

# **Culture, Public Policy and Happiness\***

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores the relationship between culture and happiness by analysing work from different disciplines as a way of shedding useful insight on policy issue. It discusses the role of public policy in furthering happiness. In addition, this paper discusses contemporary literature on identity, values, diversity, and public policy in relation to happiness and well-being, and corroborates some of the claims made in this paper by using the data from Gross National Happiness survey conducted in 2010 wherever it is applicable and warranted<sup>1</sup>. This paper makes limited use of the data insofar as it relates to culture and happiness under discussion in this paper. To make extensive use of the data is beyond the scope of this essay.*

## **Introduction**

What culture truly means and constitutes is highly contested as culture is a dynamic and constantly changing process. The definition of culture should make sense to the individual in the milieu in which a person lives to give a real sense of direction and meaning in life. The importance and relevance of culture

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted using multistage sampling method from April to December 2010, where careful attention was paid to sampling urban and rural areas. All the 20 districts were covered and 7142 respondents were interviewed. Sampling weights are applied to the data for analysis shown in this paper.

cannot be relegated to an inferior role in the field of development. Rather it should be given its due place as the benefits of culture, and its elements, are many, with primary benefit being solidarity and interactive learning.

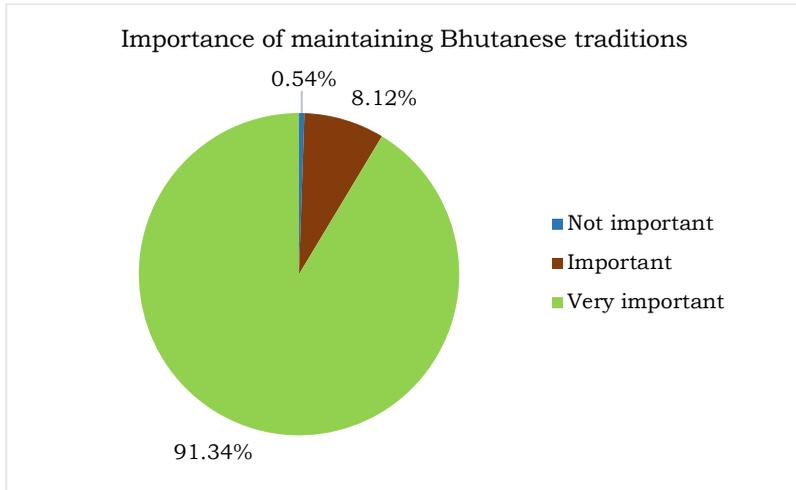
The cultural milieu in which one lives can strongly affect one's happiness and quality of life. As culture influences, and is influenced by, the policies of the government, one of the policies of the government should be to create conditions conducive to vibrant culture and happiness.

This paper is an attempt to succinctly explore the relationship between culture and happiness, and the role of public policy in furthering happiness. Key concepts of culture in relation to happiness and well-being will also be discussed.

### **Identity and Happiness**

Culture and tradition are sources of identity. In some countries such as Bhutan it exerts a pervasive influence on identity. 'Bhutanese traditions' is a broad term that includes rituals, customs, dress, code of etiquette, religious ceremonies, and customs, among others. It is considered very important by a majority of respondents in Bhutan to maintain 'Bhutanese traditions' as shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Importance of maintaining Bhutanese traditions as % of respondents*



*Source: 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data*

Identifying oneself with a group or groups is essential for overall well-being. A sense of identity is also known to correlate with social capital (Putnam 2000). People form associations when they share common identities, which helps to develop social capital. A person can choose to have multiple identities but needs to seriously reflect on the relative importance of one over another (Sen 2006).

