

Geo-Reflections

Geography of Happiness

Gopal Krishan¹

To cite this article: Krishan, G. (2024). Geography of happiness. *Population Geography*, 46(1), 161–167.

Abstract

This paper presents a novel geographic perspective on happiness, drawing on recent advancements in positive psychology. It traces the evolution of Applied Psychology, from psychotherapy to logotherapy, and explores the complexities of defining and measuring happiness. The paper challenges the idea of universal happiness, instead focusing on the unique Geography of Happiness, which illuminates the substance, source, and style of happiness across different parts of the world. It concludes that sustained happiness depends on an individual's adaptability to their geographic location and the aesthetic arrangement of their life's elements.

Keywords: happiness, positive psychology, applied psychology, geography of happiness

Introduction

Is God happy? Kolakowski (2009) poses this provocative question in his book. He argues that happiness is elusive if one is born in a state where neighbours curse geography and whose philosophers and writers echo the sentiments of the generals and ministers. He further contends that the concept of happiness cannot

apply to God as long as there is pain and death in the world, and by extension, it cannot apply to humans either. This perspective starkly contrasts the 'Geography of Happiness' concept we explore in this paper, highlighting the diverse views on the relationship between happiness and geography.

¹ Published posthumously

Kolakowski thus pronounces unhappiness inevitable and situates it within the parameters of geography, polity, and mortality. Buddha proclaimed the same but adduced different reasons. For him, human suffering is attributed to endless cravings, yearnings, and longings, which can be seen as a form of attachment to worldly desires.

The recent advancements in the discipline of Psychology strike a different note. This is observed in the emergence of the concept of happiness linked to the theme of positive psychology, a term first coined by Maslow (1954) in his book *Motivation and Personality*. In the same mode, Allport (1955) wondered in his book *Becoming* why there were no theories based on the study of healthy human beings and matters that make life worth living. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is credited for giving the idea of 'flow', a state of complete absorption in an activity, for ensuring personal happiness, in his book *The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 'Flow' is a mental state where a person is fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the activity process.

Seligman (2002) carried the same theme further in his book *Authentic Happiness*. He exhorted that psychology should be as interested in building the best things in life as much in repairing the worst. This is the basic condition for ensuring happiness.

The above observations testify to an evolving paradigm of happiness in

Psychology. A parallel development is also noticed in the modes of treatment adopted in Psychiatry, which is psychology in practice. The chart below presents a personal view of the practice of Applied Psychology as its mode of treatment transits over time.

Evolutionary Stages of Applied Psychology – A Personal View

Psychotherapy	– Listen to the heart.
Neurotherapy	– Treat the brain with anti-depressants.
Psychokinetic-therapy	– Heal the soul/positive psychology.
Logotherapy	– Define your meaning of life and chase it.

The implicit message is that applied psychology has been striving to do what is needed by calling on the human heart, brain, and soul.

Defining Happiness

Happiness generates a state of mind that is difficult to describe. This is the universal problem of defining any abstract concept. Even Seligman (2002, p. 249), the pioneer in the field of happiness, felt contented with mentioning the three dimensions of a happy life, viz. pleasant life, which successfully pursues positive emotions; good life, which is full of altruism, and meaningful life, which harnesses one's virtues and strengths for a noble cause, in place of offering a precise definition of happiness. Haybron (2008) distinguishes between psychological happiness and prudential happiness. The former

represents a profound state of mind while the latter refers to a state of overall wellbeing; the former is an emotion, the latter its ecology. Wren-Lewis (2010) believes that happiness represents how well we do. Simply put, happiness is often equated with subjective well-being in the discipline's literature.

Criteria to Measure Happiness

Every culture uses more words to describe negative emotional states of mind than positive ones. That is why capturing all the nuances of happiness while reflecting on it is so difficult. This has all the attendant problems related to its measurement.

To that effect, criteria selection depends upon the working rather than a holistic definition of happiness one adopts.

The Gallup International Research Institute tried to compare the relative degree of happiness in developed countries vis-a-vis developing ones. The criteria chosen were meant to measure the level of satisfaction with one's: i) country of domicile, ii) nature of job, iii) quality of family life and iv) concern for finances. Developed countries scored much higher on the happiness index than developing ones, but their concern for finances was found to be much more stressful.

