

Encounters with Translations of Happiness

T. Titchkosky

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Abstract

This special issue edited by Katie Aubrecht demonstrates that a focus on translations of happiness makes us attend to the interpretive process animating social relations. There are many registers of translation that individuals, communities, and the state make use of as they grapple with relations to happiness. Among the vast array of historical registers that aim to make happiness comprehensible or compelling, medicine and politics are two of the most noteworthy. Moving from one register to another, such as from institutional versions of happiness as a medically regulated matter, to its appearance in situations of war, trauma, illness, local community or state, between these differing registers, we come to re-encounter happiness in many important ways as this special issue demonstrates. This issue thus invites its readers to question modernity's progressive interest in and use of happiness as a way to narrate and assemble our essential inter-relatedness.

Keywords: *interpretation; social meaning; regulation*

Encounters with Translations of Happiness

T. Titchkosky

I am honored to write this foreword for this remarkable set of articles hereby brought together in a special issue of *Health, Culture and Society (HCS)* under the guidance of guest editor, Katie Aubrecht. The need for such an issue and address has never before been so startlingly obvious. After all, “In July 2011 the UN General Assembly passed a historic resolution. It invited member countries to measure the happiness of their people and to use this to help guide their public policies” (UN, 2013, p. 3). 2013 also witnessed the production of the 2nd UN sponsored map of global happiness which was widely circulated in the mass media. The lead article of this collection, “Happiness and the Art of Life” by Monica Greco and Paul Stenner¹ incisively reformulates the expanse of such measures into a question that is as difficult to live with as it is to ignore: What does it mean to live with happiness as a key feature governing how we conduct human relations? This is all the more pressing when we are brought to encounter happiness “splitting the subject from their world; of treating feelings and desires as purely internal, individual and subjective affairs; and of effectively cutting people off from any of their powers that do not correspond to a limited mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity [...]”(Greco & Stenner). With these splits, cuts, and demands of happiness, alongside world reports on happiness, global maps and made-to-order thirteen step programs to achieve personal happiness, the political and economic demand to *be happy* are today tied to notions of health at the individual, state and international level. Put in the language of world governance, we are called upon to “[...] make happiness a key measure and target of development” (UN Press Release). Like other measures of development, measures of happiness *under-score* “under-developed” countries. Little of life lies outside these happiness measures; yet few of these measures make us happy.

Critically engaging our collective desire to measure the happiness of ourselves, the papers collected here explore the social and political consequences of so doing. This issue of *HCS* permits readers to encounter accounts of happiness as something put together via complicated power relations, and thus illustrates Sara Ahmed’s (2004, pp. 4, 3) methodological recommendation to engage what happiness “does” as it “works to shape” ways of being in the world. As Colin Wright puts it, “the modern era encourages a clamorous and contentless *demand* for happiness precisely because the democratic Other offers happiness as a pseudo-contractual right to be exercised via consumption for its own sake: where once, for better or for worse, we all ‘knew our place’, now we rush to find our

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all author names refer to this issue.

place but because we have to make it ourselves.” Not only has happiness been “translated into a means to an end” (McKay), but also the race toward making a place in this imagined “happy future” is governed by *glances of comparison*. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson (2013), the “*demons of comparison*” animate nations and persons to compare their satisfactions against the past of the backward Other, in this case, the one who has not made a desired place on a happiness-map materialize. This demand to compare is supposed to be a way to move toward a happier future, or at least climb the ladder of its rank ordering. No longer, for example, should we imagine sustainability, economic growth, or governance itself outside of happiness measures (O’Brien; Ng & Fisher; Greco & Stenner; Wright; Duncan; Kingfisher; Marcus & Baehrisch).

