

Happiness in the Midst of Change: A Human Development Approach to Studying GNH in the Context of Economic Development

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Contemporary theories of economic development have concentrated on socioeconomic and epidemiological indices of development to the exclusion of issues of psychological and spiritual development. Yet, economic development without attention to individual human development may produce increasing wealth but decreasing happiness. The construct of Gross National Happiness (GNH), as the real measure of success in a developmental endeavor, is intended to serve as a corrective to the exclusive concern with materialistic indices of development. Development has intangible as well as tangible aspects. No theory or measurement of development can be complete without both. Naturally, the assessment of the intangibles is more subtle and difficult. However, that does not render it impossible.

We will first briefly address some of the tangible indices of development that must be considered crucial to GNH. Then, we will survey some of the relationships between economic development and subjective well-being in economically developed societies. We will then critique the contemporary psychological conceptualization of happiness as a rather narrow product of utilitarian philosophy. We will contrast this theory with the Buddhist theory of happiness, showing the close relationship between happiness and wisdom. We will continue with an assessment of the kinds of psychological changes that typically accompany economic development, especially individualism, concluding with a measurement model that could be used to monitor change in individual well-being during a period of rapid economic growth.

Tangible Requirements

Without question, GNH requires low infant and child mortality, universal access to health care, a high level of literacy, and access to gainful employment (Werner, 2003, personal communication). Full membership of women in all aspects of community life is also central. Extreme disparity in wealth is a source of abuses of economic power and of resentment of the "haves" by the "have nots" and must also be avoided. Environmental health based on harmony of humans in nature depends crucially on the maintenance of a sustainable population. On a somewhat more intangible level, GNH requires a sense of community inclusive of diversity. The present era offers more than sufficient evidence of the tragic consequences of ethnic and religious conflict. It seems likely that a balanced life, not solely

concentrated on economic activity, is important for GNH. The U. S. has unprecedented material abundance but some have suggested that it has been purchased at the cost of free time and community participation (Johnson, 1978).

There is no society that completely meets even these, more or less, tangible requirements of GNH. Certainly, the U. S. fails with respect to universal health care, disparity of income, and, to some extent, community in diversity, harmony with nature, as well as balance in life between economic and other pursuits.

Materialistic theories of well-being assume that progress in the production of material wealth and technology will automatically serve to create subjective well-being (SWB). However, effects of material wealth on SWB appear to be mixed at best. In a meta-analysis of studies of the relationship between income and SWB, Cummins (2000) found that income was an important predictor, especially for poor people who presumably were undergoing objective privation. He also found that the effect of income on SWB was generally not present for those who had entered into a state of low income intentionally (eg. college students, former urban residents who have gone back to the land). However, a number of studies have indicated that, in fact, psychological distress, as well as diminishing SWB, can be found in the context of economic growth and wealth.

Happiness In The West

Increasing wealth has conferred great benefits on western industrialized societies, including high levels of health care, education, and employment. Western societies have also made great progress in advancing human rights. However, there is evidence that economic development, especially increasing per capita wealth, has been achieved in Western societies at some cost to individual well-being. The statistical abstract of the United States (1995) reports that between the years 1940 and 1990 income rose steadily in the U. S. and the index variable "very happy" decreased commensurately. In Europe, income increased fourfold (measured in constant 1990 U. S. dollars) between 1930 and 1990, but satisfaction, first assessed in the late 1950's, remained constant (Myers, 1992). Specific indices of psychological suffering have also showed some unfavorable trends. Twenge (2000) found that trait anxiety has increased in the United States over the past half century. Preliminary analyses from the University of California, Davis Longitudinal Study confirmed that succeeding age cohorts have progressively higher levels of trait anxiety.

At the same time, the rate of depression has increased even more dramatically (Buie, 1988). Kessler, McGonagle, Zhao, Nelson, et al. (1994) found that 20% of the American public would be eligible for a diagnosis of major depression. We simply do not know how this compares with depression prevalence in the rest of the world. Weissman, Bland, Joyce,

Newman, et al. (1993) found that successively younger cohorts of Americans have increasing prevalence of depression. In the US satisfaction with marriage, job, and place of residence have all declined between 1973 and 1994 (Lane, 2000). Increase in material wealth and the decrease in some important aspects of well-being have been paralleled by a change in values with a dramatic increase in valuing material wealth at the expense of valuing a meaningful life (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1998).

We can conclude that a degree of material wealth is important for SWB but excessive attention to the acquisition of material wealth appears to be associated with decreases in SWB. At the very least, there is little indication that, beyond the provision of basic needs, increasing wealth increases SWB.

