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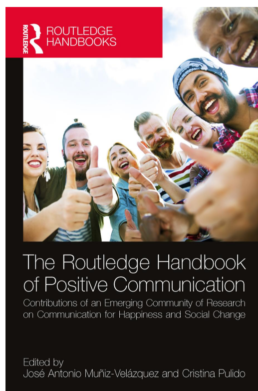

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What's in a Smile?

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5

WHAT'S IN A SMILE?

Happiness and Communication From a Cultural Perspective

Jessie K. Finch and Celestino Fernández

Introduction

Cultural differences in communication are well documented in a variety of fields: psychology, sociology, and anthropology, for example. The acknowledgment that different social identities and groups will have different ways of speaking, behaving, and understanding is key to learning about cross-cultural exchange, especially around the topic of happiness. As sociologists, we know that context matters greatly in the daily lives of humans; social context establishes parameters and greatly influences our everyday actions, emotions, and quality of life, including how we communicate, our happiness, and our overall well-being. But how exactly does social context apply to the idea of happiness? Here, we examine how social factors including nationality, race/ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and socioeconomic status can influence verbal and nonverbal communications of happiness. We examine happiness as it is both understood hedonically (that is, subjective well-being and positive emotions) as well as eudaimonically (self-realization, psychological well-being) (Ryan & Deci, 2001), though most of the research relating to cross-cultural communication of happiness has emphasized the hedonic in investigating subjective well-being across cultures.

By examining several types of culturally specific communication styles, we summarize prior literature on what positive communication means in different social contexts. First, we investigate language differences and translation issues specifically related to the idea of happiness. Second, we look at nonverbal communication styles and positive communication, questioning common assumptions around things such smiling and laughter. Third, power distance and the role of inequality in certain cultural groups is assessed as it relates to cultural-specific communication issues. Finally, we evaluate how individualism versus collectivism influences cultural conceptions of happiness and in turn affects communication styles, including the role of listening and sharing. By examining these four areas of prior research on positive communication, we demonstrate the relevance of cultural differences in experiencing and communicating happiness.

Language Differences and Translation

When discussing happiness—even within one language—there is a spectrum of subtle differences from words that denote mere contentment and general well-being to more extreme words that highlight ecstasy, bliss, and jubilation. This also links back to hedonic versus eudaimonic

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conceptions—that is, life satisfaction versus personal fulfillment. There are cultural differences even within a language group that vary based on sociocultural differences such as nationality (one may offer a simple "Hi" in the United States compared to a jovial "Cheerio" in England), region ("Howdy"), race/ethnicity ("Yo"), and age ("Sup?").

Beyond differences within language, we can also see significant cross-cultural variation between languages. As Anna Wierzbicka, a Polish linguist asks, "if 14 percent of Germans declare themselves to be *sehr glücklich* whereas 31 percent of Americans declare themselves to be very happy, can these reports be meaningfully compared if *glücklich* does not mean the same thing as happy?" (2004, p. 35). Her work questions whether, and to what extent, national differences recorded in happiness levels can be trusted given potential translation issues as well as cultural differences in national expectations and "pressures" to report well-being (also see our later section on Individualism Versus Collectivism).

While some social scientists have noted this shortcoming (Myers & Diener, 1995; Layard, 2003), there is still much work to be done in better understanding and highlighting the cross-cultural linguistic differences of happiness. Lau, Cummins, and McPherson (2005) completed a study on the development of the Personal Well-being Index (PWI), which is intended for cross-cultural measurement of subjective well-being (SWB), or hedonic happiness. Their study found that across Hong Kong Chinese respondents and Australian respondents, the survey "demonstrated good psychometric performance in terms of its reliability, validity and sensitivity, which are comparable in both countries" (403). However, in looking to add a particular survey item called "satisfaction with own happiness" the Hong Kong population associated both the terms "satisfaction" and "happiness" as the same idea, leading to confusion in responding to the item. The authors suggest more locally contextualized translations for all surveys intended to compare cross-national populations.

