

Happiness in the Poorest Communities: Subjective Well-Being Among Adolescent Waste Pickers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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This study investigated the subjective well-being (SWB) of selected adolescent waste pickers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It included the waste pickers' concepts of subjective well-being and the factors that determine their subjective well-being as individuals. In looking for these subjective well-being concepts and determinant factors, this study employed the exploratory qualitative research method through a series of in-depth interviews, case study, and focus group discussion (FGD). The data for this study were drawn from fifteen (15) waste picker respondents from the dumping place at Doung Kor District. Ten (10) of these waste picker respondents were interviewed and five (5) of them were made participants in the focus group discussion (FGD). Five (5) of the ten (10) interviewed waste picker participants are male and the other five (5) are female. The FGD group of another five is composed of three females and two males of adolescent waste pickers. The findings revealed that adolescent waste pickers' concepts of SWB summarily centered on three (3) domains: social/relational, cognitive, and affective. The factors that determined the waste pickers' concept of SWB included the following factors: personal, interpersonal, and financial. Personal factors involved categories such as physical health, good disposition in life, feeling free from pressure, positive outlook in life, being able to learn from experiences and freedom. For the interpersonal factor, taken into consideration are supportive and caring friends, being able to help family and friends, true and trusted friends, communication, getting help from NGOs and Christian churches, harmonious relationship with family, loving and caring family, and getting involved in community activities were the factors that contributed to participants' concept of happiness. Finally, financial factor included satisfaction of basic need, and financial security.

Keywords: subjective well-being, happiness, well-being, waste picker, good fortune, prosperity

Introduction

It is estimated that 2000 children and adolescents work as waste pickers on the Doung Kor rubbish dump in Phnom Penh City, with a total of 11,931 people directly or indirectly involved in waste collection process (Vyna, 2015). Waste picking (collecting rubbish from dumps in order to sell it) is prevalent in many developing countries and is reported to be the most hazardous form of child labour (International Labour Organization, 2004). Waste pickers are vulnerable to infections and parasites (Alvarado-Esquivel, Liesenfeld, Márquez-Conde, Cisneros-Camacho, Estrada-Martínez, Martínez-García, González-Herrera, & García-Corral, 2008), lung cancer, and other respiratory conditions as a result of smoke inhalation from the burning waste (Puente, 2000; Bequele & Boyden, 1988; Boyden & Holden, 1991; Salazar, 1999) and being injured by trucks or bulldozers (Abad, 1991). In addition, research reports an increase in low birth weight and birth defects among the waste

picker community (Comba, Bianchi, Fazzo, Martina, Menaegozzo, Minichilli, Mitis, Musineci, Pizzuti, Santora, Rinca, & Martuzzi, 2006).

Waste pickers in Phnom Penh experience violence, harassment, social rejection, and arrest by authorities (Pucher, 2005). They are often illiterate due to no or irregular school attendance, instead finding immediate economic gratification in waste picking. There are limited opportunities to break the cycle of poverty. Comba et al (2006) found that the waste pickers of Phnom Penh suffer high stress and worry about the future as a result of the quality of their well-being, low self-satisfaction, and lack of basic needs for the whole family.

There has been much research into the definition of happiness over the past few decades with a strong focus on western values regarding “life satisfaction”. E. Diener, M. Diener, and C. Diener (1995) define subjective well-being (SWB) as a “person’s evaluative reactions to his or her life—either in terms of life satisfaction (cognitive evaluations) or affect (ongoing emotional reaction)”. SWB is the positive state that tends to produce beneficial societal outcomes, compared to negative states, such as depression, which produce undesirable social outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Deiner, 2005). SWB is also positively associated with physical health (e.g. Diener & Chan, 2010).

More recently researchers have focused on this societal impact of SWB, indicating high levels significantly improve health and longevity, work and income, social relations, and social benefit (Diener & Ryan, 2009). Those with high SWB tend to have closer and more supportive social relations with others (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002), contributing to a more stable, productive, and effectively functioning society (Tov & Diener, 2008).

