



What have non-western (including traditional “indigenous”) cultures got to say about happiness?

Aili Pyhälä

University of Helsinki

&

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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Outline of my talk

- What's all this sudden fuss about happiness?
- What have we found out (mostly in western societies) ?
- What do we know from cross-cultural research?
- Some experiences & findings from traditional hunter-gatherer societies
- Some conclusions
- Final thoughts & reflections for discussion

A note on terminology

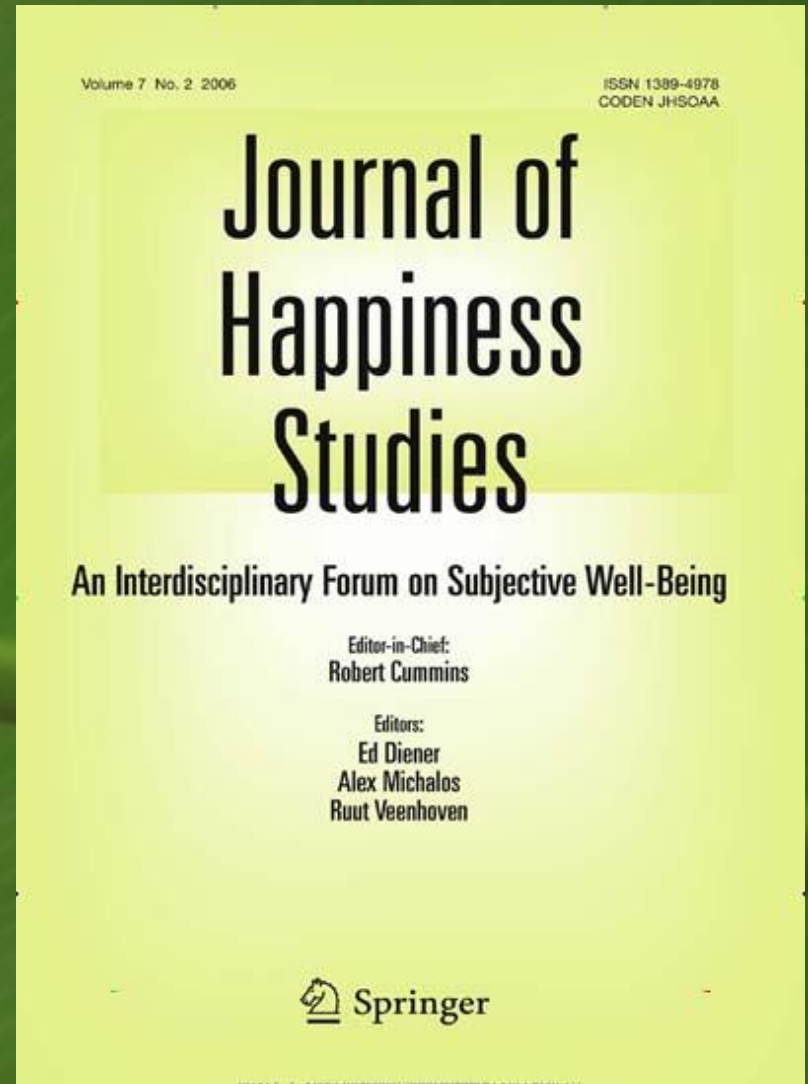
- Happiness – (Subjective) Wellbeing – Quality of Life – Life Satisfaction – Buen Vivir...
- Happiness : more hedonic
- Satisfaction : more the welfare dimension
- Happiness is more of an emotional construct

So what's all this fuss about happiness?

1. Increasing academic & scholarly interest

- From various disciplines:

- Economists
- Psychologists
- Neurobiologists
- Sociologists
- Anthropologists
- ...



PRESERVE OUR NATURAL RICH HERITAGE DO NOT POLLUTE
THE SURROUNDINGS.

REMEMBER NATURE IS THE SOURCE OF

ALL HAPPINESS.

Drukgye! NSS

What's the fuss?

