Happiness Among Urban Poor Filipino Families

Kathleen Dianne K. Dy, University of the Philippines, Philippines
Consuelo T. Chua, University of the Philippines, Philippines

Abstract

Filipinos are generally observed to display happiness despite the experience of poverty. However, limited researches have been done to support or explain such observation. The purpose of the study was to examine the level of happiness among selected Filipino families who were living below the poverty line. The study also identified the families' sources of happiness and the actions they take to experience happiness. A qualitative research design was used. Twenty urban poor two-parent families were the subjects of the study. The Family Subjective Happiness Scale was administered to the families to determine their level of happiness. In depth-interviews were used to examine the families' sources of happiness and the actions they take to be happy. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results showed that most of the poor families were either happy or very happy. The primary sources of happiness of the families include good family relationship, family togetherness, having children, faith in God, and good health. On the other hand, learning to be content, finding ways to solve their problems, engaging in leisure activities, and developing optimism were the things that the families do to achieve or experience happiness. Despite being poor, the families were happy mainly because they have close family relationships and are contented with their lives. The study provided valuable contribution to understanding why Filipino families show happiness despite poverty.

Keywords: family, family well-being, subjective happiness, Filipino families

Introduction

Despite daily struggles and constant poverty, Filipinos in general seem predisposed to happiness. The poverty incidence in the Philippines is wide at 25.8 % (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015). Nevertheless, the country has consistently scored high on measures of subjective happiness such as the 2014 Gallup Positive Experience Index, wherein the Philippines ranked among the highest in terms of positive emotions across 143 participating countries (Clifton, 2015). Similarly, the 2013 Fourth Quarter Survey by the Social Weather Station (2014) in the Philippines revealed that 86% of Filipinos were either very happy or fairly happy with their lives.

Happiness pertains to the "subjective appreciation of one's life as a whole" (Rojas & Veenhoven, 2011, p. 2). It has both cognitive and affective definitions. Using the cognitive view, happiness is defined as evaluating one's life according to certain standards, criteria, goals, and desires. From an affective view, happiness is defined by a person's evaluation of his life, and the occurrence of positive and negative experiences and emotions (Veenhoven, 2006). Happiness is subjective in nature and is not always tied to material things – the most probable reason why Filipinos are generally happy. For Filipinos, having fulfilling relations has precedence over material things, with the family as the primary source of their happiness (Cruz & Ramiro, 2009). Various studies examining different population groups in the Philippines (i.e. middle-aged, never-married women, government employees, private employees) have found that the family is the top source of happiness among Filipinos (Cruz & Ramiro, 2009; Virola, et al., 2010; Santos, 2008). Other common sources of happiness include good health, religion and spiritual pursuits, productive work, friends, and achievements. Among the low-income group, family, health, and food are top sources of happiness for women, while employment, family, and health are the top sources of happiness for men (Virola, et al., 2010).

While the family has consistently been found to be the main source of happiness among Filipinos, surveys on happiness normally consider individuals as unit of analysis. It is very much likely that Filipinos' individual happiness emanate from positive family well-being, though this area remains unexplored. Positive family functioning has been found to lead to healthy and happy individuals (i.e. Botha & Booysen, 2014; McKeown, et al., 2003). The model of family and child well-being proposed by Newland (2015) for instance, depicts that family wellbeing is the foundation of child-wellbeing. In fact, "families that function well support societies, and families with effective QoL are seen as social resource" (Isaacs, et al., 2007, p. 178).

Given these findings, it seems worthwhile to examine the happiness of Filipino families as a single unit since family functioning has a significant contribution to the well-being of the individual. Examining the happiness of Filipino families would provide a new perspective in understanding the individual subjective well-being of Filipinos. More so, looking into the sources and experiences of happiness of poor families would shed light to specific family attributes that explain why they remain happy despite their distressful situation. Hence, this study explored the happiness of urban poor Filipino families and their sources of happiness. This research focused on the idea of happiness of families, whereas existing studies delved on individuals only. Furthermore, this study attempted to discuss the interplay of the different domains of happiness as shared by the families. This research aimed to contribute to the small amount of literature on happiness of families in developing nations by addressing the following objectives: 1) Describe the perceived level of happiness among selected urban poor Filipino

families; 2) Identify the sources of happiness of poor Filipino families; and 3) Describe actions that poor Filipino families take in order to achieve or experience happiness.