The majority of Cambodians follow Theravada Buddhism with a strong emphasis on happiness and the belief that actions in this life impact the next. The culture is collectivist with the needs of the group prioritized over that of the individual, focusing on cooperation above competition. The individualistic cultures, mostly in Europe and the United States, value individual needs and accomplishments. Collectivism emphasizes the importance of duties, others’ needs, and acceptance of one’s fate (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999), with norms more important than pleasure (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Less attention is paid to the emotional consequences of events and emotions are featured less prominently in life satisfaction judgments (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000). Culture can influence and moderate SWB (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). For example, in collectivist cultures Scollon, Diener, Oishi, and Biswas-Diener (2005) found that positive and negative affect are more strongly correlated than in individualist cultures; individuals living in collectivist cultures who experience more positive affect also experience more negative affect. A number of possible explanations for the cultural difference are suggested but their findings suggest that “pride” is an important factor, and is correlated with more negative affect. Scollon et al. (2005) go on with question whether SWB is related to the presence of positive and absence of negative feelings and experiences as is often assumed in individualist populations, or whether in collectivist cultures SWB is associated with experiencing a wide range of emotions.

Camfield, Choudhury, and Devine (2007) found that the happiness in Bangladesh was borne of social elements and cultural context, such as good personal relationships with the community and family, optimism, goal-setting, the collectivist culture which values the group and family members who support each other. Similarly, Biswas-Diener, and Diener (2006) compared subjective well being of homeless people living in India and the US and found that although they shared low satisfaction with material resources and high levels of negative affect, they also reported positive ratings of the self. Those from the US, however, reported lower overall SWB than their (objectively poorer) Indian counterparts. The greatest discrepancy across the two

cultures was satisfaction with social domains, in Calcutta the homeless people's families often remain intact and their relationships were reported as more satisfying. The authors propose that the communist political system in India promotes sympathy for the poor and that there is less stigma attached to homelessness. Collectivism places a greater value on belonging and community so it follows that individual SWB may be more influenced by these factors. The findings suggest an important positive impact of collectivist culture on SWB for those living in extreme poverty.

Cross-cultural research often links poverty and SWB; people in wealthy, developed countries report considerably higher SWB than those in poor, underdeveloped countries (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). It is suggested the wealthy are more satisfied with life because the material provisions they need and want are satisfied (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010). However, as with the homeless people of Calcutta being more satisfied than their US counterparts who had more resources (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2006), some low-income groups report high SWB. The Maasai ethnic group in Kenya and Tanzania reported high SWB despite living in dung houses without electricity or running water (Biswas-Diener, Vittero, & Diener, 2005). Such findings support the idea that some groups have low materialistic aspiration and place higher value on community and social aspects of SWB, finding satisfaction with what they already have (Diener et al., 2010). Brockmann, Delhey, Welzel, and Yuan (2009) found that SWB had decreased in China despite the recent increase in material things and improvement of living standards. This finding contradicted the notion that income growth leads to happiness. This pattern could be explained through a top-heavy biased income inequality. It seems that the impact of income on SWB relates to the *comparison* with others in a person's community.

Despite a curvilinear association between income and happiness, with extra income adding little extra happiness (E. Diener, M. Diener, & C. Diener, 1995), there is evidence from India that income in the poorest communities is particularly important to SWB (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). However, it is easy to assume that those who have little resources are unhappy. Schkade & Kahneman (1998) call this the "focusing effect". For example it is easy to focus on the waste pickers' dirty and dangerous working environment and the stigma from the wider community. This ignores the full context of their lives and sources of well-being and happiness, such as their romantic relationships, friends, or spirituality. We propose that understanding what contributes to SWB in poor communities helps to empower them, and the data can be used to improve their lives by building these strengths and engaging with what they consider important and meaningful in their lives. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the concept of SWB among adolescent waste-pickers in Phnom Penh, and the factors that determine their SWB.

Method

This exploratory study employed case studies, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion (FGD) to collect data. Data collection was conducted at the Doung Kor rubbish dump in Phnom Penh; considered the largest in the city.