Altrov (2013) suggests that recognizing emotion in the context of speech requires cultural context. Based on Russians trying to understand emotional context in Estonian, she finds that "to recognize vocal emotions expressed in another language it is necessary to live in the culture and communicate in its language" (159). At the minimum, deep cultural knowledge is necessary when translating survey instruments to assure common meaning across languages, cultures, and experiences.

Research by Coulmas (2008) documents how the Japanese language does not have exact equivalents for the English words "happy" and "happiness." He explores the meaning of several Japanese words (for example, *sachi*, *fuku*, and *kōfuku*) as they relate to these terms, noting that none of them are equivalent translations. For example, the word most commonly used to translate "happiness" is *shiawase* but Coulmas notes that this word most directly translates to "brining things together." Interestingly, the end result is that the word *happī* has been adopted into Japanese and is commonly heard in Japan when speakers are referring to "happy."

Given the innumerable words in a variety of languages for the deceptively complex concept of happiness, positive communication scholars must bear in mind both linguistic challenges within a language as well as, and particularly, between languages. Likewise, cultural differences, experiences, and contexts must be taken into account.

Nonverbal Communication

Beyond spoken and written language, there are numerous types of nonverbal communications that can signal happiness and they can significantly vary across cultures. While we may take for granted a laugh and a smile as direct communication of positive emotions, are these necessarily universal cues of positive communication? According to Elfenbein and Ambady (2003) "recent research has documented evidence for an in-group advantage, meaning that people are generally

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more accurate at judging emotions when the emotions are expressed by members of their own cultural group rather than by members of a different cultural group" (159). This has been specifically shown for facial expressions such as smiling. Recognition of happiness in nonverbal forms of communication also varies with one's level of cultural competency with a given group.

While some studies have shown the universality of recognizing facial expressions for several basic "near-universal" emotions (happiness, fear, disgust, anger, surprise, sadness), there are still important subtle cultural differences in each of these areas that allow for members of a cultural "in-group" to better distinguish happiness as demonstrated by facial expressions. Groups with closer-geographical proximity or more frequent cultural exchange do better at understanding the display rules of happiness (how people manage their emotions) as well as the decoding rules (acknowledgment of others' emotional displays) (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003). This includes the smile, which is usually noted as a universal sign of happiness, though it may also have more nuanced meanings (e.g., a smug smirk or a sinister sneer).

Overall, psychologists have found that "happiness is the earliest and most accurately recognized emotion" in developing children (Vieillard & Guidetti, 2009, p. 79). In fact, children as young as two years old have been able to consistently identify happy faces. Some suggested reasons include the near-universality of the smile or the likelihood of children being greeted with happy faces and thus being able to recognize the only positive emotion of the near-universal emotions.

The smile can also be an indicator of "ideal affect match" or the concept that people have more positive relations with "those whose emotional expressions match how they ideally want to feel" (Park, Blevins, Knutson, & Tsai, 2017, p. 1083). This ideal affect match seems to predictably vary across cultures—even when race and gender are taken into account. In one study, Park et al. (2017) found that European-Americans were more likely to be generous with and trust those who are smiling at moderate and high intensity (meant to indicate excitement) while Koreans were more generous and trusting of those with no smile or a low-intensity smile, indicating calm. This finding suggests that people are more likely to trust and give to those who share culturally relevant emotional values and expressions.

Beyond facial expressions, other forms of nonverbal communication may also signal happiness differently across cultures. Paralinguistics are ways in which the voice is used other than speaking, such as tone, pitch, and sound cues. In studying these paralinguistic cues, laughter seems to be the most commonly associated cue with happiness. In Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, Scott, and Smith (2010) they explore the use of nonverbal emotional vocalizations for the near-universal emotions of anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise in both Western participants and those from secluded villages in Namibia that have not been culturally integrated. Laughter as a cue for amusement was "cross-culturally recognized as signaling joy" in both sets of participants (2010, p. 2411). This supports a "near-universal" acceptance of laughter as an international signifier, though the duration, tone, and pitch may vary with other social identities, such as gender and age. For example, a very early association for laughter comes from tickling between infants and parents.