Methods

Sample

The participants of the study include 20 urban poor nuclear Filipino families, who were informal settlers in a small village in Quezon City, the most populous city in the Philippines. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the families were selected through purposive sampling following these inclusion criteria: they should have school-aged children and earning less than 8,000 Php or 160 USD per month, the poverty threshold in the Philippines for a family of five. The participants were recruited by requesting the Village Captain of the research locale to refer families who meet the study's inclusion criteria. The researcher personally visited the families in their homes to explain the nature of the study and to seek for their consent to participate. This procedure resulted to 20 families participating in the study.

Guest et al. (2006, as cited in Saunders, et al., 2009) argued that in-depth interviews with at least 12 respondents would suffice for a sample involving a homogenous group. Since the primary goal of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the sources of happiness and the actions taken to achieve happiness of a homogenous family group (i.e. urban poor Filipino families with school-aged children), the sample size of 20 families was deemed sufficient to provide information-rich data to address the study's objectives. For each family, both parents and the eldest child served as the respondents. The ages of the parents ranged from 25 to 50 years old, while the eldest children were between 10 to 12 years of age. The families had one to five children, with most of them having two to three children. Half of the fathers were employed as full-time workers, six were employed in part-time jobs, two were self-employed, and the other two were unemployed. Sixteen out of the 20 mothers were housewives, three were employed in part-time jobs, and one employed full-time.

Instrument

The study made use of two content-validated instruments. The first instrument is the Family Subjective Happiness Scale (FSHS), a 5-point, 4-item scale which was adapted from the Subjective Happiness Scale of Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) is a highly reliable and valid four-item, 7-point Likert scale that measures individual global subjective happiness. Using the SHS as basis, a parallel global subjective happiness scale was developed for families. Compared to the SHS which considers the subjective happiness of individuals, the FSHS measures the happiness of the entire family unit based on the perspective of individual family members. The resulting FSHS was translated in Filipino, the respondents' language. The FSHS was content validated by two home economics experts from the University of the Philippines to ensure its accuracy in measuring family subjective happiness. On the other hand, to ensure the accuracy of translation from English to Filipino, the scale was examined by a representative from the *Sentro ng Wikang Filipino* (Center of Filipino Language) who is adept with both the English and Filipino Languages. To obtain the happiness score of each family in the FSHS, the mean scores of three family members (mother, father, and eldest child) were computed. Scores in the FSHS were interpreted as follows – 4.1 to 5 (very happy); 3.1 to 4 (happy); 3 (neither happy nor unhappy); 2 to 2.99 (unhappy); and 1 to 1.99 (very unhappy).

The second instrument, the Family Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (FSWQ) was used to gather qualitative data from the families. The questionnaire consists of semi-structured and

open-ended questions that focus on the sources of happiness of the families and the actions they take to be happy. The FSWQ was also examined by two home economics experts to ensure the accuracy of the questions in addressing the study's research objectives. All interview questions were written in the Filipino language.

Data Collection
Data was obtained by visiting each family in their respective homes. An explanation was given regarding the nature of the study to all respondents, followed by a request to participate. The respondents were also assured of the confidentiality of the study's results. For each family, both parents and the eldest child were asked to answer the FSHS separately. Since the target respondents were not complete for most families during the time of data collection, the researcher left the FSHS with one family member and collected these after a few days. After obtaining the accomplished FSHS, in-depth interviews were conducted with one member of the family, who was either the mother or the father. The interviews took place in a comfortable area chosen by the respondent. Some interviews were done in the homes of the respondents, while other interviews were conducted in an open area within the neighborhood. The interviews took around 15 to 20 minutes on the average. A voice recorder was used to obtain accurate details. One issue that arose during data collection was the unwillingness of two husbands to complete the FSHS. The researcher resolved this by computing only the scores of the mother and child for the two families.