Ten adolescents participated in individual interviews and another five in an FGD, with four from the interview group being studied in greater detail as case studies. They ranged in age from 14 to 20 years, and were involved in waste picking for at least a year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include a variety of situations in order to obtain varied and richer data. Each interview was conducted for 45 to 60 minutes. Interview schedules were piloted with adolescents to ensure understanding. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants N = 15

Variables		f	%
Age	14-16	5	33
	17-19	7	47
	20	3	20
Sex	Female	8	53
	Male	7	47
Educational attainment	Never attended school	1	7
	Reached grade 3-9 then left	8	53
	Grade 3-9 and continued	6	40
Marital status	Married	1	7
	Single	14	93
Duration of work on dump	1-3 years	7	47
	4-6 years	5	33
	7+ years	3	20

The word “subjective well-being” or “happiness” was translated into two words in the Cambodian language, Khmer: which means “happiness, good fortune, prosperity” and which means “happy, salubrious, which means “happy, salubrious, beneficial, healthy, wholesome”. Researchers from the Royal University of Phnom Penh suggested the use of both terms as appropriate and commonly used by psychology researchers in Cambodia.

Reflexivity

The study was conducted by a Cambodian researcher with 10 years experience as a counselor and social worker in Cambodia, as part of a master course at De La Salle University in the Philippines. The researcher had some experience of working with adolescents working and living in the dump and knowledge about SWB in the Cambodian context. Khmer language (the native language of researcher and subjects) was used during the data collection. The use of translation can have an impact upon the results as it adds another layer of interpretation; however the only way to disseminate findings to the international community is through translation. Checks were included to guard against interpretation biases.

Data Analysis

Once transcribed, data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Categories were repeatedly modified, added to and collated to fit the emerging data. Having identified the themes and forming initial categories for the entire data set, it was translated to English. An external judge, a senior professor from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, checked and verified the identified domains and categories in English against the raw data in the Khmer language.

Results

Concept of SWB

Results revealed that the adolescent waste pickers in Phnom Penh’s responses regarding their SWB can be categorized into three domains: social/relational, cognitive, and affective. Each domain can be broken down further into sub-domains with high levels of agreement (Table 2).

Table 2

Concept of SWB Among Adolescent Waste Pickers in Phnom Penh (N = 15)

Domains	Categories	f
Social/relational	Being with family	
	Complete family	14
	Being loved and cared for	12
	Sense of meaning in life	11
	Being with friends	
	Getting support	13
	Enjoyment of life	12
	Sense of belonging	10
	Being accepted and understood	9
Cognitive	Acceptance of reality	10
	Sense of satisfaction in life	9
Affective	Enjoyment of being healthy	12
	Free from worries	9

Social/Relational

This domain can be divided into two subdomains: being with family and being with friends. Most of the participants believed that being with their family captured the essence of being happy and this included having a complete family, being loved and cared for, and having a sense of meaning in life.

I do not want anyone to be away from home and be separated from the family. I feel happy when my family is living together in the same house. I feel happy that way and it gives me strong sense of confidence.

Most of the respondents felt that they were well taken care of within the family. Eleven believed that being with their family gives them a sense of meaning in life, citing their parents and siblings are their reason for striving harder in life.

My mother means so much to me. Without her, my life is meaningless. She is the reason why I am working hard.

The majority reported that support from friends at the dump, and being there provides an opportunity to enjoy the company of their friends, reporting that this makes them happy. Despite their hazardous work, they feel safe because they have friends who will help and support them.

I am happy being with my waste picker friends. I find them very supportive of me and I feel they value me so much. When I am in need of help, I feel they are ready to help. When I am with them, I am not scared of anything.

Ten respondents reported that being with their friends gives them a sense of belonging that makes them happy. They have often been together for many years and that strengthens their relationships. This also leads them to feel accepted and understood. Nine felt that nobody can accept and understand them but their friends.

I am happy because I am with friends who can accept and understand me. Only the waste pickers like us can understand our situation. The rich people could not understand our feelings because they do not experience the kind of life we have.