Utilitarian Approach To Happiness

Even though both Aristotle and His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1998) stated that happiness was the goal of all human endeavors, we still don't know what it is. Veenhoven (2001), in constructing a world database of concepts and measures of happiness, restricted the content of this database to constructs and measures consistent with a utilitarian philosophical perspective. For him, happiness is defined as the "degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her life as a whole favorably" including pleasant affect and "contentment (perceived realization of wants)" (Veenhoven, 2001, p. 35). He explicitly excluded measures that have anything to do with a meaningful life. All considerations of meaning and consequences of acts or modes of being associated with happiness are ruled out. What remain are simply reports of happiness over the short or long term. Veenhoven only considers present happiness with life as a whole as an uncontaminated assessment of happiness. The problem is that it actually does not tell us anything about the nature of happiness and, in the best positivist tradition, it divorces happiness from value. From this perspective, the happiness of the Dalai Lama is the same as the happiness of a career criminal. This signals serious limitations to utilitarian/mechanistic approaches to happiness.

From a utilitarian viewpoint, the "pursuit of happiness" has no surplus meaning related to levels of maturity. Even though Veenhoven takes the perception of longer term well-being as a better measure than mere immediate pleasure, the immature good feelings resulting from the gratification of one's own wants are no different from the happiness resulting from providing food for starving people.

The conceptualization of happiness is much influenced by issues of measurement. Because happiness has been studied by psychologists, who have been steeped in the theory of traits, it is typically assessed as a trait. In general, psychological studies have found that SWB is very much influenced by hereditary temperament (Tellegen, Lykken, Bouchard,

Wilcox, Segal, & Rich, 1988). Indeed, expressions of positive affect may well be more strongly associated with temperament than with anything else. If happiness is merely positive affect, then there may be little that can be done to enhance it, aside from simply eliminating poverty. However, as noted above, the fact remains that even trait measures of unhappiness (e. g. anxiety and depression) have shown signs of variability not easily attributable solely to hereditary temperament. That is, it is unlikely that genetic risks for anxiety and depression have changed much in the course of the last half-century. Even happiness as measured by SWB (mainly positive affect) can be influenced by demographic variables such as income, age, and sex although these effects are rather small. Perception influences happiness much more than does demographics, including income (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002).

It appears that, from a utilitarian, individualist perspective, happiness is an endogenous (hereditary temperament) variable and/or an affect added to experiences of satisfaction of wants.

It is noteworthy that, from a Buddhist perspective, wants can never be satisfied. They simply increase with satiation. This “hedonic treadmill” (cf. , Lane, 2000), while fueling economic growth, is regarded by Buddhist psychology as a source of suffering. Increases in measures of subjective ill being in the context of unprecedented satisfaction of wants lends credence to this view.

A Buddhist Approach

Buddhist psychology emphasizes suffering and its causes as well as the cessation of suffering and the path to such cessation. While Buddhism does not offer an explicit theory of happiness per se, it does offer an explicit theory of the causes of suffering. For Buddhist psychology, the “three poisons”, greed, ill-will, and delusion, cause suffering by obscuring fundamental human nature. Greed and ill-will, grasping and rejecting, create the self, not merely as the locus of experience, but as William James, the founder of American Psychology, put it, a person's self is:

Not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife [or her husband] and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, his yacht and bank account (James, 1890/1983, p. 279).

In sum, the self, as it is continuously constructed in the way described by James, is identical with the illusory self, described in Buddhist psychology, produced through grasping and rejecting. It creates a false sense of extreme individuality that gives the impression of separation of persons from each other, from other living beings, and from the environment as a whole (cf. Levenson, Jennings, Le & Aldwin, 2003).

Recently, methods of empirically assessing individualism have been developed in the context of work on cultural syndromes (Triandis, 1990,

1998). Cultural syndromes can be assessed at the individual level and have recently been shown to be differentially related to destructive emotions. Four syndromes have been identified, including two forms of individualism and collectivism, termed "vertical" and "horizontal," the former emphasizing competition and hierarchy and the latter, equality and cooperation. The form of individualism encouraged by utilitarian views of economic development is, naturally, vertical individualism, the purest form of which can be observed in the U. S. Horizontal (less competitive) individualism is found in such societies as Sweden and Denmark. Buddhist cultures, at least ideally, are more inclined to horizontal collectivism, a cultural syndrome that de-emphasizes individualism and competition. Le (2003) recently found the vertical individualist cultural syndrome to be associated with higher scores on measures of narcissism and neuroticism (trait anxiety) and lower scores on a measure of self-transcendence. To the extent that economic development is associated with increasing individualism, it would seem wiser to encourage the form of individualism that may be less conducive to greed and ill-will.