Given the role of laughter across cultures and that laughter is catching (that is, when one person starts laughing, others frequently join in, even if they do not know what triggered the laughter in the initial person), it is no wonder that "laughter therapy" (also "humor therapy" and "laughter yoga") is now practiced in many countries, including, for example Brazil, England, India, and the United States, to help reduce stress and anxiety and promote overall health, wellness, and happiness. We know that laughing stimulates catecholamines, which in turn release endorphins, and endorphins help us feel relaxed and happy. The many psychological and physiological benefits of (both real and fake) laughter have been extensively documented (MacDonald, 2004).

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Other nonverbal behaviors that can convey emotionality are posture, gesture, and body language. This area of communications study is known as kinesics and has been studied in relation to positive communication by a variety of fields, including neuropsychology, computer modeling, and robotics.

In studying affective posture recognition, animation engineers have worked on developing an avatars' body posture to inter-culturally signal specific types of emotionality. Using a generic, full-body, 3D avatar that was non-specific in its culture, gender, or race/ethnicity, researchers compared Japanese, Sri Lankan, and Caucasian Americans' interpretations of emotion from the given pictures of the avatar (Kleinsmith, De Silva, & Bianchi-Berthouze, 2006). Avatar body-models that had lowered heads and slouched posture were recognized as sad in all three cultures. Those with open arms, often raised above their heads, and a seeming saunter in their step (shown as one foot placed in front of another or slightly lifted) were all recognized as happy (Kleinsmith, 2006).

Other research has shown that gestures such as raised arms, a general lack of muscle tension, and leaning inwards can be recognized by adults with 90 percent accuracy to distinguish happiness (Boone & Cunningham, 1998). Indeed, these types of gestures are recognized in fields where the body is an instrument, such as dance. Shikanai, Sawada, and Ishii (2013) developed the Movements Impressions Emotions Model for dance and tested for the conveyance of three emotions through bodily movement: joy, anger, and sadness. In this study, they found that "movements in which the limbs use large amounts of space, turning, and jumping tend to have the greatest effects on the perception of joy" which support previous findings that suggest "expressions of happy feelings are characterized by high levels of energy, a large number of changes, skipping, jumping, and turning" (119). This dynamic demonstration of joy may be more attainable then through higher levels of physical ability to use one's body as a messenger of positivity.

Thus, if one wants to convey positive messages, it may be best do so with both language content that is culturally appropriate as well as recognizable nonverbal communicants of happiness: smiles, laughter, skipping, or, as numerous pop song videos would have us believe, throwing one's hands in the air and waving them around like one just does not care (one also can see clearly recognizable nonverbal communication of emotions in old silent films and by mimes throughout the world).

Power Distance and Inequality

Many cultural differences are based on assumptions of happiness and smiling in comparison to displays of dominance or aggression. This links together the idea that social and cultural position relative to others in a given social hierarchy or power structure may influence how one communicates, especially when and in what manner they are allowed to express happiness.

Hess, Adams, and Kleck (2005) suggest that the rules of facial expressions and happiness as related to power and inequality are different not just between cultures, but also within cultures and between social identities such as gender. She finds support for the stereotypes associated with gender and emotional displays. For example, her research supports the fact that in many Western societies, "anger displays are more appropriate for men and smiling is requisite for women" (Hess et al., 2005, p. 515). This implies men are rated as more dominant while women are rated as more affiliative. Men are expected to smile more frequently than women to be considered affiliative. Contrastingly, women have a more difficult time showing dominance given the masculine "morphological cues associated with perceived high dominance such as a square jaw, thick eyebrows, and receding hairlines" in comparison to women's more frequent "large eyes and narrow jaws [which] lead to perceptions of warmth, honesty, submissiveness, and incompetence" (534). These differences may be further complicated by issues of sexuality, in that non-heteronormative gender displays are often viewed differently.