Cognitive

Acceptance of reality and sense of life satisfaction were found to contribute to participants' concept of happiness. Ten participants reported that they are able to enjoy life because they are able to accept their

situation. They believed they could not change the course of their life instantly.

I am a waste picker and I cannot change that. The only thing I can do is to accept the kind of life I have.

Nine participants believed that happiness involves a sense of satisfaction in life. For these participants, satisfaction was based on the fact that they are able to have three meals a day; satisfying this basic need is enough to make them happy as they compare it to harder times;

I am satisfied with my life because I can now eat three times a day. Two years ago, we could only have one meal a day. We are six in the family and our food was not enough for all of us. We had to share whatever food we have on the table. Now we can afford to eat more than three times a day.

Affective

The affective domain comprised the enjoyment of being healthy and the freedom from worries. Participants were aware of the danger they face but eight reported that knowing that they are still healthy makes them happy.

I am working at the dumping site and I am exposed to toxic substances. I am happy that I have never been sick.

Nine participants felt that the fact that they are free from worrying about where to get money to meet their families' basic needs contributes to their SWB. To explain this, one participant said:

I think my income is enough for me and my family. Now, I don't have to worry about tomorrow, at least for now. I have enough to spend for my family. The fact is that I do not have to worry as to where to get money or to worry about other things is a reason to be happy.

Factors Affecting SWB

The following categories of determinant factors were identified: personal, interpersonal, and financial. Each has a number of subcategories as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Factors That Determine the SWB Among Adolescent Waste Pickers

Domains	Categories	f
Personal	Physical health	12
	Feeling free from pressure	11
	Time to rest and relax	10
	Independence	8
Interpersonal	Loving and caring family	14
	Open communication	13
	Involvement in the community	13
	Helping the family	12
	Help from NGOs and Christian Churches	12
	Harmonious relationship with family and friends	11
	Learning from friends	11
Financial	Sense of security	12
	Satisfaction of basic needs	10

Note. N = 15.

Personal

Personal factors determining SWB were physical health, feeling free from pressure, having time to rest and relax, and independence.

Eight participants reported quality of physical health contributes to SWB and that they take efforts to protect their health by wearing boots, gloves, and other gadgets that shield them from the possible effects of chemical substances to which they are exposed.

Eleven participants reported that feeling free from pressure is an important contributing factor to their SWB. They can work at any time that they want and do not have to worry about a supervisor controlling or pressuring them. One participant said:

In the dumping place, we are not pressured to do our jobs. There is no pressure of being dismissed if we do not do our jobs well. There is nothing to worry about being blamed if we do not work well. I am free to do whatever I want to do at the dumping site. We do not have any boss to control us. No one orders us to work or go overtime. Everything depends on us. If we work hard we will earn more but if we do not, we earn less.

Another factor that determines adolescent waste pickers' SWB is when they have enough time to rest and relax. Ten participants expressed the importance of this. The work is hard and they become tired. Whenever they have time, they stop working for a while and look for a place to relax or play with their friends. One said:

At the dumping place we stop working for a while and play in groups when there are no trucks loading the wastes. When we grow tired, we always find time to rest and relax.

Eight participants reported that the independence they experience as waste pickers contributes to their SWB. They do not have to depend on others as long as they work hard:

Even if we are waste pickers, we are proud because we are independent. I am happy that I do not have to beg from anyone in order to survive. All I need to do is just work on my own.

Interpersonal

The interpersonal factor was believed to be critical in determining the SWB of the adolescent waste pickers. They highly valued their interpersonal relationships with their family, friends, and community.

Having a loving and caring family was found to be an essential factor determining the happiness of most participants:

I need a family. With my family, I feel I am surrounded with people who love me and care for me.

Thirteen participants revealed that it is important for them to have open communication with others to aid understanding and avoid conflict:

I realized that in a family it takes an open communication of the members to be able to understand one another. This lessens friction and this brings about happiness.

The majority also valued involvement in their community as an important determining factor in SWB. By thinking of others they reported feeling happy to be able to contribute to the community where they belong. One participant said:

I am involved in some community program in our village. I have been involved with the campaign in the "birth spacing program", hygiene program, and water sanitation program of our village. I find this involvement very helpful to others and very meaningful to me.

