondents aged 16–20; satisfaction of material needs for those aged 20–30; achievement at work for those aged 30–40; gratification of need for respect for those aged 40–50; and being at ease with life for those older than 50. This pattern of apparent differential importance in sources of happiness corresponds to specific concerns relevant to particular stages in life. However, the importance of family and interpersonal relationships was not affected by age, a finding that is consistent with the Chinese emphasis on the social being.

In conclusion, the Western conception of happiness seems to place greater emphasis on intrapersonal or internal evaluation and contentment, whereas the Chinese conception emphasizes interpersonal or external evaluation and satisfaction. This split is consistent with Triandis's (1994) distinction between individualism and collectivism. However, the Chinese and the Western conceptions of happiness do have some similarities, such as pleasure and positive affect.

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