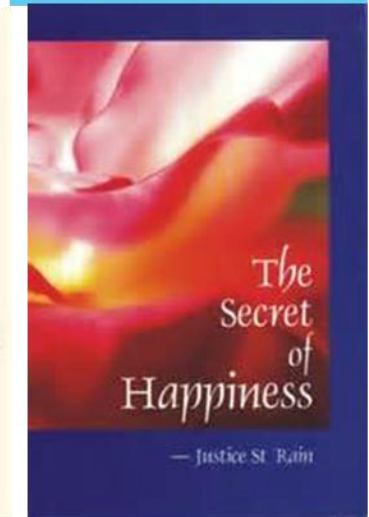
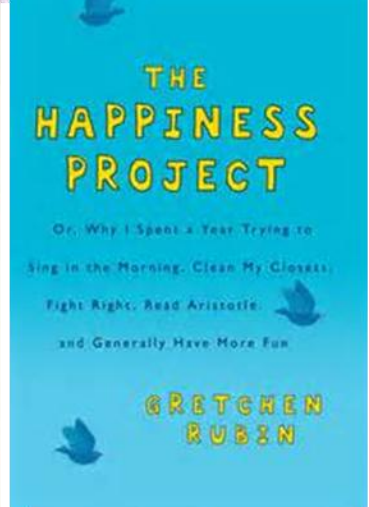
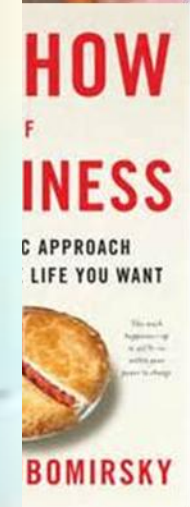
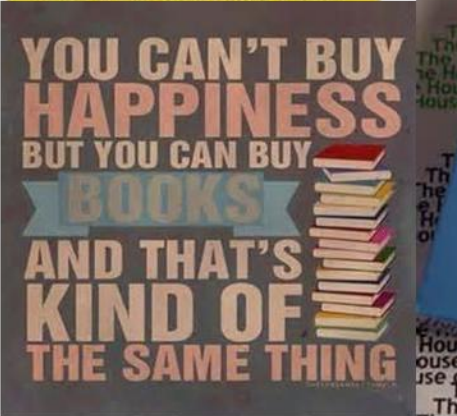
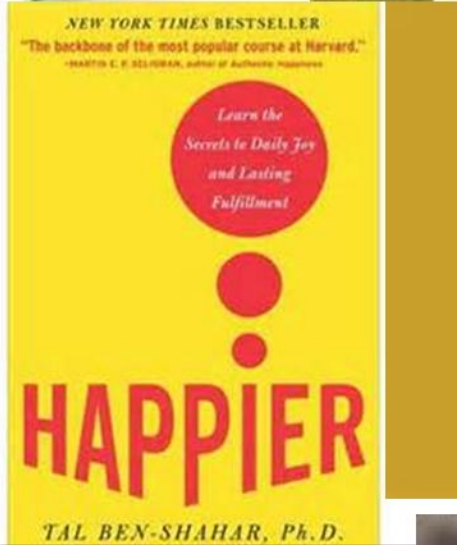
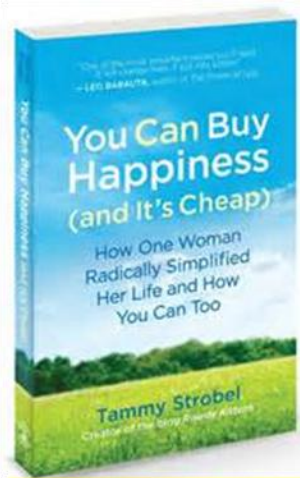
3. Happiness THE TREND: "Happylogia"
media, advertisement, (brainwashing?)...



But hold on...

A study neurobiological study revealed that
"Eating ice cream really does make you happy." (!!?)