The first World Happiness Report was released in April 2012 based on a UN High-level meeting on "Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm" that reviewed related evidence from the emerging science of happiness and presented

the available global data on national happiness, showing that the quality of people's lives can be coherently, reliably, and validly assessed by various subjective well-being measures, collectively referred to then and in subsequent reports as "happiness." The latest 2024 report, a partnership among Gallup, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the World Happiness Report's Editorial Board, is in the public domain.

Andrian White of the University of Leicester, United Kingdom, referred to people's happiness in different countries and the overall living conditions obtained therein. He observes that happy countries are healthy, wealthy, and wise. Among 178 countries put under the scanner, Denmark was placed on the top, the United States at the rank of 23, China at 82, and India at 125.

Using 'subjective wellbeing' as the basis, the University of Michigan's World Values Survey asked the respondents, 'Taking all things together, would you say you are very happy, or rather happy, not very happy, or not at all happy?' This amounts to seeking impressionistic expression for subjective well-being. The results were not authentic, and Nigeria, Puerto Rico, or Mexico could occupy one of the top positions on the happiness ladder.

The fact is that it is difficult to devise a common yardstick to measure happiness. The very concept and sources of happiness are subject to the cultural ecology, economic

capacity, environmental milieu, and governance quality of a given society, among other things. This can be easily confirmed by taking even a bird's-eye view of the scenario as represented by some select countries. The observations herein are primarily from the book *'The Geography of Bliss'* by Weiner (2008), borrowing not only ideas but also literary expressions at places. These are the finest in their original form. The desired originality is disclaimed in this section of the paper. A deep and wide gratitude to him is placed on record.

Sources of Happiness Differ by Country

United States

Pursuing happiness is vital to the nation's constitution. The people put this mandate into practice by chasing happiness and being mobile. Moving westward is their instinctive frontier spirit. On reaching California, they will not stop there. Why not hop over the Pacific and go further beyond?

Mobility in search of happiness takes another form, too. They go on hunting for and moving into bigger, brighter houses over successive phases of their life. An average American is said to have changed over a dozen residences in their lifetime. They are constantly in search of paradise. Since paradise is a moving target, their pursuit of happiness is unending.

India

Indians are happy if their heads can hold two contradictory thoughts about action without exploding.

They can combine ultra-modernity with Paleozoic spirituality. No wonder the westerns come in search of happiness here. Thanks to Osho and others of his clan.

Indians consider this world a Maya (illusion) but stretch its operational meaning in the opposite direction. They have no hesitation in chasing Maya (wealth) in its worldly connotation.

In India, one observes the best and worst of humanity, the ridiculous and sublime, the profane and profound, and above all, happy-unhappy and unhappy-happy people. Hence, everything about India is true, and its opposite is also true.

Naturally, Indians' happiness lies in their capacity to live with two opposites concurrently. They enjoy a constant war between their inner and outer spaces.

United Kingdom

The British are suspicious of happiness. A self-help book will probably proclaim, in their case, I am not O.K., and you are even less O.K. Life is not about happiness for them; it is just muddling through or getting by.

The British do possess latent happiness. Taxing one per cent heavily may be a source of happiness for 99 per cent of others—no wonder the British Government has set up a Department of Happiness.

A pub or public house is a venue of happiness through self-service and long conversations, but again, people are economical with their emotions, if not their pockets.

British reserve is proverbial. For them, happiness is not an uninterrupted series of pleasure moments. To them, Freud's decision to die of cancer while continuing psycho-analyzing his abnormal patients does make sense.

Switzerland

The Swiss are near the pinnacle of the happiness pyramid, which is understandable. The country they inhabit is a brand name. Kashmir is said to be the Switzerland of India, Singapore of Asia, and Costa Rica of Central America.

In Swiss parlance, happiness is this: Not longing to be somewhere else, not searching for a job, and not being someone else.

Indeed, the Swiss are deeply rooted in place. Their passports include the name of their native place, even though they may not have visited it. To them, a sense of belonging imparts happiness.

Their happiness also lies in being functional, remaining in the middle without swinging between great highs and terrible lows, and ensuring cleanliness even at the dirtiest sites. Swiss toilets are rated as the cleanest in the world.

For the Swiss, envy is the enemy of happiness. Hence, they live the mantra of enjoyment. This combines joy with contentment, not to flash themselves on the stage or in the street. They cherish affluence but hate to talk about money. Moreover, their happiness lies with a super-quality chocolate between the teeth.

