

Thematic thread: Living Conviviality

Title: What have traditional hunter-gatherers got to say about happiness?

Long Abstract:

The quest for happiness has become a global rush, almost alike the quest for wealth. While many may believe that the two outcomes are intricately linked, with more wealth bringing about more happiness, researchers have been showing us that this is not always the case. Higher incomes may raise happiness to some extent, but studies in the social, psychological and economic disciplines are showing that both the *craving* and *competition* for higher income may actually reduce one's happiness. Also, as many studies demonstrate, once basic needs are met, increased income does not necessarily equal increased happiness.

At the national level, statistics show us that countries like the United States have achieved striking economic and technological progress over the past half century, but with little to show in terms of gains in self-reported happiness of its citizens. At a social level, increased wealth has come at a high price, with widened social and economic inequalities, as well as higher rates of depression, violence, and mistrust. Awareness of these trends has led to a rising worldwide demand that policy-makers incorporate other than just economic measures as indicators for wellbeing, and that they be more closely aligned with what really matters to people. So, for instance, while the past decades have seen governments equating wellbeing to mainly economic indicators such as the Gross National Product (GNP), today the focus is increasingly shifting towards self-reported "happiness", with countries like Bhutan adopting a "National Happiness Index" (NHI).

Last year, The Earth Institute released its second ever World Happiness Report, which ranks the happiest countries around the globe based on World Gallup Poll Surveys. While this is a big step forward in happiness research, some fundamental questions still remain unanswered. For instance: a) what does happiness mean to different peoples around the globe? And b) is there a universal understanding of the concept? While a number of studies have looked at happiness across different cultures, the focus has tended to remain on the links between happiness and income. A much less addressed issue is whether there are cross-cultural differences in the actual *perceptions* of happiness, leading us to question whether we can even compare happiness across cultures.

This study addresses this gap by questioning whether we really can have one common approach to study happiness in application to people and societies with strikingly different cultures and worldviews, or whether we run the risk of having different

interpretations, and thus non-comparable answers, particularly on self-reported happiness. Moreover, the literature that exists on social and psychological aspects of happiness is highly biased to modern, industrialized societies. As a result, there is an evident lack of research on local understandings and definitions of happiness by other cultures, particularly from small-scale, preindustrial societies who are likely to be highly, if not completely, left out of the Gallup surveys compiling the currently predominant global data on happiness.

The overall aim of this study is *to understand perceptions of happiness and well-being in three traditional indigenous hunter-gatherer societies*. More specifically, I compare individual self-reported happiness data with: 1) individual health (self-reported and biophysical); 2) individual perceptions of basic needs; 3) household income and wealth, and; 4) personality (positive and negative emotions). I also compare self-reported happiness with a) general demographic (e.g. gender, age), cultural (e.g. beliefs, acculturation), and social capital (e.g. trust, sharing) characteristics of the individual and their context.

The study takes place amongst six villages from three indigenous hunter-gatherer societies: the Tsimane' in Bolivian Amazonia, the Baka in the Cameroonian Congo Basin, and the Punan Tubu in Indonesian Borneo. The data were obtained from fieldwork over an 18-months period in each site. In each case, the villages allow for comparison between one village that is more market-integrated and acculturated, and one village living a more traditional lifestyle.

The data are analyzed using quantitative statistical methods to correlate between individual happiness and the above-mentioned variables, as well as to generally compare happiness perceptions across the three cultures. The findings of the research have numerous implications. Firstly, they shed new light on the still scarce literature on cross-cultural differences in perceptions of happiness. Secondly, the study provides a valuable basis for future policy makers, development agents, researchers and other actors working with national or local wellbeing. Finally, what new perspectives and conceptualisations result from this study will no doubt add breadth and depth to the otherwise mostly Western epistemologically grounded discourse around happiness and wellbeing, and hence also raises questions concerning our current mainstream "development" trajectory.