Identity is often grouped into two types: singular identity and multiple identities. Singular identity is generally associated with negative consequences, whereas multiple identities result in favourable outcomes (Sen 2006). In Buddhism, however, there is no such thing as fixed identity. The teachings of anatman or non-self see identity not as a fixed state or quality, but rather as an always changing process. That is, identities are simply shorthand for patterns of identification. This suggests that differences between cultures (as sources of identity) should also be seen dynamically as patterns of

cultural differentiation - that is, as processes that are purposeful or value-laden.

A false conception of identity that is fixed, which undercuts freedom of identification and smothers diversity in culture, as opposed to identity as fluid and changing leads to flawed public policy and adversely affects the happiness of the citizens.

### **Diversity and Multiculturalism**

Diversity is a value in itself, which contributes to well-being and coordination of public policy. It also expands choices. Hershock (2006) argues that diversity is useful in resolving conflicts as it creates conditions and qualities conducive to promoting differences, which arises from a complex pattern of values-intentions-actions, that makes a difference in realising shared welfare in the interdependent world in which we now live.

Ura (2007) cautions that diversity may threaten solidarity, especially if diversity is developing too fast. In this regard if diversity develops rapidly it could lead children astray because of their difficulty in understanding the meanings of their local cultural values, customs and traditions. If the pace of diversity matters, then at what pace diversity should be allowed to develop needs be critically analysed and arrived through public deliberation and reasoning.

Closely related to diversity is the concept of multiculturalism, which supports diversity and widens individuals' freedom. Nevertheless, multiculturalism has been criticised from conservative as well as from liberal fronts. Conservatives argue that multiculturalism opposes the maintenance of unified national identity whereas liberals stress that it undermines liberal principles of equality and impartiality - recognising group-specific rights means denying the equal treatment of individuals (Kukathas 1998 cited in Ayirtman 2007). Sen (2006) argues that lack of clear understanding of what multiculturalism means and its pros and cons is related to

conflicts in the contemporary world. He distinguishes multiculturalism from “plural monoculturalism” stating that “two styles existing side by side without the twain meeting, must really seen as plural monoculturalism.” Hence, for something to be called multicultural, two or more styles or traditions should contribute to each other in the process of creating a new one.

What is required is to see culture as neither static nor uniform, which also applies in the context of multiculturalism. This helps to address and educate people about cultural differences. In the anthropological literature, discussions of cultures long out of touch with others makes it clear that isolated cultures are always in decline (losing their own cultural legacies) and that cultures thrive inter-culturally.

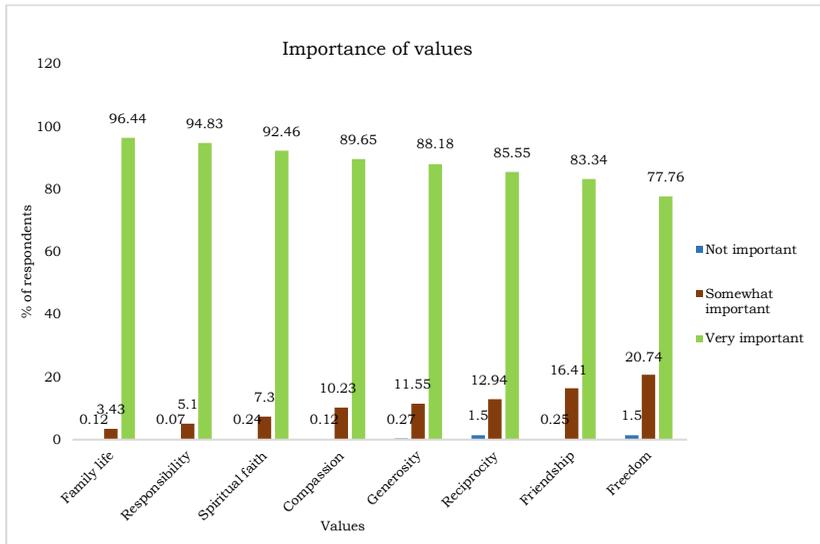
What is made challenging by cultural contact is the difficulty in identifying any local culture as indigenous as cultural contact is seen to lead to hybridisation of behavioural modes (Sen 2006). However, some consider the concept of indigenous and non-indigenous people as applicable only to colonised nations, because the term has roots in the colonial period (Ura 2007). Several states in Asia have rejected the concept of indigenous rights as the policies related to it would have radical consequences, because in the first place it is difficult define who indigenous people are (Kingsbury 1998 cited in Ura 2007, p.61).

