INTERVIEW: CULTURAL FRAMEWORK OF HAPPINESS

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Happiness is one of the most useful and the most important things we could be studying. Our environmental impact is enormous; inequality is rising. It's pretty clear that we are going to change some things in the coming years. Technology alone is not going to fix this. We can have carbon taxes, we can be developing environment-friendly technologies – but at the end of the day, if our priorities are still wrong, we may still not have a good quality of life that we could have, and also we may never really solve our problems with inequality, with the environment. So, I think, figuring out how – more efficiently – to create conditions for happy lives is really essential. There is a lot we can do with an individual level of happiness too, but I am less interested in the "Me"-question ("what can I do for myself?") that "what can WE do for a happier society?"

Uliana Lushch-Purii, PhD, Associate Professor, co-funder of The Ukrainian Institute for Happiness Research: *Some people who have very superficial knowledge on happiness claim that speaking happiness on a society scale or in state management dimension has totalitarian origin. On the contrary, we [Roman Purii and I] – as co-authors of a book on happiness and co-funders of The Ukrainian Institute for Happiness Research, prove that subject of happiness is important for democratic societies, because we speak of society of happy people, that is no patterns of happiness are imposed, everyone is searching for his/her ways to be happy, people try to share happiness and be happy together. How can we eliminate a totalitarian spirit in the problem of happiness?*

That's a great question. I really hope philosophers will get more involved in this, since political philosophy has a lot to say that is relevant, but we really haven't been a part of a game. I am worried about governments being too heavy-handed in trying to ether just promote happiness narrowly or using a narrow definition of happiness. In the last year this book came out "The Origins of Happiness" by Richard Layard and Andrew Clark – really fantastic researchers, I thing very highly of them. They are pushing for policies to be based on maximizing life-satisfaction index as measured by current life-satisfaction measures. I think those measures are very useful but they have lots of limitations. For example, you might find that one population is just more resilient: people are pretty satisfied despite difficult social-economic conditions and circumstances. And you've got another population that is really fragile – I am thinking of white people here in the United States – who might really get a big boost in life-satisfaction from the same policies. It is not clear that it wouldn't be easier to boost white people's happiness and African Americans' happiness if African Americans are just more resilient and they are able pretty high life-satisfaction even when there are a lot of things that they know are not satisfactory.

There is a real lack of resilience in the United States among white poor people. The expectations were built up so high, because the unions, the economy have been functioning much better for them until a few decades ago, and ever since it gets worse

for them. But even if you present them at the same material conditions as African Americans, they seem much less happy.

Most efforts in bringing happiness and well-being in the policy are not that simple. OECD – they do economic indicators – they are pushing, so far anyway, a broad range of indicators and life-satisfaction is just one of them. I would like to see more emotional well-being measures included, to track anxiety, depression and stress. But at least we have less technocracy or totalitarian worry.

I concern myself a liberal in a philosophical sense, that is, I think liberty and freedom are really essential. I worry a lot about paternalism. At the end of a day, people have to be free, to be happy and to make mistakes. We also shouldn't confuse happiness with contentment or complacency. I have a dear friend who is a Buddhist monk. He is really happy but not complacent. He is working very hard, like a machine, in charity projects, providing healthcare and education in Nepal. He is very active, he works really hard and he is not complacent at all. I think that is the best evidence that in general happier people are more interested in helping other people. When you are unhappy and miserable it tends to make you more focused on your own problems.

We do cross cultural research, since there are clearly big cultural differences in experiencing happiness. Shape of happiness might be different in different cultures and different cultures may value different kinds of happiness. There is a lot of evidence that in the East Asia, like in China, people value tranquility or peace of mind, whereas Americans are more interested in a "smily face" and cheerfulness as a type of happiness. So far, the measures of happiness have not broken out these different types of happiness; and we are looking to see what are different dimensions of happiness and what emotions are needed for happiness in different cultures. For example, melancholy is an interesting emotion; and the French author Victor Hugo defined it as "happiness of being sad", however, it's not a very American sentiment. So culture is really important.

If, in your culture, you value most how your kids are doing, than that is going to affect your life satisfaction; that is, "I am not satisfied with my life until my kids are doing well". Obviously, our relationships and how our families are doing affect the reported life satisfaction, but I think it is different across cultures. In China or Japan happiness strongly includes how person's family is doing, how a person is fulfilling her responsibilities to her family and doing her part (being a good son or a good father).

Uliana Lushch-Purii, PhD: *Definitely, we cannot be happy despite everything and other people's happiness is important. But I believe that the tragedy is when by wanting their kids to be happy people eventually ruin their kids' life, because they want them to be happy in a way that they see happiness for them. So basically they dedicate their own life to take care of those children, their refuse of their own happiness, they make sacrifices that those children actually do not consider and do not need, and eventually children get unhappy as well. That is like a vicious circle. For this reason, I believe that a person should focus on her own happiness, and then her children will be happy as well.*

I see that a lot, since there are a lot of immigrants in the US especially from Asia – India and China, for instance. Parents really put a lot of pressure on their kids (study hard, be excellent, choose complicated profession). Parents have sacrificed a lot for their kids and kids really want to please their parents, even though it might totally not be the right thing for them, they do not want to disrespect their parents.

Mariano Rojas did a great research on the Latin American culture. They are community oriented and put family first. So we need to look at measures of relationships. They spend so much more time with their families and friends that Americans do. They see many more relatives. They get a huge bonus from that. But family and friends are more as a sort of support, not of pressure. So both – Eastern Asian people and Latin American people – are family oriented and not individualistic. On the one hand, in the first case there is much more pressure on kinds and high expectations, on the other hand, Latin Americans are less productive in studying and working. Moreover, when family comes first, it makes corruption easier, since that is a favor for a friend or a family member. But I don't have the answer what is better.

Uliana Lushch-Purii, **PhD**: *Question on happiness and moral framework. How is happiness related to Good-Evil problem, values and moral dimension?*

Philosophers really like to argue about this because Aristotle, Socrates, Thomas Aquinas and many others said that happiness is being moral, being virtuous and that is essential. So you can't be bad and achieve happiness. Today we are much more subjective and still it is a common opinion that bad people are unhappy. This subject is difficult to study no matter how you think of happiness. Even though, there is a strong connection between morality and happiness. Everybody has moral values and psychopaths are a very small percentage of population. People don't believe that bad people can be happy; it seems that there must be something wrong deep down or they are just crazy. Evil behavior, though, is also natural. Xenophobia and hostility are examples of the most horrible behavior that people engage in. But I believe, no matter how you think of happiness, what philosophical theory you have, it is a really poor bet to be a bad person and happy. Almost all of us value more things than just our happiness. For example, if I am dishonest, I feel like a failure on my own terms, so many people want to be honest. In general the evidence is that happier people tend to be more altruistic and give more. There is no evidence that happier people are more selfish. Exceptions can always be found, but in general we all agree that happiness and morality tend to go together.