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In addition to these morphological cues, Keating (1981) found "a universal association between smiles and happiness" but in comparisons also found expressions of nonsmiling to be associated with dominance. For example, she also found that facial cues such as a lowered brow were associated with dominance, but in Westernized samples only.

Thus, beyond individual dominance, there is also much evidence to suggest that international differences in social and cultural equality would influence a culture's predisposition to positive communication. That is to say, in cultures where there is more equality, we might find more expression—verbal or nonverbal—of happiness through positive communication.

Other work has emphasized the cultural construction of happiness, especially in the European-American context (Kingfisher, 2013). This work questions the hegemonic nature of happiness as a Western construction and links it to forms of neoliberal governance. This may also manifest in other national- or cultural-level variables.

Throughout the world, racial/ethnic groups with less power and freedom generally tend to be less happy than the dominant racial/ethnic group. However, race/ethnicity and happiness are complicated issues. In particular, in the United States African Americans, Latinos, and indigenous communities tend to report being less happy than the dominant white population. For example, in a national survey, roughly 33 percent of whites stated that they were very happy compared to 28 percent of Hispanics (The Harris Poll #30, 2013). This is understandable in light of the fact that Latinos have been the targets of state and national anti-immigrant legislation (such as SB1070 in the state of Arizona) or ongoing discourse around building a wall on the US-Mexico border to keep out migrants.

Another study (Yap, Settles, & Pratt-Hyatt, 2011) found that among African Americans, the more participants identified with being black (or the more being black was an important part of their identity), the happier they were with life as a whole. This may indicate the positive embracement of one's racial/ethnic identity is key to well-being despite a socially subordinate position in a given racial hierarchy.

Stevenson and Wolfers (2009) found that happiness can be intersectional, affecting different racial groups by gender as well as other identity features. White women of all ages and incomes are substantially less happy today than in the 1970s, while black women have become much happier. In the 1970s white women were the happiest of any group. Stevenson and Wolfers call this "the paradox of declining female happiness" and attribute this problem to socioeconomic forces as well as changing social expectations put on women to now be both model mothers and wives as well as model workers (27).

Finally, as the saying goes, money has indeed been shown to buy happiness (at the minimum, it can by comfort). However, this monetary power differential has its limits as well. Kahneman and Deaton (2010) demonstrate that high income may increase one's overall life satisfaction (eudaimonic happiness) but not their emotional well-being (hedonic happiness). They found that emotional well-being, while associated with income fails to have an effect past an annual income of ~$75,000 in the United States. This demonstrates that one's happiness may be different based on one's socioeconomic status, at least between a threshold of being able to fully care for one's self and one's family. While this finding has not been explicitly replicated internationally, it seems likely that one's level of well-being will cease to increase with one's income past the point of basic necessities being met. Throughout the world, one can identify wealthy, powerful individuals who have "all the comforts of life" but are unhappy, indeed, some are quite miserable, as exemplified, for example, by some world leaders.

These international differences in socioeconomic status may also intersect with other cultural systems that convey power, such as religion. For example, Li & Bond (2010) found that secularism had a "small but statistically very significant" positive relationship to life satisfaction across four waves of the World Values Survey (1984–2004), which covers almost 100 countries

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and 90 percent of the world's population. However, this was moderated by the country's human development index, suggesting secularism may only increase well-being in more developed nations. This is likely linked to religious emphasis on tradition and conformity, which are also linked to power (Li & Bond, 2010).

As this section has shown, various power dynamics can influence one's happiness as well as how one is able to communicate that happiness. Any credible social science research should understand what power dynamics are at play in a situation to better contextualize the social relations—and as seen above, the search for understanding happiness is no different.

