

## The Meaning of Happiness and Unhappiness among Female Teenagers in Urban Finland: A Social Representations Approach

**Authors :** Jennifer De Paola

**Abstract :** Objectives: The literature is saturated with figures and hard data on happiness and its rates, causes and effects at a large scale, whereas very little is known about the way specific groups of people within societies understand and talk about happiness in their everyday life. The present study contributes to fill this gap in the happiness research by analyzing social representations of happiness among young women through the theoretical frame provided by Moscovici's Social Representation Theory. Methods: Participants were (N= 351) female students (16-18 year olds) from Finnish, Swedish and English speaking high schools in the Helsinki region, Finland. Main source of data collection were word associations using the stimulus word 'happiness' and word associations using as stimulus the term that in the participants' opinion represents the opposite of happiness. The allowed number of associations was five per stimulus word (10 associations per participant). In total, the 351 participants produced 6973 associations with the two stimulus words given: 3500 (50,19%) associations with 'happiness' and 3473 (49,81%) associations with 'opposite of happiness'. The associations produced were analyzed qualitatively to identify associations with similar meaning and then coded combining similar associations in larger categories. Results: In total, 33 categories were identified respectively for the stimulus word 'happiness' and for the stimulus word 'opposite of happiness'. In general terms, the 33 categories identified for 'happiness' included associations regarding relationships with key people considered important, such as 'family', abstract concepts such as meaningful life, success and moral values as well as more mundane and hedonic elements like food, pleasure and fun. Similarly, the 33 categories emerged for 'opposite of happiness' included relationship problems and arguments, negative feelings such as sadness, depression, stress as well as more concrete issues such as financial problems. Participants were also asked to rate their own level of happiness on a scale from 1 to 10. Results indicated the mean of the self-rated level of happiness was 7,93 (the range varied from 1 to 10; SD = 1, 50). Participants' responses were further divided into three different groups according to the self-rated level of happiness: group 1 (level 10-9), group 2 (level 8-6), and group 3 (level 5 and lower) in order to investigate the way the categories mentioned above were distributed among the different groups. Preliminary results show that the category 'family' is associated with higher level of happiness, whereas its presence gradually decreases among the participants with a lower level of happiness. Moreover, the category 'depression' seems to be mainly present among participants in group 3, whereas the category 'sadness' is mainly present among participants with higher level of happiness. Conclusion: In conclusion, this study indicates the prevalent ways of thinking about happiness and its opposite among young female students, suggesting that representations varied to some extent depending on the happiness level of the participants. This study contributes to bringing new knowledge as it considers happiness as a holistic state, thus going beyond the literature that so far has too often viewed happiness as a mere unidimensional spectrum.

**Keywords :** female, happiness, social representations, unhappiness

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