Most of the adolescent waste pickers also found it important to support their family. These participants are aware of the financial situations of their family and they want to help the whole family have a better life:

My parents are into heavy debts. I work with my sisters to help my parents pay our debts. I am happy that I have a chance to help my parents.

I am an oldest child in the family of five children. My parents alone could not support our family so I need to help them. I am happy that I am able to help my parents.

Whilst they reported strong community support, assistance from NGOs and Christian churches is also a factor contributing to SWB. Twelve of the participants shared that they are grateful that there are organizations that support and promote the welfare of waste pickers in the city:

Waste pickers' situations now are much better than before. There are several NGOs and Christian churches that come to us and provide us the medical care we need. They also give us food.

We get health education from several NGOs and Christian churches. This makes our health conscious. We realized the importance of health care and sickness prevention.

The waste pickers place a great deal of importance to maintaining the harmonious nature of their relationships either with their family or friends:

I have strong relationship with my family. We are much closer to one another now before when my father used to become violent to my mother. He is already working now and this makes our house a peaceful place to live in.

Most of the participants had not attended school. The dump served as their school where they learn from those who wanted to share their knowledge. Eleven participants reported the presence of friends who are willing to share knowledge contributes to their SWB. These include lessons in literacy and "lessons in life":

Friends are not just persons we know for a few days. They are persons from whom we can get insights or ideas on how we can improve our life. I have never attended school so I learned from my friends. All their ideas are lessons I take in life.

Financial

This domain comprised two main determinants; financial security and satisfaction of basic needs. The adolescent waste pickers demonstrate their own concept of financial security, they feel secure because they know they can earn enough or more for one day. Most of the waste pickers reported having experienced starvation or having no money to meet their basic needs. Now that they are earning, they find it important to know how to budget and save:

Unlike the time when we were living in our hometown, life here in the city is much better. We feel secure because at least we know more or less how much we will earn for the day. I know for sure that every day, we could earn at least 10,000 riel from collecting wastes. We just need to learn how to budget.

At least now, we can save from our earnings from collecting wastes. I can manage our expenses according to our means. This gives me a sense of security because of our savings.

Participants chose waste picking as a job because of poverty. Waste picking may not be a stable job but they believe just need to work hard to satisfy their basic needs. One participant shared:

Food is the basic need that we really think of. We are happy because we have money to buy food.

Discussion

The findings of the study correspond with definitions of SWB as including a global assessment of a person's life or life satisfaction and that it is a subjective, phenomenological experience (Diener, 1984; 2006; Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). People are happy when they subjectively believe themselves to be happy. It is

the presence of positive emotions and relative absence of negative emotions and it is also the global judgment of one as a whole. The findings also fit the theory that an individual achieves SWB when a certain goal, object, or need has been met or achieved (Diener & Ryan, 2009).

In the collectivist context of Cambodia, the individual takes second place to the group, so family, neighborhood, or society is more important (Sriwarakuel, Dy, Haryatmoko, Chuan, & Yiheang, 2005). It is therefore no surprise that the adolescent waste pickers placed such value on their family, friends, and community in their concept of subjective well-being. Family is the strongest and the most valued social unit in the Cambodian society. In line with these findings, Markus and Kitayama (1991) also found that family contributes to life satisfaction in collectivist cultures and is a strong correlate of happiness. People report that they feel happy when they are with others, particularly with their family (Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990).

However, Myers and Diener (1995) extended this effect beyond family to include friends stating that all supportive relationships are associated with happiness. This is also highlighted in the lives of the adolescent waste pickers in this study. Participants' friends and the community to which they belong play a significant role in their SWB. Through being with friends participants are able to experience the joy of life and a sense of belongingness. The dump seems to be a good place to socialise. Friendship has been identified as a strong predictor of SWB in collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The ability to accept their reality was also highlighted as an important factor impacting SWB. Several stated that they cannot change their reality but they can make a difference to how they perceive that reality. The Buddhist belief in fate and karma may contribute to this cognitive domain and enable greater acceptance and less striving for a different life promoting satisfaction with current reality. This may reflect the process of "adaptation" which posits that humans adapt to their circumstances to maintain a "happiness set point" which is affected little by their environment unless there is change (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bullman, 1978).

