Explorations of factors affecting happiness of Sri Lankans

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Abstract—*Presently multidimensional measures of quality of life and happiness levels and well being are increasingly discussed and are considered as significant parameters in measuring a country's development. While there are many existing studies based on Western Individualistic societies, data related to the local context is seldom available. This paper establishes facts to achieve the objective of determining the factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans thus intend to fill the gap in knowledge. The naissance literature regarding sources of happiness is found from Bhutan, where a happiness index has been developed for the country. Canada, Australia, and USA account for many related studies, and the available literature related to Eastern Countries is largely centred on Japan, China and Hong Kong. Methodologically this is a qualitative study carried out with 202 respondents, aged between 21-60 from the districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara, selected through convenient sampling. Respondents have born and lived in Sri Lanka, and thereby shared common cultural roots unique to the country. A structured interview was conducted and results were transcribed manually using thematic approach. NVivo analysis was used to identify the different factors affecting happiness. To ensure reliability of the results fifteen percent of the sample was rated by the second rater and the inter rater agreement was recorded above eighty percent. As the outcome the study identified twelve factors affecting happiness of Sri Lankans. Among these factors family was reported as the highest contributor to happiness, followed by career and wealth. Based on the findings it could be observed that as an Asian culture Sri Lanka naturally upholds collectivist values which put family first. Present study is limited to three main cities of the country, and it's suggested that the identified factors could provide a basis for development of a happiness index applicable to Sri Lanka.*

Keywords— *Happiness, Gross National Happiness , Sri Lanka*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, social scientists has begun to pay increased attention to a more positive side of human existence such as happiness, which is considered more important than the traditional measurement of poverty and other economic indicators. Many countries of the world has attempted in developing happiness indices in an attempt to define the concept in relation to their respective countries and as an indicator to measure the quality of life of people living in the country. This provides a more holistic approach on determining the social progress of a country than the mere economic indicators such as the Gross National Product (GNP). A national happiness index would talk about existence of indicators such as happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well being and quality of life (Campbell 1976; Diener 1984; Fordyce 1988; Frisch et al 1992; Kammann & Flett 1983).

Measures and analyses of happiness have received great attention by policymakers in the recent years. In 2011, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development" and the 2012 "World Happiness Report" advocates for self reported well-being and happiness to take precedence over GNP in policymaking (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012).

The concept of **Gross National Happiness (GNH)** was originated in Bhutan in 1972, by Bhutan's former King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, as a national ruling philosophy based on a Buddhist spiritual point of view (Bhutan, Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012). Bhutan's GNH Index is a multidimensional measure and it is linked with a set of policy and programme screening tools so that it has practical applications. The GNH index is built from data drawn from periodic surveys which are representative by district, gender, age, rural-urban residence, etc.

As United Nations (UN) declared 20th of March as the International Day of Happiness, it has been recognized that the relevance of happiness and well being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world is high. This officially assigned happy date has marked its second year recently. According to the world's happiness report, they have ranked 156 countries in the order of National Happiness, with most of the Scandinavian countries topping the list. It has taken into consideration a robust combination of higher life expectancy, gross domestic product per capita,

generosity, freedom to make life choices and perception of corruption. The intention of the development of this index is the improvement of social, economic and environmental well being of the world. While Denmark, Norway and Switzerland has been ranked as the happiest nations in their respective orders, Sri Lanka has been ranked at the 137th place, among the bottom 20 countries on the index, ranking below Mali, Uganda, the Palestinian Territories, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Haiti (United Nations, World Happiness Report, 2013).

According to the report, Sri Lanka is ranked 137th right under Niger, a country situated in North of Nigeria which is in the midst of the conflict between the army and the Boko Haram Islamist militants. Sri Lanka has the lowest ranking among the South Asian countries listed in the index. This report has been based on data collectives in relevance to 2010 – 2012, where Sri Lanka indicates a sharp drop from the report based on 2005 – 2010. Considering the fact that the factors affecting happiness is unique to the individualistic cultures of the respective countries, there are less studies on the Eastern societies and there have been no specific studies carried out in the local context in order to identify the factors affecting the happiness levels of Sri Lankans. Thus the current study aims to fill this gap in knowledge.

