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The Sources of Happiness to the Malaysians and Indonesians: Data from a Smaller Nation

Jas Laile Jaafar^a, Mohd Awang Idris^b, Jamal Ismuni^c, Yoo Fei^d, Salinah Jaafar^e,
Zahir Ahmad^f, Muhammad Raduan Mohd Ariff^g, Bagus Takwin^h, Yogi
Suprayogi Sugandi^{i*}

^a*Dept of Educational Psychology and Counseling; Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

^{bcd}*Dept of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

^{ef}*Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

^g*Dept of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

^h*Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

ⁱ*Faculty of Social Administration, University of Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia*

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to explore the happiness indicators of the Malaysians and Indonesians. Although there have been many studies investigating happiness dimension in Western societies, relatively is known about it in the Eastern societies. A total of 202 respondents (100 Malaysians, 102 Indonesians) were asked to respond to a question on happiness. Content analysis of responses to the question “what makes you happy” yielded 12 themes. Qualitative analyses yielded, as predicted, the welfare of the groups especially family, take precedence over personal achievements.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +603 7967 5095; fax: +603 7967 5010 .
E-mail address: laile@um.edu.my.

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1. Introduction

One classic question in studying SWB is what makes people happy? So far, most of the studies on happiness have been centered on Western individualistic countries. In the East, there have been studies on the happiness of the Koreans (Kim et al., 2007; Lee et al., 1999), the quality of life and happiness of the Japanese (Inoguchi & Fujii, 2009; Kan, Karasawa, & Kitayama, 2009; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009), the happiness of high school students in Taiwan (Su & Lu, 2009), subjective well-being of migrants and older adults in China (Cheng & Chan, 2005; Ku, Fox & McKenna, 2008; Lam & Boey, 2005; Monk-Turner & Turner, 2009), the quality of life and life satisfaction of the Chinese in Hong Kong (Cheung & Leung, 2002; Sing, 2009; Wan & Lau, 2004), the quality of life in Singapore (Tambyah, Tan & Kau, 2009), the personal well-being of Thais (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2004; Yiengprugsawan et al., 2009), happiness of the Turks (Eryilmaz, 2010), and the Pakistanis (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). An impressive study was done by Lu and Shih (1997) on the sources of happiness and the study has been cited ever since. Obviously, all these studies show that there are some distinctive features of the happiness of the Eastern people (see also Nakamura, 1985). The people in the East usually belong to a collectivistic society. Apparently, collectivistic values have some significant influence on the things that makes them happy. In other words, the concept and definition of happiness have, up to this point, been based on a Western ideal that places great emphasis on individualism and liberalism which is in contrast to collectivistic cultures that place importance on a harmonious relationship with other members of the society (Lu & Gilmour, 2006; Lu & Shih, 1997). In collectivistic Confucian-based cultures and societies such as the Koreans, the Chinese and the Japanese, moderation rather than extremism is held in greater esteem. In other words, extreme happiness and satisfaction are not considered ideal in such collectivistic societies (Lu et al., 2001). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the well-established concept of happiness of the Western societies are observed in the Eastern societies or do the Eastern societies do have some distinctive contributing factors of happiness. Although a few studies in Eastern culture would provides a significant knowledge on this area, however most of the studies is only focusing on Chinese or Japanese. Yet study focusing on Eastern Muslim countries and the understanding of the concept happiness remain unclear. Thus, the current study specifically focuses on Malaysian and Indonesian.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, the number of studies on that associated to happiness concept is escalating slowly as this subject is quite new in this region. In Malaysia, Haslina (2010) conducted a study on the relationship between personality and subjective well-being, and others on the life satisfaction of women, aborigines, and the elderly (Howell, Howell & Schwabe, 2006; Howell et al., 2012; Jaafar et al., 2009; Ma'rof and Asnarulkhadi, 2006; Nor Ba'yah & Kamsiah, 2002; Noraini, 1999; Swami et al., 2007). Likewise in Indonesia, there are studies on the quality of life of the aged in Indonesia (Kurniawan and Scheithauer, 2012; Lesmana, 2012; Lamb, 1996; Ofstedal, Reidy, & Knodel, 2004; Soeharso, Yudha, & Evanytha, 2010), and happiness in women (Miwa Patnani, 2010). Thus, not only that happiness of the Eastern societies are underrepresented, but the studies from this side of the world are also substantially on the Chinese, but some of them are also economically and management-based. Therefore, it would seem that the limitation of the current literature highlights the necessity of documenting the meaning of

happiness in Eastern cultures which, in fact, comprise not only the Chinese but also the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, the Philippines, Malaysians and Indonesians.

The current study specifically explores the concept of happiness among Malays who lives in Malaysia and Indonesian. We conceive that this study is crucial since most of Malays and Javanese are Muslim, in contrast to some previous studies in Asia (i.e. Cheung & Leung, 2002; Su & Lu, 2009). Second, although both Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia share similarities in term of power distance and collective culture (Schwartz, 1999), however national characteristics would provide a significant distinctiveness among both people (see Georgas & Berry, 1995). While Malaysia administration system derived from British common law (Idris, Dollard & Winefield, 2010), Indonesia in particular adopted the system from Dutch legacy. Based on the above arguments, the present study attempts to explore the happiness indicators of the Malaysians and Indonesians by interviewing the respondents. We utilized ‘lay theory approach’ (Kinman & Jones, 2005) to gain the information from the respondents as it prove as useful and has some advantages, particularly to see how people themselves interpret the concept of happiness. Our analyses intend to contribute some findings from a smaller nation and it is hoped that some culturally-distinctive values of the Malaysians and Indonesians which have an effect on well-being can be highlighted.