Thailand

Just as the Eskimos or Inuits have many words for snow and Icelanders for ice, the Thais have several synonyms for a smile. For them, a smile is at the core of happiness. They believe that happy people have no reason to think.

No wonder, after a coup in 2004, the junta announced that its official policy would not focus on economic growth but on people's happiness. After the 2004 tsunami, no one blamed the government. They said that it happened.

In that light, introspection and happiness are allergic to each other. Any thinking about happiness is going to make Thais unhappy.

Bhutan

The nation's anthem proclaims thus: As the doctrine of Lord Buddha flourishes, may the sun of peace and happiness shine upon people. Happiness is a government policy. King Wangchuk first floated the idea of Gross National Happiness as a substitute for Gross National Product in 1973.

Bhutan has more monks than soldiers. It is a land of sumptuous tranquillity. Happiness is deemed as a synonym for compassion.

To Bhutanese, self-happiness makes no sense; in the Buddhist tradition, they believe in happiness for all. The country is devoid of self-help books in bookstores. For them, happiness is relational rather than rational.

Iceland

It consistently ranks among the highest in the world on the happiness scoreboard.

Icelanders describe their country as an ice cube, sub-polar in climate and tiny. If the emerging global warming is going to make our planet a hot hell, Icelanders will equate it with a lovely paradise.

Why do cold climates produce happier people than warm ones? In warm places, life is easy, and people can get along without help. In cold areas, cooperation with others is something one cannot do without. If necessity is the mother of invention, interdependence is the mother of affection.

The country remains dark for six months in a year. Anyone sad because of darkness died long ago. Those who survived had a genetic immunity to darkness. Hence, this is the survival of the apt.

Everyone in Iceland is creative. They are still waiting for a person who is not a poet, writer, painter, or musician. They carry a natural sense of style.

Icelanders don't attach a stigma to their failure. They admire the inability of those who failed with good intentions. Success in future is reserved for them. In a sense, Iceland is a nation of born-again, though not in a karmic sense.

Happiness is not a function of hard, cold logic but of creativity, which allows one to imagine a virtual reality and facilitates self-transformation.

Happiness Geography

We may try to respond here to a simple curiosity: What does geography have to do with happiness? A joint reference to the two will likely be a mystery to a layperson. One may surmise that it could be an enquiry into the influence of geographical factors like landscape, climate, weather, sunshine or the waxing phase of the moon on an individual's happiness. This is to go by the popular perception of geography. This may be partly true. But then it is to miss a variety of perspectives the discipline harnesses for understanding any dimension of reality.

A fundamental concern of geography is to find out how things, phenomena, and processes differ from one area to another. In that pursuit, a geographer will explore how the degree and sources of happiness vary from one part of the world to another. As described in the previous section, this perspective of spatial differentiation was harnessed to identify the avenues of happiness in select countries.

Geography equally values the role of a place's nature in causing happiness or otherwise. Any aesthetic or spatial arrangement, such as a garden or respect of a landscape like the trijunction of a seafront, forested hill, or meandering stream, is likely to generate happiness. That is how tourist places are developed to meet such a human urge.

In brief, geography deals with happiness in ways distinctive and adds to the knowledge produced by

other social sciences, especially Psychology.

Concluding Remarks

To me, as a geographer, sustainable happiness lies in adaptation to every change in the geography of one's life. Don't interrupt yourself to take stock of your happiness. Just remain in flow.

'Know thyself' may not be the best advice after all. A pinch of self-delusion is an important ingredient in the happiness recipe. Research has confirmed that happy people remember more good moments than occur.

The genuine happiness lies in an aesthetic arrangement of different flowers in the bouquet of one's life. For that, one has to cultivate an expertise in ikebana.

References

- Allport, G. (1955). *Becoming: Basic consideration for a psychology of personality*. Yale University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper and Row.
- Haybron, D. M. (2000). Two philosophical problems in the study of happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1(2), 207-225.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010075527517>
- Kalakowski, L. (2009). *Is God happy?* Basic.
- Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. Harper.

Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. Free Press.

Weiner, E. (2008). *The geography of bliss*. Twelve-Hachette Book Group.

Wren-Lewis, S. (2010). Towards a complete account of psychological happiness. *Praxis*, 2(2), 58-81.

Author

Gopal Krishan
 Formerly, Professor Emeritus
 Department of Geography
 Panjab University, Chandigarh