In perusing the previous studies, it could be observed that many researchers have found a link between sustainable development of a country and the happiness of the people. Sri Lanka, being a fast growing economy seeking sustainable development in the future, needs to take into consideration that the happiness of the nation is an important phenomenon which needs immediate attention of the policy makers. Significant changes in community retrofit and design are needed to satisfy future growth without compounding current problems, and communities should be developed to integrate resilient and efficient economic, environmental and social systems. A potential approach for community development could focus on human happiness. This could be considered as a part of *"soft infrastructure"* development of the country, which is essential to compliment the current "**hard infrastructure**" development taking place, in order to attain real growth. Happiness, like physical and mental health, denotes the degree to which people flourish in a society (Veenhoven,1992). Studies have considered the links between our external environment and human welfare and wellbeing (DePledge et al., 2011; Thompson Coon et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2011), while others have shown that

a community rooted in happiness is likely to include sustainable environmental, economic and social systems (Leyden et al., 2011;O'Brien,2005).

A. Literature Background
The primary research on happiness levels of a country is found from Bhutan, which is grounded on the Buddhist ideals. The Bhutanese studies carried out by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (Bhutan, Centre for Bhutan Studies ,2012) suggest that beneficial development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other. Accordingly four pillars of national happiness has been identified namely ; *promotion of sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance.*(Bhutan, Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012).At this level of generality, the concept of GNH is trans -cultural—a nation need not be Buddhist to value sustainable development, cultural integrity, ecosystem conservation, and good governance. Through collaboration with an international group of scholars and empirical researchers the Centre for Bhutan Studies has further defined these four pillars with greater specificity into nine general contributors to happiness— *physical factors, mental and spiritual health; time-balance; social and community vitality; cultural vitality; education; living standards; good governance; and ecological vitality*. Although the Bhutanese GNH framework reflects its Buddhist origins, it is solidly based upon the empirical research literature of happiness, positive psychology and well-being.(Bhutan, Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012)

Presently the majority of studies on happiness indicators have been centered on Western individualistic countries. In the East, there have been studies on the happiness of the Koreans (Kim et al., 2007; Lee et al., 1999), the quality of life and happiness of the Japanese (Kan, Karasawa, & Kitayama, 2009; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000), the happiness of high school students in Taiwan (Su & Lu, 2009), subjective well-being of migrants and older adults in China (Cheng & Chan, 2005; Ku, Fox & McKenna, 2008; Lam & Boey, 2005; Monk-Turner & Turner, 2009), the quality of life and life satisfaction of the Chinese in Hong Kong (Sing, 2009; Wan & Lau, 2004), the quality of life in Singapore (Tambyah, Tan & Kau, 2009), the personal well-being of Thais (Ingersoll- Dayton et al., 2004; Yiengprugsawan et

al., 2009), happiness of the Turks (Eryilmaz, 2010), and thePakistanis (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004).

In perusing the above literature related to Eastern societies it could be noted that thenumber of studies associated with the concept of happiness isescalating slowly as this subject is quite new in this region. In studies conducted on different communities it has been commonly indentified that there is a relationship between personality and subjective well-being, and between culture and the life satisfactionof women, aborigines, and the elderly (Howell, Howell & Schwabe, 2006; Howell et al., 2012). Likewise in Indonesia, there are studies on the quality of life of the aged in Indonesia (Kurniawanand Scheithauer, 2012; Ofstedal, Reidy, & Knodel, 2004; Soeharso, Yudha,& Evanytha, 2010), and happiness in women (Miwa ,2010). Thus, not only that happiness of theEastern societies are underrepresented, but the studies from this side of the world are also substantially onthe Chinese, but some of them are also economically and management-based. Therefore, it would seem that the limitation of the current literature highlights the necessity of documenting the meaning of happiness in Eastern cultures.

1) Approaches to measure happiness: With reference to the studies stated above different researchers have identified different methodologies in measuring happiness. According to Veenhoven (1993) the happiness measurements has two distinctive approaches; deductive and inductive. He argues that the optimal societies are happy societies; thereby it is imperative to countries that they give importance to the concept of happiness.

Adding to that, Tomes (1985) have developed an interdependent approach to happiness which has different features to the two methods of happiness measurements stated by Veenhoven (1993). According to Tomes (1985), apart from individual characteristics, utility has a dependency on the well-being of other members of society. Happiness and satisfaction should therefore depend on the average income of society and its distribution among rich and poor. In other words, heargues that happiness is relative to the well being of the neighbours of the society where one lives.

Complementing the above argument, Becker (1974) reports that the founding fathers of economics (Bentham, Edgeworth, Marshall, Smith) has emphasized social interactions as important determinants of utility.