Data Analysis
The level of happiness of the families was analyzed using descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was applied to the interview data. Data from the interviews were transcribed and encoded leading to themes about the families' sources of happiness, actions taken to experience happiness, and things aspired to be happy. Themes that emerged were strengthened by providing verbatim quotes.

Results and Discussion

Level of Happiness of Urban Poor Filipino Families
Consistent with the high individual happiness scores of Filipinos, majority of the families were either happy or very happy (Table 1). A large percentage of them (45%) obtained scores of 4.1 to 5.0 on the Family Subjective Happiness Scale, which translates to "very happy". The same percentage of families obtained a score of 3.1 to 4, which can be interpreted as "happy". On the contrary, one family was neither happy nor unhappy, while another family was unhappy.

The high perceived level of happiness among the families supports studies showing that Filipinos are one of the happiest people in the world. Data from the 2005 World Values Survey on subjective well-being showed that the Philippines ranked higher than more developed countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea (National Science Foundation, 2012). The 2014 Gallup World Poll also reported that the Philippines shared the fifth (5th) rank with Singapore, Switzerland, and Uruguay among 143 participating countries in terms of positive emotions (Clifton, 2015). The results also support previous observations that being poor does not necessarily equate to being unhappy. An earlier study of Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) among poor people in Calcutta, India, found that slum dwellers, homeless people, and sex workers have positive levels of satisfaction for specific life domains, even though they have a slightly negative overall life satisfaction. They are satisfied with many aspects of life despite having adverse living conditions because they are religiously active and have satisfying social and family relationships. Biswas-Diener and Diener concluded that "while the poor of Calcutta

do not lead enviable lives, they do lead meaningful lives. They capitalize on the non-material resources available to them and find satisfaction in many areas of their lives" (p. 349). Looking at the results of the current study in a similar way, it can be implied that poor Filipino families are also happy because as Santos (2008) said, Filipinos value kinship, and are satisfied with their family. However, unlike the Calcuttans, who have a slightly below neutral level of global life satisfaction, Filipinos families in the current study were found to be very happy.

Table 1: Perceived Happiness of the Selected Poor Filipino Families

Level of Happiness	Score	f	%
Very Happy	4.10 to 5.0	9	45
Happy	3.1 to 4.0	9	45
Neither Happy nor Unhappy	3.0	1	5
Unhappy	2.0 to 2.99	1	5
Very Unhappy	1.0 to 1.99	0	0

Note. N = 20

Simon (2002) discussed the proposed three stages of a happy life by Martin Seligman. A "pleasant life" refers to the enjoyment of daily experiences and the satisfaction of needs; an "engaged life" meant being engaged or getting into the "flow" of doing things, while a "meaningful life" pertains to finding purpose through the participation in other people's lives. These stages could explain the happiness of poor Filipino families. They are happy because they find joy in everyday activities such as spending time with their family; and watching their children laugh, smile, and dance. Filipino families are also optimistic, easily pleased and content, and have high faith in God's will and provision (Caruncho, 2008; Cruz & Ramiro, 2009). It is also possible that the poor families experience a "meaningful life" through their positive relationship and interaction with their family, kin, and the community.

Sources of Happiness of Urban Poor Filipino Families
The thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded several emergent themes on the families' sources of happiness. These themes were labeled as – Positive Family Relations, Family Togetherness, Children, Faith in God, Good Health, Togetherness with Relatives and Neighbors, Sufficient Food, Material Things, and Accomplishment of Daily Tasks (Table 2). As evident from the emergent themes, the sources of happiness of the families are generally simple and non-material.