Hybridisation and changes to cultural practices, symbols and images are facilitated by sophisticated modern technologies, and other resources. But how such resources are used determines whether it enhances or hampers them. What is important is that technology be effectively used without distorting or damaging them.

## Values and Happiness

Values indicate what is right and important in life, and influences our behaviours. There is no doubt on the importance accorded to values as more than 70% of the respondents report family life, responsibility, spiritual faith, compassion, friendship, generosity, reciprocity, and freedom as very important as it is evident from Figure 2. The importance that people assign to values can indicate the direction society might be heading in terms of steering the course of societal well-being.

*Figure 2. Importance of values as % of respondents*

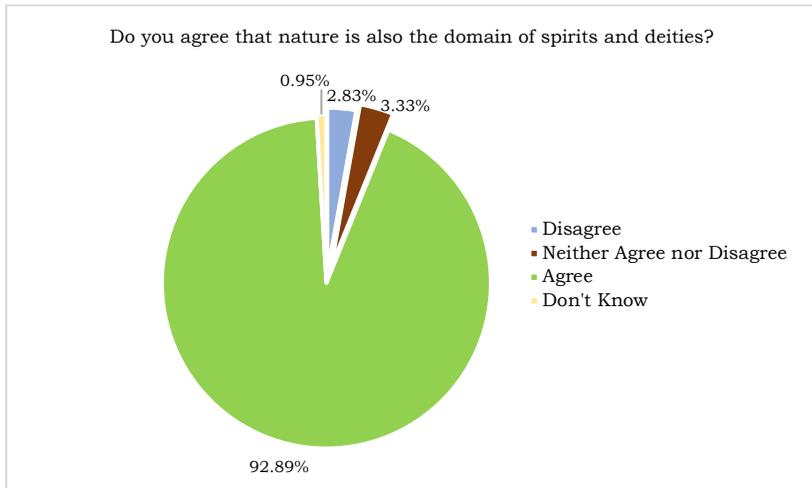


*Source: 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data*

Values need to encompass individuals' relationship with all sentient beings and the natural environment to create a more just and harmonious world. Traditional socio-cultural norms have a positive impact on values and behaviour. For instance, in Bhutan every year for a certain period of time people are not allowed to extract resources or graze animals in the forest thus

regenerating the natural environment. Further, people are not allowed to pollute the area where the deity resides otherwise it is believed to cause death and sickness in the community. Peoples' connectedness to nature is confirmed by the fact that 92.89% of the respondents agree that besides human beings, nature is also the domain of spirits and deities (see Figure 3). Though such beliefs can always be questioned the act of following it contributes to the conservation of environment. Values drive the development of society and contribute to happiness.

*Figure 3.* % of respondents agreeing that nature is the domain of spirits and deities



*Source: 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data*

The meaning and difference between intentions and values needs to be clearly understood to pre-empt troubles and problems. Though the intention maybe good, the underlying values of action may not necessarily be good<sup>2</sup> (Hershock 2006). Hershock (2006) argues that conflicting and competing values gives rise to predicaments, such as climate change and world hunger, which can be addressed only with a global deepened resolve, not technical solution - an issue public policy needs to give careful attention.

Is there a relationship between life goals and subjective well-being? Headey (2006) showed that pursuing life goals that are non-zero sum (non-competitive) in nature, such as family life and altruism, promotes life satisfaction and pursuing zero-sum goals, such as material wealth and career success, reduces life satisfaction, using data from the long-running German Socio-Economic Panel Survey. Attaching high value to spirituality and practicing it by performing meditation and reciting prayers is known to bring about positive changes in the brain and eventually increase one's happiness. Davidson et al. (2003) found that subjects who meditated showed positive, predictable changes in the brain and immune function compared to their counterparts who did not meditate by examining their brains.