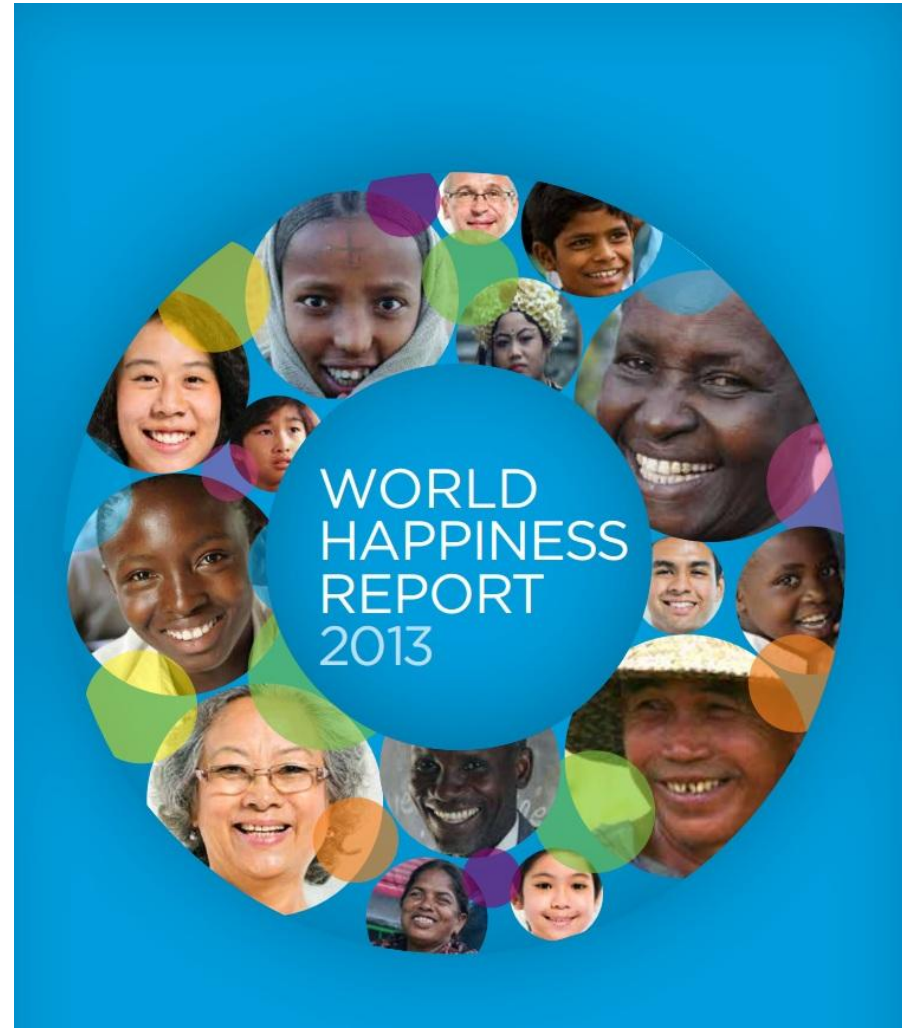
The Guardian, Friday 29 April 2005



What draws us to happiness?

4. Search for alternatives to GDP, for indicators of wellbeing other than economic growth and mainstream “development”

HAPPY
PLANET
INDEX



Cross-cultural SWB research

- Norms dictate appropriate feelings and how important SWB is considered to be (Diener, Oishi & Lucas 2003)
- Differences in patterning and content of SWB variables between cultures, as well as in the *causes* correlated to SWB (Tov & Diener. 2007)
- Differences in “expression” of happiness (e.g. no cultural differences in on-line experience, yet European Americans reported higher degree of well-being than Asian Americans) (Oishi, 2002, 2005)
- Individualistic cultures are happier than collectivists. Psychological attributes characterizing the self more relevant to Western individualists than to the happiness of collectivists (Suh and Oishi 2004)

Studies amongst indigenous peoples

- **The Navajos:** “walking in beauty”, a spiritual and daily practice bonding people to themselves, their loved ones, their community and social relations, the natural world, and the universe. Strong interconnections between body, mind and spirit (Willeto 2012)
- **The Inuit:** family life is at the center of happiness. Happiness also includes the state of mind of being engaged in a particular activity. Traditional social values and practices are considered integral to reforming wellness (Kral & Idlout 2012)
- **The Tuva:** cyclical happiness: the same word for happiness, sadness and the mixed coexistence of the two (Yuxin Hou, Pers. Comm)

LEK Project

<http://icta.uab.cat/Etnecologia/lek>

“The Adaptive Nature of Culture:

A cross-cultural analysis of the returns of Local Environmental Knowledge in three indigenous societies”



Ethnoecology Laboratory



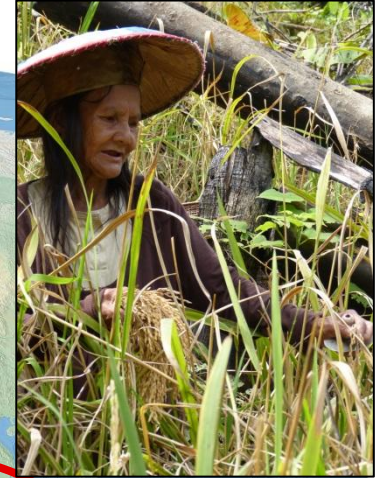
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LEK Project

FP-7-261791-LEK

Case Study Sites: 3 Ethnicities, 6 Communities



2 villages

Tsimane'

2 villages

Baka

2 villages

Punan Tubu





Methods

- 18 months fieldwork in each site
- Carefully Standardized Quarterly Surveys
- Adults 16 years and over



Methodological Challenges

(Pilot-testing):

What did not work?

- Smiles
- Terminology (like “happy”)
- Too many similar & vague questions
- 10-pt scale

What worked?

- New wording & context
- Causality
- 5 pt scale
- Negative emotions recall (anger, fear, jealousy)

Results

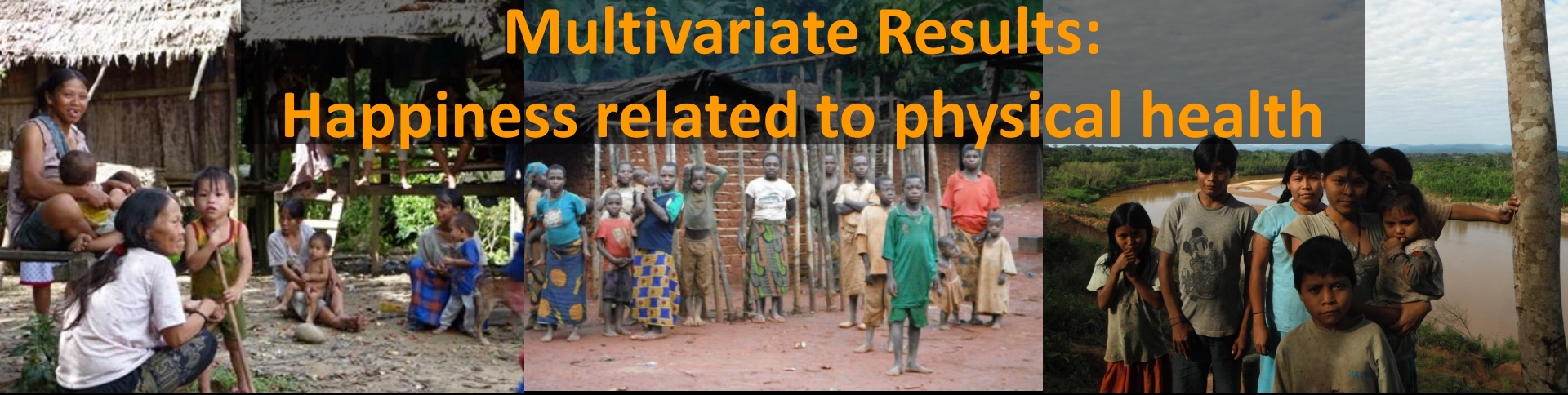
Mean Self-Reported Happiness

Country	Score	Country avg
Bolivia	5.522	5.857
nr obs	135	
Cameroon	6.050	4.420
nr obs	219	
Indonesia	5.060	5.348
nr obs	114	
Total Avg	5.544	
total nr obs	474	

In all three, pregnant females had highest scores (5.933) compared to non-pregnant females (5.236) and males (5.698)

Multivariate Results:

Happiness related to physical health



Controlling for age, gender, education, income, & integration

- **BMI** ($p=0.007$) (**for men**) & **anemia** ($p=0.067$) were significantly correlated to self-reported emotional wellbeing
 - For men, the bigger the BMI, the happier
 - For all, the more anemic, the less happy
- Self-Reported **Physical Health** & Self-reported **Mental Health** were significantly correlated ($p=0.000$)