Physical health was reported to contribute to SWB and therefore enhances their psychological health; however it is also possible that those who have good mental health or more positive affect are less likely to suffer from physical health problems (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000). It appears from the interviews that *perceptions* of physical health and safety may be important to the adolescents SWB.

In order to maintain harmony in a relationship, Cambodian culture dictates that one should hide his or her feelings to avoid conflict (Ollier & Winter, 2006). In terms of the waste pickers' need for open communication and harmonious relationships there is previous evidence that the quality of interactions with others also influences SWB (Diener & Biswas-Deiner, 2005). Participants were not angry with their parents for making them work because they know they are poor and they felt the need to help. It seems that it is also the Cambodian culture that as children grow older, they are encouraged to develop a sense of duty and obligation (Lum, 2011). Despite these realities, most of the participants never expressed bitterness or anger. They said it would be better to look at the positive side of life and focus on what could be done to improve their condition. Most of them felt that they have better lives compared to those who need to beg for food. Being able to contribute to their families, through both their income and spending time together, and to their communities, through both informal friendships and education and formal opportunities to be involved in projects, were important factors in SWB. This supports the findings of Biswas-Diener, and Diener (2006) that in collectivist cultures social factors contribute significantly to SWB. However, the results also suggest that the context of poverty in Cambodia means that a comparison of the waste pickers with their peers who must beg contributes to their perception of their lives as satisfactory.

Minimal external restriction and individual freedom of the waste pickers were considered to be the most attractive features of waste picking. They are also free from pressure from employers or supervisors who would set rules and regulations for them to follow. According to Christopher (1999) it is our capacity for autonomy that brings us our dignity as human beings. Freedom and autonomy have been found to be a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in an individualistic culture than in a collectivistic culture (Oishi et al., 1999). However, Hofstede (2001) found that autonomy is also important to individuals in a collectivistic culture. The findings provide initial support that waste pickers' value and gain well-being from perceiving control over their environment and choices. Often in the developed world a psychopathology approach has been taken, which consistently associates a lack of control with increased anxiety and depression (see Chorpita & Barlow, 1998 for a review). Although this finding offers minimal support for a wider association with well being and control, it may be of interest to local organisations that seek to find alternative employment and education for waste picking adolescents. Assumptions that the job has no positive aspects may be an obstacle for engaging young people in new roles and education.

Financial security and satisfaction of basic needs are important factors that determined the waste picker's happiness. Working as waste pickers gave them an opportunity to meet their basic needs. SWB tends to be higher among people who possess adequate financial resources (Diener, 1984). The participants expressed that happiness involved being free from worries, which they usually defined as having enough to eat or pay for basic needs on a given day. As in the comparison of homeless people in India and the US (Biswas-Diener & Diener 2006) it appears that the collectivist culture offers protection from some of the most damaging influences of poverty by placing greater value on social relationships and community.

Conclusion

The subjective well-being of the adolescent waste pickers rests on their perception of their life in its entirety: How they view their life being with the family; how they live life with friends at the dump; how they feel satisfied with the food they eat; and how they find happiness and fulfillment is being able to fulfill basic needs.

The adolescent waste pickers also view their perception of subjective well-being based on their experiences within their family's situation and their community of origin.

The way the adolescent waste pickers think, what they experience from the surrounding environment, and their attitude and assessment of life, also determines their subjective well-being.

Several factors, namely: meaningful family relation, interpersonal relationship, money or income, physical health, interest and support of society, and autonomy or freedom determined the experience of subjective well-being of adolescent waste pickers.

This study highlights that culture is a significant factor in the SWB of adolescent waste pickers, with the implication that the concept and determining factors of SWB vary across cultures. There are certain formulations in psychology that had been initially thought of as pan-cultural or universal but have now been found to be more culture-specific (Reyes, 2004). The way that happiness is conceptualised when working with the people from different cultures should be re-evaluated.

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