Accordingly an individual's satisfaction was supposed to depend not only on his own consumption of goods and services, but also on the status, reputation and distinction accorded to him by others. According to Becker (1974) interactions between individuals in their pursuit of prestige have been repeatedly emphasized by sociologists such as Blau, Durkheim, Simmel, Parsons and Veblen. For the most part, however, economists omit the characteristics of others as determinants of satisfaction and consider an isolated individual who derives utility solely from the direct consumption of goods, services and leisure. This approach may be adequate for many problems; however, in analyzing family decision-making, charitable contributions, participation in volunteer work, and the determinants of government transfer programs, this approach may be seriously misleading. In order to analyze such questions economists have formulated models of interdependent (or 'extended') preferences, in which the well-being of others enters, positively or negatively, as an argument in the utility function (Becker 1974; Gregory 1980; Hochman and Rodgers 1969; Roberts 1984; Schall 1972; Scott 1972; Thurow 1971).

2) Happiness Models: Different writers have developed different happiness models in order to address the measurement of happiness. Alkire – Foster methodology based on the multi dimensional poverty index (Alkire & Foster, 2011) GNH index developed by the centre for Bhutan studies (Bhutan, Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012), Day Reconstruction Method developed by Kahneman et al. (2004a) are among the most important happiness measurement models. Many of these studies are attempting to develop models in order to measure the happiness indicators of different societies and identify the distinctive features in different societies in measuring happiness (Nakamura, 1985). The people in the East, including the Asians, usually belong to a collectivistic society. Apparently, collectivistic values have some significant influence on the things that makes them happy. In other words, the concept and definition of happiness have, up to this point, been based on a Western ideal that places great emphasis on individualism and liberalism which is in contrast to collectivistic cultures that place importance on a harmonious relationship with other members of the society (Lu & Shih, 1997). In collectivistic eastern cultures and societies such as the Sri Lankans, Koreans, the Chinese and the Japanese, moderation rather than extremism is held in greater esteem. In other words, extreme happiness and satisfaction are not considered ideal in such collectivistic societies (Lu and

Gilmour,2006). Therefore, it remains to be researched whether the well-established concept of happiness and the happiness measurement models of the Western societies are observed in the Eastern societies or do our societies have some distinctive contributing factors of happiness.

B. Aims and Objectives
The current study specifically explores the concept of happiness among Sri Lankans. The author conceives that this study is crucial since the national cultural characteristics would provide a significant distinctiveness on the way a person perceives life satisfaction (Georgas & Berry, 1995). While the Sri Lankan administration system is derived from British common law (Idris, Dollard & Winefield, 2010), roots of the Dutch legacy is also present in the country. Based on the above arguments, and the existing literature the researcher identified that while there has been many studies conducted on happiness levels, its impacting parameters and subjective well being, there are no studies specifically addressing the Sri Lankan context. Therefore the foremost objective of this study is to explore the factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans. The study is carries out with the specific objective of identifying the most influential factor on the happiness of Sri Lankans.
Current study would answer the research question "What are the factors affecting the happiness levels of Sri Lankans?"

II. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN
A. Respondents
The study was carried out as a qualitative study using the inductive approach. It intended to identify the factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans. As there were no previous studies available on the Sri Lankan context, this study design aimed to identify the factors of happiness which are specifically related to the local context.

Study deploys 202 respondents between the ages 21-60 selected from the geographical areas of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts. These districts represent the Western province of the country with a total population of approximately 5.3 Mn. The study deploys the convenient sampling methodology in selecting the samle. The above districts represent the urban and the semi urban areas of the country and represent a fairly common cultural climate. The study has the limitation of being confided to theses three cities, and in the event of developing a culturally sensitive happiness index for the

country; the study would have to be expanded to cover the entire country.

As the present study covers the urban and semi urban areas of the country, in developing the study further, the rural sector to be included in order to develop a locally sensitive happiness index.

Convenient sampling technique was used in order to select the study sample. The sample consisted of 110 males and 92 females. All respondents were born in Sri Lanka and have lived in the country during their life time. Therefore, the researcher considered them to share the same cultural roots which are unique to the country.

The researcher utilized the lay theory approach (Kinman & Jones, 2005) to gain the information from the respondents as it is proved to be useful and has some advantages in exploring how people themselves interpret the concept of happiness.