There is also a relationship between economic growth and postmaterialist values. Inglehart (1999) showed that a gradual intergenerational shift in values takes place in societies that have surpassed a certain threshold of income, using data from

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate what this means Hershock cites one instance of how one of the descendants of Dharma King Dalhanemi governs the country. During the reign of this descendent a class of needy grows. This leads to poverty and for the first time someone commits theft. In order to stop theft, he gives money to the thief. When people hear of this incidence they also start stealing. As a warning to stop thievery he beheads a thief. What thieves then do is kill people from whom they steal so that no one may report their crime. In this story the values embedded in his strategy for realising this end (his intention to stop theft) is liable to repercussions.

World Values Surveys, which covered more than sixty societies representing almost 75 percent of the world's population. Inglehart (1999) further states that while economic growth is conducive to the spread of postmaterialist values, neither an individual's values nor those of a society as a whole will change overnight (in fact it takes long periods of rising economic security).

Postmodern values are regarded to promote tolerance between groups and gives priority to environmental protection and cultural issues over economic growth when these goals conflict (Inglehart 1999). However, we need to be cautious as economic development could alter values and erode traditional socio-cultural norms as it increases consumption and material desires. To avert such desires and increased consumption, sound policies should be framed that do not encourage such behaviours, and, for that matter, sound policy of the government as a whole should be in place. Further, Buddhist values should be promoted and practiced by individuals as these prevent increase of consumptions. Aversion to greed and desire is seen as one of the prerequisites to enlightenment in Buddhism.

### **Public Policy and Happiness**

Any decisions that we make should be based on reason and supported by empirical data if available. In case of public issues, laws and policies should be framed through collective discussion that needs to be justified to the public who are source of political authority. Richardson (2010) contends that governmental legitimacy can be achieved only by combining two normative ideas: "the idea that laws and policies must not be simply arbitrary but must be based on reasons, and the idea that the process whereby reasons are brought to bear on lawmaking must be structured so as to assure equal concern and respect for each citizen." Further, he mentions that this basic lesson needs to be integrated within four important strands to arrive at a more satisfactory interpretation of

democracy: republican, liberal-egalitarian, populist, and rationalist<sup>3</sup>.

One measure of happiness, then, becomes the degree to which public policy making demonstrates diversity (in terms of age, sex, occupation, ethnicity, views, etc) in deliberation. Deliberation should not be based only on quantitative data but also on values. If right policies are framed and implemented, then it is likely that society would navigate towards happiness. This entails formulation and implementation of programmes and projects based on these policies. Even programmes and projects should be subjected to democratic consensus.

For deliberation to be truly vibrant, it requires giving public some space. Deliberators can be brought together in a forum where they discuss issues of common concern. This can create a direct link between citizens and public or elected officials, who can benefit from the deliberation and voice their concerns in larger bodies, such as national assembly (Gastil 2010). Such forums should be initiated even at the community level and in the media and connected to the policy making process to yield better public decisions.

Gastil (2010) lists four requirements of deliberation: authority and institutional space; resources to invest in high-quality deliberation, where deliberative forums require planning, facilities, participant recruitment, cooperation of experts, and gathering of informational resources; participants with the right attitude and abilities to work together effectively; and believing that deliberation can bring benefits, such as cultivating deliberative skills and habits, sense of citizenship, shaping civic culture, and creation of better public policy.

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<sup>3</sup> These strands represent, respectively, the values of freedom as non-domination, equal basic liberties, and, in the case of the last two, respect for autonomy. See “Public Opinion, Happiness, and the Will of the People: Policy-making in a Democracy”, pp. 27-36, for detailed explanation of these strands.