Throughout *Translating Happiness* readers are shown the drastically different consequences tied up with the normal free-floating expectation that happiness can and should be measured and pursued, at both the global and personal levels. We are shown too how such measures become information and maps, held by the powers-that-be to be reflections of states of being “healthy, wealthy, and wise” that will guide future endeavors that some believe will serve the best interests of the people so mapped. While this “happy future” may forever be forestalled, and thus unachievable, there nonetheless remains the question of whose actual lives and what lived realities have been translated into these measures of happiness (Hwahng). As Kelly Fritsch’s work on accessibility endeavors leads us to ask – does taking our happiness measures mark a barrier to the need to experience other ways of pursuing an inclusive capacity and does it result in an actualization of a changed future? Noting that the “pursuit of happiness” might be a problem and not a solution, highlights the importance of studying what lies behind the creation of measures that are themselves caught up in moments of recognition of future hopes overwritten by a past steeped in oppressive power relations. Sel J. Hwahng’s article regarding “Trans/Gender-variant Health Disparities Research,” uniquely highlights this issue of power. Never making use of the concept of “happiness” per se, Hwahng highlights those “values within a cosmology that will remain incomplete until the lowest socio-economic echelons are not only addressed but also foregrounded and integrated within any conceptual, theoretical, or political framework or system.” And of those cosmologies that do include the question of happiness, readers of this collection are brought to face a variety of political consequences; not only those of well-being being translated into homogenous measurable figures of productivity but also of populations transformed into patterns of predictable mass behavior. Moreover, consciousness itself needs to experience a transformation of the desire to pursue happiness into a moral and normative demand (Aubrecht; Kingfisher; O’Brien; Ng & Fisher; McKay; Duncan; Wright). Or, as Hoppe Silke puts it, happiness represents a “paradox” that brings us again to the question of how we judge life and, in this case, also limb via the common question of the relation between disability and happiness.

In this special issue, we also encounter happiness as a complex socio-cultural location that provokes a re-encounter with taken-for-granted assumptions regarding well-being, progress, and even survival. For example, happiness is examined as a location between nation states and ethnic minorities such as the Rusyn people (Cantin), between a nation state and stigmatized people contained within the Japanese Leprosaria (Tanaka), between children and norms governing mothering in North America (Douglas), between global economic interests and emotional

experiences, including pain and illness (Bock; Söderfeldt & Verstraete; McMellon; Marcus & Baehrisch), and in the midst of experiences of discrimination or the devaluation of disability, sexuality and gender as this plays out through the dispersions of post-colonial power relations (Chapman; Fritsch; Chandler & Rice; Hwahng). In all these diverse ways the question of happiness is poignantly raised. These articles have also provided readers with the challenge to discern whether happiness is an act of over-conformity or contains within it the possibility of change.

Rather than a “promise of salvation” (Söderfeldt & Verstraete; Douglas; Chapman; Morgan), this collection allows for unsettling the use of happiness as a reflection of well being and thus invites us to consider what else our collective and individual interests in happiness may be doing. For example, Christina McMellon’s ethnographic research with young Lao volunteers, shows how youth in Vientiane, Laos, put together at least three different senses of happiness. Kathryn Tanaka’s investigation of how the literature written from within the walls of the Japanese Leprosaria, has provided the reader with the possibility of encountering a happiness far removed from the neo-liberal subject of productive independent prowess marching freely forward upon the horizon of economic opportunity. Eliza Chandler and Carla Rice’s work offers a re-working of the terms of self-pleasure as it is tied to the appearance of happiness as a form of self-management in the face of departures from norms of able-ness and bodily size. Throughout this collection, we are brought to the question of happiness at the individual level understood as a method of conducting our conduct (Foucault’s sense of governmentality), also revealed at the state and global level of governance (Wright; Grant; Chapman; McKay; Ng & Fisher). As Duncan Grant says, “Never before have states of subjectivity been exercised with the aid of the technologies of surveys, statistical and policy analysis, and scientific disciplines to the extent we see today [...]” And, never before has there been such a diverse collection of scholars wishing to delve into the governing meaning happiness has for us, but more importantly, *made of us*.