Results

Type of cause	% times mentioned	for happiness	for unhappiness
Biophysical	25.6	23.6	24,8
Economic	25.3	37.2	14,4
Social	25.3	27.7	23,2
Emotional	19.7	6.1	36
Environmental	2.9	4.1	0,8
Spiritual	1.2	1.4	0,8
Nr. of Obs	340	148	125

Examples of causes

Biophysical

Symptom

Infected by people

Insects/Animals

Food poisoning

Physical working condition

Substance abuse

Life cycle

Bad hygiene

Illnesses caused by mother's milk

Health/Sickness-related

Accident (football, machete, etc)

Spiritual

Blessed by God/Komba/spirits

Fear of spirits

Food prohibition transcended

Spiritual (general)

Economic

Having enough or Lacking of food/water/hunger

About to finish a project

Successful/productive harvest/hunting/fishing

About to sell produce

Have enough alcohol

Lacking or having things/economy/possessions

Social

Family (either well or worried about)

Conjugal problems

Social or legal problem/jealousy

Victim of theft

Social event

Emotional

Loneliness

Sadness in heart/memories/nostalgia

Seeing bad things

Fear of death or illness

Wants to dance

A closer look at the Tsimane'



What is happiness, anyway? Tsimane' responses

Happiness for the Tsimane'	Type	Saliency
To spend time with close family	Social	0.56
To have a good garden plot	Economic-S	0.46
To have good food	Economic-S	0.35
To succeed in hunting	Economic-S	0.35
To drink <i>shocdye'</i>	Social	0.24
To succeed in fishing	Economic-S	0.23
To have good health	Health	0.21
To receive visits	Social	0.21
To acquire commercial goods	Economic-M	0.19
To visit kin	Social	0.19
To have money	Economic-M	0.19
To visit the town	Social	0.13

A closer look at the Tsimane'

- Consumption of market goods is not associated with wellbeing (Masferrer-Dodas, et al 2012).

>> supports degrowth!

- Negative association between individual achievement of the cultural model and psychological distress; positive association between individual achievement of the cultural model and psychological well-being (Reyes-García, et al 2009).
- The Tsimane' sense of happiness centers on social relations and success in common subsistence activities. Possession of material goods and money does not appear as important sources of happiness.



Conclusions

- Global reports mostly based on just one question – which does not even work in all cultures (for several reasons)
- Challenges in communication between cultures, and between local and “scientific” ways of knowing, feeling, living and expressing.
- Cross-cultural investigations of happiness and subjective well-being requires a greater linguistic and cross-cultural sophistication.

Challenges/ Limitations/ Caveats

- Dichotomy of mental and non-mental (spiritual/cultural/natural) realms – imposed & questionable
- Lay criticism on the study (especially quantification & measurement) of concepts like happiness, wellbeing and emotions
- Cultural imposition: Happiness still largely a western concept - seen as individualistic, as a mission, as an indicator of personal “success”

Reflections/ Thoughts

- Obsession of finding the perfect measurement scales, analytical frameworks, and then “the happiest people on Earth”.
- Why even study happiness? Why try to define it?
- *“Each person has their own specific and unique definition of happiness and what it means to them, and that is how it should be”* (Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi, Bhutanese monk)
- What to do with cultural inconsistencies in the absolute fundamentals of happiness/wellbeing?
- Dangers of mainstream ideology and “top-down” logic for an “index of happiness” rather than holistic measures of multidimensional well-being.
- Is there something we can learn from indigenous perspectives for our own understandings and “living” of happiness? How would that shape our view on personal and collective evolution?

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Thank you!



aili.pyhala@uab.cat

Main World Happiness Report findings

- Happier countries tend to be richer countries.
- More important than income are social factors (e.g. strength of social support, absence of corruption, degree of personal freedom...)
- Unemployment causes as much unhappiness as bereavement or separation.
- Mental health is the biggest single factor affecting happiness in any country.
- Stable family life and enduring marriages +
- In advanced countries, women are happier than men; in poorer countries : mixed.
- Happiness is lowest in middle age.