An emphasis on the individual self is central to utilitarian economic philosophy. Economic development is unavoidably associated with increasing individualism as described by Ahuvia (2002). Indeed, whatever positive relationship does exist between per capita GNP and SWB appears to be mediated by individualism such that when individualism is controlled for, the correlation between GNP and SWB disappears (Ahuvia, 2002; Diener, 1995). Ahuvia goes on to draw attention to the fact that cultures that actually score highest on SWB are those cultures that would be described as "horizontal individualist" cultures in the taxonomy of cultural syndromes (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Schyns, 2000). Ahuvia (2002) hypothesizes that cultures such as those of Denmark, Iceland, and Switzerland, that are individualistic in the sense of freedom from coercion, are characterized by substantially greater SWB than those, such as the United States, that are individualistic in the sense of self-interest and competition. This interpretation is consistent with the finding of decreasing SWB and increasing indices of psychological distress in the United States.

This whole line of inquiry has given support to Buddhist ideas of human development. It is very clear that Buddhism's emphasis on individual effort as well as social responsibility, expressed in terms of wisdom and compassion, makes it an ideal foundation for a non-destructive individualism. It also avoids the wholesale importation of Western utilitarian ideas of happiness into cultures that may have the capacity to pursue other avenues of human development.

For Buddhist psychology, compassion, wisdom, and happiness are considered basic to human nature. They are not states to be added, but are already fully present in the mind, yet obscured by the work of the process of self-construction. For Buddhist psychology, when the obscurations of

fundamental human nature are lifted, this nature appears intact. For Buddhism, the fundamental wisdom mind is nondualistic. In dualism are the seeds of greed, ill-will and delusion.

While this not the place for an examination of specific methods for effecting the realization of fundamental human nature, it is no mean feat. No set of social policies can bring it about. However, the authoritative presence of a spiritual tradition can serve as a protective factor against some of the potentially harmful effects of economic development. In the case of the United States, Hirsch (1976) argued that religious norms were crucial to the maintenance of the American social fabric in its period of unprecedented economic growth. It is important in the maintenance of communitarian values in the face of the utilitarian philosophy of the market. Contemporary Buddhist philosopher David Loy remarks that,

From a religious perspective, the problem with market capitalism and its values is twofold: greed and delusion. On the one hand, the unrestrained market emphasizes and even requires greed in at least two ways. Desire for profit is necessary to fuel the engine of the economic system, and an insatiable desire to consume ever more must be generated to create markets for what can be produced. Within an economic theory and the market it promotes, the moral dimension of greed is inevitably lost; today it seems left to religion to preserve what is problematic about a human trait that is unsavory at best.... The spiritual problem with greed [is that it] is based on delusion: the delusion that happiness is to be found by satisfying one's greed (Loy, 2002, p. 207).

Contemporary social science lends support to this view with the finding, cited above, that the increased wealth and consumption of recent decades have not brought about increasing happiness. In many respects, they appear to have had the opposite effect, as Buddhist psychology would have predicted. Loy's analysis can be supplemented by observing that an unrestrained market philosophy also cultivates ill-will, the third of the "three poisons," through the celebration of competition and the creation of a culture of "winners and losers. "

In Buddhist psychology, the three poisons create suffering. In Western psychology, suffering is referred to as stress. The evidence of declining SWB in industrially developed societies with competitive individualist cultures, as incomplete a measure of well-being as it is, suggests that the psychological conditions that promote rapid economic growth, also promote stress. This is reflected not only in declining measures of global SWB, but also in specific measures of psychological distress.

From the perspective of Buddhist psychology, the "pursuit of happiness," enshrined in the U. S. Declaration of Independence, is best approached indirectly. If the natural state of human beings is happiness, protecting against the sources of unhappiness is the key to allowing

happiness to take care of itself. What is approached directly, from the perspective of Buddhist psychology, is the application of the antidote to greed, ill-will, and delusion which is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Buddhist developmental psychology offers both a means of cultivating these attributes and of assessing their effectiveness. The three trainings of Buddhist psychology are antidotes to the three poisons and, as such, are means of promoting human development. These trainings, ethics, meditation, and wisdom, are, from the Buddhist psychological perspective, the foundations of happiness.

In recent years, Western students of human development have realized that wisdom expresses an ultimate goal of human development through the lifespan. However, there has been considerable disagreement about what wisdom is. One prominent theory defines wisdom as “expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). We have argued that this conceptualization of wisdom fails to capture the full range of the construct. Drawing upon the Buddhist understanding of wisdom, we define wisdom as transcendence of the self or ego. We have found that we can assess the construct of wisdom as self-transcendence and it is our view that this way of experiencing the world can be cultivated very effectively in a Buddhist culture. We have also found that self-transcendence is negatively related to indices of psychological ill-health, such as narcissism and neuroticism, and positively related to wholesome traits and states of mind such as openness to experience and agreeableness. We have also found self-transcendence to be stronger in persons who have a meditation or other form of spiritual practice (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2003; Le, 2003).