B. Measures and Procedures
Interviews were conducted at a place of convenience for the respondents and no time limit was set. The respondents were interviewed on a structured interview, mainly covering the theme "What makes you happy?". This data collction methodology was adopted as the study takes an inductive approach in identifying the happiness sources. The interview session lasted between 10 to 20 minutes. All recorded interview responses were transcribed by using thematic approach and were analyzed using NVivo , coding and classification to identify the themes of happiness. To ensure the reliability of the result, 15% proportion of the sample were rated by second rater (Kinmanand Jones, 2005; Idris, Dollardand Winefield, 2010). The resulting coded transcripts were compared for reliability and it is found that the percentage of inter-rater agreement is more that 80%. The data were sifted through to examine the significant statements which indicate the contributing factors affecting happiness.

III. RESULTS
There are 12 themes emerged from the study, indicated as the sources of happiness which are family, career, interpersonal and social relationships, self-growth/self-autonomy, wealth, recreation needs, education, absence from negative feelings, national prosperity, health, religious and spiritual needs, and basic needs (see Table 1). Seventy Four percent of the respondents reported

family as the highest contributor in bringing them happiness. This is followed by work-related achievements and Wealth.

Table 4. Factors / indicators of happiness

Factors / Indicators	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Family	69	**34**	81	**40**	150	**74**
Career / Achievement at work	35	**17**	29	**14**	64	**32**
Wealth	28	**14**	27	**13**	55	**27**
Self autonomy/freedom / self – fulfillment	34	**17**	11	**5**	45	**22**
Social Relationships/intra and interpersonal relationships	25	**12**	14	**7**	39	**19**
Absence from negative feelings	26	**13**	13	**6**	39	**19**
Recreation needs	21	**10**	15	**7**	36	**18**
Health	18	**10**	12	**6**	30	**15**
Education	7	**3**	11	**5**	18	**9**
Religious / Spiritual needs	12	**6**	4	**2**	16	**8**
National prosperity , peace	7	**3**	4	**2**	11	**5**
Physiological / Basic needs	5	**2**	3	**1**	8	**4**

IV.DISCUSSION

The current study attempted to achieve the objectives of exploring the factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans. It was indicated that there are twelve factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans. As evidenced in data theses sources are ranked as follows according to the given importance; Family, Career and achievements at work, Wealth, Self autonomy, freedom and self fulfilment, Social relationships, intra and inter personal relationships, absence from negative feelings, Recreation needs, Health, Education, Religious, spiritual needs, National prosperity and peace, Physiological and basic needs.

In par with the other studies carried out in the Eastern societies, these findings demonstrate that the Sri Lankan society naturally upholds collectivistic values which put family first. Earlier research has also shown that happiness in Eastern societies is based on six dimensions namely, relationships with other individuals, respect towards others, financial status, work achievements, less emphasis on social status but maintaining harmony (Lu and Glimour, 2006). The findings of this study are also is in par with the reported happiness indicators by Luand Shih (1997). They reported that the wish to be respected, harmonious interpersonal relationships, career achievements, an easier life, *schadenfreude*, self-control and self-actualization, positive feelings, joy and health, relationships with children, relationships with parents and siblings, marital relationship, life goals, relationships with others, finances, health, positive attitude, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, autonomy, self-growth, freedom and recreation, social status, kindness, appearance, social environment and relationships with loved ones are important factors affecting happiness in Eastern societies(Lu & Shih, 1997). Therefore, the present study findings are somewhat parallel with past studies on the Eastern society's happiness indicators and the results also reflect cultural values in Sri Lanka.

V. CONCLUSION

As evidenced in data of the current study, it could be concluded that Sri Lankans have 12 main factors affecting their happiness with family having the highest impact. Veenhoven (2012) argues that the question is easier put than answered as individuals experiences of happiness and subjective well being are inherently linked to their culture and individual characteristics. The findings agree with the above stated. The current study is the first known study to explore the factors affecting the happiness of Sri Lankans. This study has the limitation of being confided to three main cities of the country, and if the study is expanded to cover the population of the entire Sri Lanka, there is a possibility of developing culturally-sensitive happiness indicators measuring GNH unique to Sri Lanka which will capture all culturally-related values of the country. Such indicators could be used by the policy makers of the country in order to capture and identify the real growth and develop

country's future strategies accordingly. The finding of the present study contributes basic knowledge to this emerging body of research on the happiness of Sri Lankans.

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