The state of affairs of objectified relations to happiness is neither reified nor affirmed in Aubrecht’s collection. This collection is exemplary in its commitment to treat the objectification of happiness and its social and political consequences as an important arena of social inquiry. Translating “happiness studies” into an arena for social inquiry offers yet one more understanding of happiness that is, happily, not so easy to map. Such translations create a lively place to question what happiness means, as Dan Goodley (2013) puts it, for how it “should be valued in our context of austerity, economic crisis and neoliberal capitalism.” A message offered by this collection: not being at one with the appearance of happiness grounds an opportunity to seek out what happiness demonstrates about political organization. That is, happiness is not so much a place of arrival as it is mode of translating and transporting our interests in self and other into symbolic social moments worthy of inquiry. Never only a sign of well-being but rather symptomatic of further need for critical social inquiry, happiness, as it is represented within this special issue, points to the possibility of a self-reflexive future that can take into account its own historical genesis.

I wish to end with a word on the social and political practice of translation itself. *Translation*, to move from

one register to another register of meaning, is an important interpretive issue functioning in the liminal space between creativity and constraint – a space necessary for a consideration of happiness as a socio-cultural phenomenon. “Translation,” says Wolfgang Iser (2005:5), reminds us that every act of “interpretation transposes something into something else.” This means that every interpretation addresses and yet makes something from that which has come before. And, what we make of happiness is a salient question throughout this special issue. *Translating Happiness*’ demonstrated focus on *translation* makes us attend to the interpretive process itself. What registers do individuals, communities, and the state make use of as they grapple with relations to happiness? In the face of this question, there are a vast array of historical registers that aim to make happiness comprehensible, medicine and politics being two of the most noteworthy. As we move from one register to another, such as from institutional versions of happiness as a medically regulated matter, to its appearance in situations of war, trauma, local community or state; between these differing registers, we come to re-encounter happiness as a social act, whose measure always entails an interpretive insufficiency and thus an invitation to question modernity’s progressive interest in and use of happiness to order social life and political arrangements.

In his interpretation of colonial history understood through the space of post-colonial organization, Homi K. Bhabha highlights the generative power in the act of translation. He says,

This translation of the meaning of time into the discourse of space [...] of modernity’s presence and present; this insistence that power must be thought in the hybridity of race and sexuality; that nation must be reconceived liminally as the dynastic-in-the-democratic, race-difference doubling and splitting the teleology of class-consciousness: it is through these iterative interrogations and historical initiations that the cultural location of modernity shifts to the postcolonial site. (Bhabha, 2011 [see also Bhabha, 1994, “Conclusion”])

The articles in this collection on happiness represent the “iterative interrogations and historical initiations” of which Bhabha speaks. This special issue represent a back and forth between making contemporary relations into the question of happiness by translating spaces of behaviors of people, communities and nations into locations where well-being is measured. Addressing such maneuvers, the articles in this special issue serve as a powerful encounter with happiness inviting us to re-engage and, perhaps, to re-make a form of governance and desire key to neo-liberal times’ constitution of “modernity’s presence and present.” Moving happiness on to a plurality of registers of well-being, of economic capacity, of the doing-good for others, of self, of accessibility, of care and survival transposes the meaning of happiness. These transpositions represent important issues not the least of which is the fact that the de-historization of happiness at the individual and global level is dangerous, despite its commonness. This collection teaches us how to read happiness as multiple stories of our relatedness – caught between ourselves and others in times not of our own making where we are positioned to think of the ties that bind us to the spaces that are not of our own choosing (West, 1995). By revealing the interpretive insufficiencies encountered in translations of happiness, these articles provide the reader with an opportunity to encounter its contours, trace the tensions that outline its significance and, in so doing, this collection unsettles the more oppressive ways happiness is used to order life.

What is most dramatically revealed through its translation is that happiness is an important arena of meaning making. Its translation also makes it possible to encounter the obviousness of a desire to comprehend what happiness might in fact be. The urgency of analysis is compelled by the fact that we are inhabited by an orientation to happiness that we need to continue to explore since it has made more of “us” than we have made of it.

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