Is it possible to cultivate self-transcendence in a whole society, a society also undergoing a change process that encourages individualism? We hypothesize that, to the extent the trainings of ethics and meditation are sustained, wisdom as self-transcendence will flourish offering a strong protective factor against psychological ill-health and socially destructive attitudes and behavior that derive from competitive individualism. The three trainings constitute a method of lifespan human development.

Buddhist ethics, unlike the dominant system of justice-based ethics in the West, is based fundamentally on compassion. Indeed, compassion is one of the two wheels of the Dharma. From this perspective, the happiness that is a facet of fundamental human nature, follows directly from the ethics of compassion. The Dalai Lama (1999) argues that without compassion there can be no true happiness.

Understanding compassion as ultimately impartial empathy for all sentient beings, the Dalai Lama writes of its role in daily life as follows:

Does the ideal of developing it to the point where it is unconditional mean that we must abandon our own interests entirely? Not at all. In fact, it is the best way of serving them - - indeed, it could even be said to constitute

the wisest course for fulfilling self-interest. For if it is correct that those qualities such as love, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness are what happiness consists in, and if it is also correct that *nying je*, or compassion... is both a source and the fruit of these qualities, then the more we are compassionate, the more we provide for our own happiness. Thus, any idea that concern for others, though a noble quality, is a matter for our private lives only, is simply short-sighted. Compassion belongs to every sphere of activity including, of course, the workplace (H. H. Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 127)

This is especially pertinent to the issue of increasing individualism in the context of economic development discussed above. From the Dalai Lama's viewpoint, there is no need to regard them as contradictory. Actually, individualism brings the need for compassion into the forefront because of the weakening of collectivist sanctions against "standing out." When we have the chance to express our unique individualities, we also have the chance to be consciously compassionate.

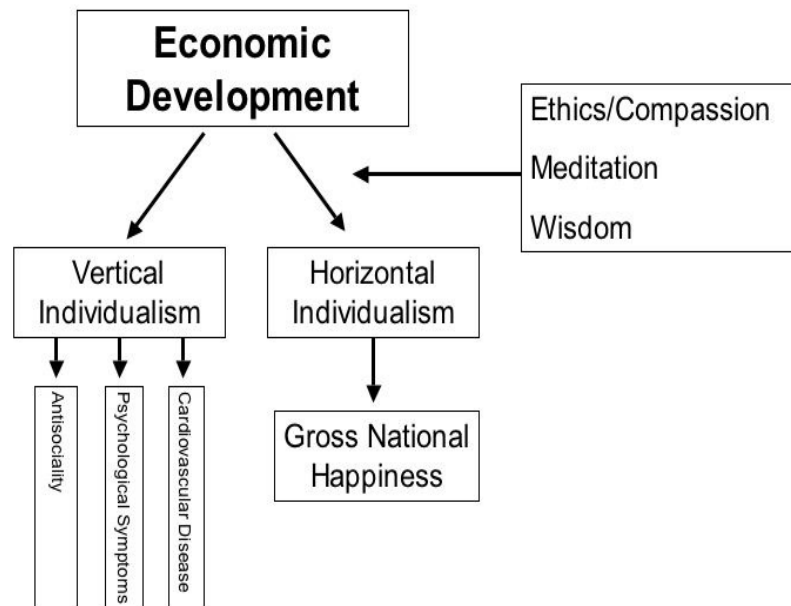
Recent studies have shown that even brief courses of meditation with very short periods of the simplest meditation practices are associated with better psychological and physical health (Andresen, 2000; Alexander, Chandler, Langer, Newman, & Davies, 1989; Kabat-Zinn, Massion, Kristeller, Peterson, Fletcher, et al. ; Patel, Marmot, Terry, Carruthers, Hunt, & Patel, 1985). In Buddhism, it is widely understood that ethics and meditation are mutually enhancing; only through the cultivation of an ethical life can one develop the equanimity of mind even to begin sincere meditation practice (Palmo, 2003).

The adherence to a compassion-based ethics combined with meditation is believed to result in wisdom experienced as non-duality or, in our work, self-transcendence. The three trainings understood in this way as not only a monastic practice, but as the basis of ordinary life, may constitute a viable path to Gross National Happiness.

Monitoring Risk And Protective Factors of GNH

Many well-established measures exist that can be employed to construct a multi-level model of the effects of cultural change on GNH. Economic development, cultural syndromes, socially destructive attitudes, and symptoms of psychological distress can be readily assessed. It is also important to assess the prevalence of the practice of the three trainings. We hypothesize that adherence to ethical precepts and meditation practice are maintained and the extent to which individuals are self-transcendent will mediate the relationship between economic development and psychosocial well-being (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A psychosocial model of GNH



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