Positive family relations and family togetherness emerged to be the top sources of happiness among the urban poor Filipino families (Table 2). All families shared stories about their sources of happiness that are related to these two themes. Positive family relations pertain to the harmonious relationships between spouses and siblings. The respondents emphasized that they feel happy when the family members get along well and when spouses remain faithful to each other. The parents also shared that not having arguments with their spouses make them feel happy. The importance of positive family relationships in achieving family happiness is shown in the words of the Respondent 5 – "*We are happy if there is love, cooperation, and respect for each other; respect and trust are important for a family to be strong.*" On the other hand, family togetherness, as a source of happiness, refers to spending quality time with family members and doing simple activities together such as watching television, sharing funny stories, playing, cooking, and sharing daily experiences. They also experience happiness when they find opportunities to go to nearby places as a family such as public parks, malls, the church,

playground, or a relative's house. The respondents also shared that being complete as a family provides a special opportunity to exchange stories with one another. For this reason, they are especially happy during mealtimes and weekends. Respondent 1 shared: "*We are happy when we are complete as a family. Like now, my husband is home. He only goes home once a week, sometimes on Mondays*".

Children also emerged to be a major source of happiness among the families and ranked third among their sources of happiness (Table 2). Nineteen of the respondents narrated stories about the happiness that their children have brought to their families. The parents shared that being able to provide for their children's needs and wants such as food and school necessities brings happiness to them. The respondents also shared the happiness that the family experiences whenever their children perform well in school and show affection to other family members. Moreover, the simple things that children do such as laughing, smiling, and dancing become sources of happiness to the family. In addition, the children's good behavior like being respectful, kind, and obedient also brings happiness. Some respondents even mentioned that they feel happy just by seeing their children grow up normally. A respondent highlighted that a family is incomplete without children. The importance of children as a source of happiness for families is displayed in the words of Respondent 11: "*The family's source of happiness is the child; we do not allow our children to leave our sight*".

Filipino families are known to place high value on children. Medina (1991) said that a Filipino family is not normally considered a family without a child. She emphasized that the importance of children to Filipino families is reflected in the Filipino term for family ("mag-anak") which contains the root word "anak" or child in English. Children are a source of happiness to families because they provide socio-emotional benefits such as companionship, love, happiness, play, fun, and distraction from worries. Children also provide a sense of fulfilment and meaning in life (Bulatao, 1978, as cited in Medina, 1991). Although parents know the cost of having children, the value they place on them surpasses the child rearing difficulties that they must face (Medina, 1991).

Table 2: Emergent Themes on the Families' Sources of Happiness

Emergent Themes on Sources of Happiness	f^a	Rank
Positive Family Relations	20	1.5^b
Family Togetherness	20	1.5
Children	19	3
Faith in God	14	4
Good Health	11	5
Being Together with Kin and Neighbours	9	6
Sufficient Food to Eat	5	7
Material Things	3	8.5
Accomplishing Daily Tasks	3	8.5

Note. N = 20
[a] Reflects the number of respondents who stated key terms under a particular emergent theme
[b] The top rank refers to the most common source of happiness

The emergent theme, faith in God, ranks fourth as a source of happiness among the poor families (Table 2). Faith in God and constant prayers give the families hope and confidence that their needs will be fulfilled. Their strong faith in God becomes a source of happiness

because they believe that God will hear their prayers, guide them, and will never neglect them. Filipinos are generally religious and display strong faith in God (Abad, 2001), a probable reason for their resilience and happiness even during desperate times. Previous studies have shown that religiosity is related to happiness (i.e. Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2009; Francis, et al., 2014). The belief that the families can depend on God in times of trouble is a possible explanation why they remain optimistic and happy despite economic struggles.

Good health emerged as fifth source of happiness of the families. Fourteen out of the twenty respondents mentioned that their children's good health provides happiness to them. Some of the families also mentioned that they feel happy when their relatives are healthy. Respondent 18 expressed feeling secure when their children are healthy because they do not have to worry about medical expenses – "*We are happy when we are healthy because we feel secure. We are not problematic even if we do not have money.*"

Another emergent theme is togetherness with relatives and neighbors. Maintaining constant communication with their kin gives the families joy, especially when they live far apart. The families experience happiness when they find time to visit each other or call each other through their mobile phones. Exchanging stories and jokes provide them a feeling of happiness. Relatives also provide a source of support during difficult times, such as when financial resources are limited. Retaining a constant relationship with their kin lightens their burdens, as Respondent 14 shared:

> "*When we call our relatives in the countryside, they ask "what is your viand?", then we jokingly say - "We don't have, how about you? You might want to send us". That's why we feel happy. Our sadness disappears when we hear good news from them.*"

The other emergent themes on the families' sources of happiness include having sufficient food to eat, material things, and accomplishing daily tasks. Some of the respondents shared that being able to eat regularly is enough to give them happiness because there are times when they do not have food to eat and go about the day with an empty stomach. Material things also emerged as a source of happiness but interestingly only three respondents mentioned key terms related to this theme (Table 2). Material things as an emerged theme pertains to the acquisition of new things such as home appliances, clothing, toys, gadgets, and personal belongings. The last theme that emerged from the interviews is "accomplishing daily tasks" which ranks equally with the theme "material things" (Table 2). This theme refers to performing daily routines such as household chores, and childcare. Doing the chores with their family and finishing tasks ahead of time provide happiness to them.

Curiously, none of the respondents mentioned money as a source of their family's happiness. They claimed that money is simply a secondary source of happiness needed to acquire basic needs. In saying so, money is only important for the families to cover their basic needs. Nonetheless, despite the insufficiency of material resources, these families learned to be content and happy. As quoted from Respondent 13 – "*Money is not that important (for a families' happiness). Money is not the only thing that people needs. Money is only important to help cope with daily life.*"

There are opposing views in literature about the relationship between happiness and material wealth. Some studies suggest that wealth is associated with happiness, while other studies show otherwise (Borrero, et al., 2013). There are also studies supporting a balanced view that economic well-being is related to happiness but only to a certain extent. For instance, the

Easterlin Paradox holds that that there is a threshold to the increase in satisfaction or happiness that one begets from accumulation of wealth (Easterlin, 1974, 2001 as cited in Borrero, et al., 2013). An increase in income provides people with higher happiness but only until a certain extent. As one gets richer, increments in happiness that one receives from material things decline. Similarly, Veenhoven (1993, as cited in Cox, 2011) hypothesized the diminishing returns theory of the relationship between subjective well-being and income, saying that the relationship between the two variables is more evident among the poor. He also believed that meeting basic needs impacts subjective well-being greatly, but once needs are met, the increase in happiness diminishes.

In the current study, the Filipino families were found to be happy despite extreme poverty; citing non-material factors such as family relations, togetherness, and children as top sources of happiness. This finding is consistent with the study of Virola, et al. (2010) which revealed that the family is the top source of happiness among Filipinos. Their reliance mainly on non-material possessions as sources of happiness is a possible explanation for this happy outlook despite being poor. The results also have similarities with other Asian countries such as Bangladesh, wherein kinship is valued, unlike European and American countries, where individualist goals are given more importance (Santos, 2008; Cox, 2011).

The association between close interpersonal relationships and happiness is supported by literature. For instance, a comparison of happiness across 41 countries in the study of Haller and Hadler (2006) showed that individuals who have close personal relationships, and those who are socially and religiously active are significantly happier than individuals who do not enjoy such relations. In another study, Borrero et al. (2013) analyzed data on wealth, happiness, and culture across 197 countries and found that collectivism helped poor people attain great happiness despite major adversities in life.

Actions Poor Filipino Families Take in Order to Achieve or Experience Happiness
The in-depth interviews revealed four emergent themes on the actions that the poor families take to achieve or experience happiness – Being Content, Finding Ways to Solve Problems, Doing Leisurely Activities, and Developing Resiliency and Optimism (Table 3). Being content ranked first as the most common action that the poor families take to experience happiness. Being content refers to being satisfied with whatever the families have and with what God has given them. The respondents shared that they choose to be content with simple things such as good family relationships and having enough basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, and good health. The other families are contented because they have the capacity to overcome their problems. Remarkably, many of the interviewed families are satisfied with God's simple provisions. They choose to be grateful for the things they have, instead of aspiring for more wealth and material things, as shown in the statement of Respondent 8 – "*We are content with what we have. We are happy if the family is complete. We do not wish for a lot of money. We just want a simple life, with what God has to offer.*"

Contentment has a positive correlation with life satisfaction as shown in the study of Rojas & Veenhoven (2011) wherein contentment was found to account for "71 % of the variability in life satisfaction" (p. 10). The high positive correlation between contentment and life satisfaction provides a sound explanation why the poor Filipino families in this study are happy despite their financial struggles. They are contented with simple joys of life such as having basic needs and good family relations. They find joy with the simple non-material aspects of life that consequently brings them happiness.