Identity influences the way we think and reason, although there are other factors too. Identity is of particular relevance here. It is important not to allow a sense of belonging to a particular community and its cultural norms to influence our reasons as it often does. On the contrary, it is important to nurture cultural interrelations to improve public policy and advance development.

In order to create conditions conducive to happiness, appropriate policies should be framed and revised when necessary. The decision makers assume an important role in the implementation of these policies, as they are at the helm of decision making.

Policies need to encompass values. The development of a national educational curriculum in Bhutan that incorporates the values of Gross National Happiness is a good example. Policy intervention at the national level has more impact and influence than that at the community level. The recent practice of meditation in all schools in Bhutan is an unprecedented initiative. The challenge for Bhutan is to incorporate values into the private sectors as value laden initiatives and interventions are still in its infancy, if not lacking. Eco-village initiative known as Future Vision Ecological Park in Tatui in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, which is based on a humanistic vision of maximum utilisation of human and natural resources and harmony with nature, has its influence and reach only within their realm, that is, at the community level, but not at the national level.

Public policy is not a panacea for all our problems, especially in the private sphere of life. Hence, people should be nurtured towards becoming responsible citizens. An analysis of the 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data shows that women worked on average 8 hours 18 minutes a day compared to men who worked on average 7 hours 37 minutes. Since women worked longer hours than men mean self reported happiness level (on a scale of 0 to 10) of women was lower than men. The mean self reported happiness level of men is 6.2 whereas that

of women is 5.9 (see Table 1). The survey data also reveals that an increase in work hours is positively related to an increase in stress level (see Table 2). It would be in the interest of the government to reduce the stress level of women; therefore, men should share responsibilities in household work activities such as cooking, washing clothes and looking after children. This is an instance where responsibility complements public policy.

Table 1. *Relationship between work hour and self reported happiness by gender*

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Mean self reported happiness</b>	<b>Mean work hours</b>
Male	6.2	7:37
Female	5.9	8:18

*Source: 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data*

Table 2. *Relationship between work hour and stress*

<b>Mean work hour</b>	<b>Stress level</b>
8:19	Very stressful
7:58	Somewhat/moderately stressful
7:51	Not at all stressful

*Source: 2010 Gross National Happiness survey data*

A keen interest and concern about happiness allows individuals to gain prior knowledge of the effects of cognitive fallacies, and the ability to select and consume goods that results in happiness and that last longer (Hirata 2006). Taking happiness as a policy objective, as Bhutan does, would orient public policy that is conducive to collective happiness of the society; governmental decisions will strive to avert the adverse effects of adaptive aspirations and competition, minimises negative externalities, reduces work hours, and hinder implementing things that cost the happiness of the citizens, and give priority to ethics and justice when conflict arises (Hirata 2006).

When happiness is considered seriously, individuals exercise their choice to choose things that generate happiness. The thing that generates happiness varies across individuals; it could be pursuing hedonic activities or practising enlightening spiritual practices, such as meditation, because how one views happiness differs across people. However, one should be conscious enough to choose things that are free from negative externalities and have collective benefits. There are, however, limits or boundary within which choices are made.

These boundaries are often decided by the government and also dictated by societal norms. The challenge is to expand choices, and to empower people to be agents of their collective actions.

It has been argued that the happiness maximisation view fails to deal with conflicts of interest, but we have to very clear that happiness maximisation is also about the prevention of conflicts of interest. In a happiness-oriented society all things that matter in life, such as rights, liberties, and other democratic principles, would be subsumed under the condition for happiness, and given their due place in public policy.

One of the weaknesses of such an objection lies in the understanding of the meaning of happiness from a narrow lens that is confined only on *individual* interests. Happiness is not a function of individual, subjective well-being (the typical Western bias); it is a function of relational harmony, where people relate and mutually contribute to each other.