Individualism Versus Collectivism

A final area of exploration that links happiness and communication is the varying cultural predisposition of individualism versus collectivism in a given culture. This distinction is often highlighted at the national level where individualist countries are defined as those promoting independence and self-reliance (such as the United States, much of Continental Europe, Australia, etc.) while conversely, collectivist countries (such as many Asian and Scandinavian countries) highlight group cohesion, cooperation, and rights of the community over the individual. Much research has demonstrated that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, but have nuances such as horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism, which emphasize variation in power differences. These differences can vary based on demographic issues (race/ethnicity) as well as national level differences and can influence intercultural effectiveness in communication (Okoro, Cardon, Marshall, & Thomas, 2011).

These national level differences have been shown to affect reported well-being, such that "Anglo-American culture fosters and encourages cheerfulness [and] positive thinking" (Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 42) while other cultures may limit the public expression and reporting or expression of hedonic happiness. For example, Sheldon et al. (2017) suggest that Russians and Americans had similar levels of reported Subjective Well-Being, but the Russians were less likely to express or display their happiness, especially to strangers (as opposed to friends and family). This cultural difference highlights the potential for miscommunication based on external displays of happiness.

In our courses on happiness, numerous Asian students have commented on how smiling in public is much more prevalent in the United States than in their home countries. Indeed, these Asian students say that this is one of the cultural differences they immediately noticed when they moved to the United States. McDuff, Girard, and Kaliouby (2017) support this anecdotal evidence in their emphasis on cross-cultural differences in facial behavior. He argues that

> participants from more individualist cultures displayed more brow furrowing overall, whereas smiling depended on both culture and setting. Specifically, participants from more individualist countries were more expressive in the facility setting, while participants from more collectivist countries were more expressive in the home setting. Female participants displayed more smiling and less brow furrowing than male participants overall, with the latter difference being more pronounced in more individualist countries.
>
> *(p. 1)*

Other work by Walsh (1997) highlights the differences between communal broadcasting communication style of Aboriginal cultures in Australia compared to the dyadic nature of Western communication. These differences emphasize a Western individualist conversational habit of eye contact, turn-taking, and short messages compared to a more collectivists, listener-controlled, long-term conversational style used by Aboriginal cultures.

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Anthropologist John Bodley (2013) proposes that countries that are organized in small units (one million or less) that allow more people to participate in the government are happier than those living in large nations with large governments. We also know that people living in democracies where they feel greater freedom are happier than those living under totalitarian governments where freedoms are often more restricted. Additionally, people living in countries with strong social safety nets (e.g., universal health care and free education, as is the case in Scandinavian countries) are happier than people living in countries with fewer such support systems (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017).

Thus, this section shows that government and national culture provide a cultural lens through which happiness can be expressed and communicated. Those who communicate their well-being in one manner may not be understood by outsiders, or may not care to share that well-being with others from different cultures.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter seeks to document how culture influences communications, particularly around happiness. While context and social groups can greatly influence how we experience and express happiness, including talking about it, it remains true that every human being has experienced happiness, even if only briefly and intermittently, during their life. Even under the most repressive social, political, religious, and economic environments, throughout the course of human history, people have found occasions for experiencing joy and reasons to celebrate. Such is the strength of the human spirit.

Although there are many cultural contexts and differences that influence happiness, and how we communicate it, smiling seems to be quite universal and genuinely communicates happiness, albeit with important nuances, across nations, cultures, genders, ages, class, etc. Likewise with laughter. One way of remaining upbeat, even under the most difficult and challenging circumstances, which all humans experience during their lifetimes, is to keep smiling: "Just keep smiling. Even when you're sad, keep smiling" (Weiner, 2008, p. 321). Likewise with laughter. Smiling and laughing during difficult situations does not mean that one should simply accept dire circumstances. Rather, it is a recognition of the healing power of smiles and laughter and the strength they give us to be able to carry on, to work against those problematic, repressive, and depressive circumstances in an effort to change them for the better. Such is the power of positive communication.

Both smiling and laughter have healthy physiological and psychological benefits, and both smiling and laughter are contagious. Thus, our smiles and laughter contribute not only to our well-being they do the same for the people around us, regardless of cultural or other social differences.

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