Finding ways to solve their problems is another action that the families take to be happy. Since financial constraint is their main problem, they try to find varied ways to earn extra income through scavenging, selling used plastic and bottles, borrowing money from their neighbors, and asking help from their relatives. The families also try their best to budget their limited income and to practice frugality to ensure enough money when needed. Because of insufficient income, there are times when spouses argue with each other. Nevertheless, the respondents emphasized that instead of allowing the lack of money to be a source of conflict, family members should help each other to solve their problems. Respondent 19 said – *"We are able to get by. Money should not be a source of conflict. That is why we have to find ways, to save. If we earn income, we have to save so that we will have money when bills come*."

Table 3: Emergent Themes on Actions taken to Achieve Happiness

Emergent Themes on Actions Taken to Be Happy	f^a	Rank
Being Content	14	1 ^{b}
Finding Ways to Solve Problems	11	2
Doing Simple Leisure Activities	8	3
Developing Optimism	6	4

Note. N = 20
^{a} Reflects the number of participants who stated key terms under a particular emergent theme
^{b} The top rank refers to the most common source of happiness

Doing simple leisure activities emerged as the third most common strategy that families take to experience happiness. Leisure activities include trips to nearby places and eating out with their friends whenever they have the time and money. Leisure activities also pertain to granting their children's simple requests to eat good food and buy simple toys. As Respondent 16 shared – *"We bring the children to other places so that the whole family will be happy. We buy them the toys that they like and feed them delicious food."* Finally, developing optimism ranked as the fourth strategy that families employ to be happy. To deal with family problems, they practiced positive thinking and patience even as they continue to trust in God. They try to approach their present difficulties and future uncertainties with optimism. Particularly, they faced their problems in a positive way to secure a happy family life.

Conclusion

This study investigated the level of happiness among selected urban poor Filipino families, their sources of happiness, and the actions they take to achieve happiness. Consistent with the high individual happiness of Filipinos, the families in this study are generally very happy despite being very poor. The reason for such can be explained by their ability to find happiness from simple non-material aspects of life such as family relations and togetherness. The families in this study are happy because of their good disposition and conscious effort to be contented with what they have. They also choose to be thankful of the simple things that God has provided them. The families in this study also possess qualities such as resilience and optimism that further strengthens their happiness. The results of the study have implications on the nature of interventions that should be provided by the government and family practitioners to help poor families. Since the families give strong importance to family relationships and their children, it only follows family programs to help these families should focus not only on financial and livelihood programs but also on further strengthening family relations and children's welfare.

The study has several limitations that may be addressed by future studies. First, the study interviewed only one parent per family about their sources of happiness and the actions they take to be happy. However, the data would be richer and more comprehensive if the viewpoint of other family members were also considered. Future studies may consider comparing differences in the perspectives of husbands and wives, as well as children and parents on family happiness. Second, since the sample size of the study was limited, it was difficult to establish a connection between individual happiness and the collective happiness of the entire family unit. Future studies should consider gathering data from a wider sample of families to examine this link. Third, the translation of the Subjective Happiness Scale to the Filipino language was only validated through examination by a Filipino language expert. However, the scale's validity would be more ascertained if the translation goes through the process of forward translation, backward translation, expert panel examination, and pilot testing, prior to the administration of the final scale (Tsang, Royse, & Terkawi, 2017). Finally, the study focused only on subjective happiness of poor families with school-aged children. Therefore, future studies should examine the possible variations on happiness across different stages of the family life cycle.

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Corresponding author: Consuelo T. Chua
Email: cielo3chua@gmail.com