One of the practical methods to resolve value conflicts or conflict of interests is to apply the method proposed by Richardson (2010) about how policies should be made in a democracy. It is as follows: “any policy making process should throughout be disciplined, in the sense that its deliberations respect the limits of the possible, rather than being led off on tangents by mere wishes; second, any policy-making process should also encourage a practically intelligent approach to public problems, one wherein public deliberations are flexibly

open to refashioning collective ends and aims in light of unexpected obstacles; and third, any policymaking process should be designed so as to reduce the danger of bureaucratic domination, both by remaining accountable to the people and their democratic representatives and by providing mechanisms whereby agency decisions can continue to contribute to forging - or hammering out - the will of the people.” A happiness-oriented approach lists many dimensions that are flexible enough to respond to all sorts of conflicts among various aspects of what matters. This will help to identify value conflicts and provide opportunity to refine dimensions of what really matters, using public input and avoiding bureaucratic domination at the same time<sup>4</sup>.

There are again two arguments cited often against maximisation of happiness<sup>5</sup>. The first objection is that maximising average happiness neglects people whose lives are barely worth living, and the other is that maximising aggregate happiness implies government to adopt policies that take into account the capacities of the people to adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves, even though the circumstance maybe adverse (some people may report being happy though they are suffering adverse circumstances, for example, battered wives who report they are happy because of their capacities to adapt to such circumstances).

The first objection, I believe, has to do with the individualistic notion of happiness, which is indifferent to the needs of those ‘whose lives are barely worth living’. The second objection has not taken into account an informed evaluation of happiness using judgement; it should be rational and make sense to reality. What approaches such as happiness indices do instead is guide policy making and individual goals. In addition,

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<sup>4</sup> See “Public Opinion, Happiness, and the Will of the People: Policymaking in a Democracy”, pp. 55-59 for detailed explanation of how Gross National Happiness can be put to work in policy making.

<sup>5</sup> See Bates, Winton (2009), “Gross National Happiness”, Asian-Pacific Economic Literature, pp. 2-3, for the arguments against maximising aggregate happiness.

utilitarian approaches help to identify how well policies, institutions and rules serves peaceful cooperation<sup>6</sup> among individuals pursuing their diverse goals in life (Yeager 2001 cited in Bates 2009). Measuring happiness does not mean aggregate happiness has to be maximised by any means; what is more important to measure are the dimensions of happiness and revise whenever necessary. This is because of the lack of perfect method to aggregate indicators into a single index and to identify and address value conflicts among what matters.

## **Conclusion**

An attempt has been made to explore the relationship between culture and happiness, and how public policy can further happiness. The paper has also emphasised the need to create a culture of deliberation.

It has been explained that seeing culture and identity as static and fixed runs the risk of creating problems and framing flawed public policy. This adversely affects the happiness of people.

Cultural diversity aligns well with multiculturalism but underlines the need for mutual contribution. Since individual lives in relation to each other, happiness cannot be seen as a function of *individual*, subjective well-being, confined only on individual interests. When happiness is seen dynamically as exerting a relational quality any conflicts of interest can be given due place on a common platform to deliberate and find ways to resolve the conflicts. A crucial measure of happiness is the degree to which public policy making demonstrates diversity in deliberation, which should be based on reason.

Policies need to encompass values as it drives the development of society, and as individuals we need to be responsible citizens recognising that public policy cannot solve all our problems.

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<sup>6</sup> This social cooperation serves as a means to attain the ends of society by helping each other to attain their individual ends (Hazlitt 1998 cited in Bates 2009).

To further happiness, government needs to avert the adaptive aspirations and positional competition, as research has shown they adversely affect happiness. Government also needs to minimise negative externalities, reduce work hours, and other aspects that are known to affect the collective happiness of people.

In policy making, it is important to identify and measure (to track progress and guide public policy) dimensions or conditions of happiness and refine and revise whenever necessary to address value conflicts among what matters and in view of the lack of perfect method to aggregate indicators into single index.

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