1. Method

2.1 Respondents

Two hundred and two respondents (100 Malaysians and 102 Indonesians; 110 males and 92 females, 21 to 60 years old) in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Bandung respectively, were interviewed. Respondents were approached by using convenience sampling. We approached the respondent at their home and workplaces. All respondents are Muslims and sharing the same cultural roots (commonly known as Austronesian or recently Malay-Austronesian, see Hassan, 2004; Reid, 2001). Both societies are rich with Eastern and Islamic traditions which practice collectivistic culture (Jaafar et al., 2009; Wan Kadir, 1994).

2.2 Measures and Procedures

Interviews were conducted at a convenience place for the respondents and no time limit is set. The respondents was asked, “What makes you happy?”. The question is used in studying the kinds of things leading to happiness or what constitutes SWB. The interview session lasted between 10 to 20 minutes. All recorded interviews were transcribed manually by using thematic approach and were analyzed using NVivo to identify the themes of happiness. To ensure the reliability of the result, 15% proportion in both sample of sample were rated by second rater (cf. Kinman & Jones, 2005; Idris, Dollard & Winefield, 2010). The resulting coded transcripts were compared for reliability and it is found that the percentage of inter-rater agreement is more than 80%. The data were sifted through to examine the significant statements which indicate the contributing factors of happiness.

2.3 Results

There are 12 themes emerges from the study, indicated as the sources of happiness which are family, career, interpersonal and social relationships, self-growth/self-autonomy, wealth, recreation, needs, education, absence from negative feelings, national prosperity, health, religion, and basic needs (see Table 1). Thirty percent of the Malaysians and 28.8% of the Indonesian reported that family as the

highest contributor in bringing them happiness. This is followed by work-related achievements and group welfare by the Malaysians, and group welfare and self-autonomy by the Indonesians.

Table 1: What makes you happy?

Themes/Indicators (what makes you happy)	Malaysia						Indonesia					
	M	%	F	%	T	%	M	%	F	%	T	%
Family	28	26.4	41	33.0	69	30.1	41	22.7	40	40.0	81	28.8
Social relationships/intra and interpersonal relationships	8	7.5	16	12.9	24	10.4	27	15.0	13	13.0	40	14.2
Self autonomy/freedom/self -fulfillment	8	7.5	16	12.9	24	10.4	20	11.0	11	11.0	31	11.1
Career/Achievement at work	15	14.2	11	8.9	26	11.3	10	5.4	3	3.0	13	4.6
Wealth	15	14.1	7	5.6	22	9.6	19	10.5	4	4.0	23	8.2
Recreation needs	9	8.5	12	9.7	21	9.1	12	6.6	3	3.0	15	5.3
Absence from negative feelings	8	7.5	3	2.4	11	4.8	18	10.0	10	10.0	28	10.0
Education	2	1.9	9	7.3	11	4.8	5	2.8	2	2.0	7	2.5
National prosperity, peace	6	5.7	3	2.4	9	3.9	1	0.6	1	3.0	2	0.7
Religious/spiritual needs	2	1.9	2	1.6	4	1.7	10	5.5	2	2.0	12	4.3
Health	4	3.8	4	3.3	8	3.5	14	7.7	8	8.0	22	7.8
Physiological/Basic needs	1	1.0	0	0	1	0.4	4	2.2	3	3.0	7	2.5

Notes: M= male; F= female; T= total

2. Discussion

The current study attempts to explore the happiness indicators of the Malaysians and Indonesians. We found that there are 12 happiness indicators which are family, career, interpersonal and social relationships, self-growth/self-autonomy, wealth, recreation, needs, education, absence from negative feelings, national prosperity, health, religion, and basic needs. As with past studies on other

Eastern societies, these findings demonstrate that the Malaysian and Indonesian societies naturally uphold collectivistic values which put family and group welfare first. Earlier research has also shown that happiness in Eastern societies is based on six dimensions viz., relationships with other individuals, respect toward others, financial status, work achievements, less emphasis on social status but maintaining harmony (Lu et al., 2001), harmony and stability in life (Lee et al., 2001), wish to be respected, harmonious interpersonal relationships, career achievements, an easier life, *schadenfreude*, self-control and self-actualisation, positive feelings, joy and health (Lu & Shih, 1997), relationships with children, relationships with parents and siblings, marital relationship, life goals, relationships with others, finances, health, positive attitude, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, autonomy, self-growth, freedom and recreation, social status, kindness, appearance, social environment and relationships with loved ones. Therefore, the present study findings are somewhat parallel with past studies on the Eastern society's happiness indicators and the results also reflect cultural values in Malaysia and Indonesia.

3. Conclusion

Veenhoven (2012) argues that the question is easier put than answered as individuals' experiences of SWB are inherently linked to their culture. At least the current study is the first known quantitative study to explore the happiness indicators of the Malaysians and Indonesians. There is still a long way to go until we are able to produce our own culturally-sensitive happiness measurement which will capture all our culturally-related values. Our findings add to a small but emerging body of research on the happiness of the Eastern people.

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