

## Learning the Scripts:

An exploration of the shared ways in which young Lao volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness.

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## Abstract

The idea that development policies need to take account of factors broader than economic growth is increasingly commonplace. A focus upon happiness provides an alternative way of looking at development, but the concept of happiness is far from straightforward. This paper argues that any consideration of happiness in policy must be grounded in nuanced qualitative research that provides a rich understanding of the realities of people's lives and their multiple and often conflicting understandings of what happiness means.

This paper draws on ethnographic research with young Lao volunteers with community-based organisations in Vientiane, Laos, that took place between 2010 and 2012. Drawing on Wierzbicka's (2004) concept of cultural scripts, it identifies, describes and explores three collective scripts that this specific group of young people believe about the things that make them happy:

- The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person
- I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life
- I am happy when I follow my heart

Despite illustrating very different understandings of happiness, these stories are woven from a common set of themes about the things that young people think make them happy. Consideration is given to the possible origins of these shared scripts. The discussion section of the paper looks at the implications of these shared scripts for understanding happiness and for the inclusion of a consideration of the concept of happiness in public policy.

The paper ends with three conclusions. Firstly it suggests the importance of rich qualitative research in order to make choices about the meaningful use of well-being indicators. Secondly, in making explicit the socially constructed ways that people understand happiness, such research can also remind us of the need to interrogate the ways that happiness is considered in public policy. Thirdly, the paper suggests that such a critical approach to happiness could also be beneficial at the personal level in order for individuals to challenge and make choices about their own beliefs about happiness.

**Keywords:** *happiness; subjective well-being; Laos*

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### I. Introduction

The idea that development policies need to take account of factors broader than economic growth is increasingly influential at organisational, national and international levels. One key example is the capabilities approach which has inspired the UN's Human Development Reports that include a broad range of rights-based objective indicators of wellbeing (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2011). Decisions still need to be made, however, about which indicators will be prioritised and these decisions are often based upon assumptions and subjective understandings of quality of life (Torras 2008). In addition, Veenhoven (2002) argues that objective indicators for wellbeing only provide part of the picture, since two people can have the same life circumstances yet experience their life very differently because of different priorities and values.

A focus upon happiness provides an alternative way of looking at development. Happiness has been integrated into policy through either subjective indicators that use numerical self-reports to provide aggregates and comparisons of the subjective aspect of well-being, or as a means to make choices between objective wellbeing indicators. The concept of happiness is, however, far from straightforward. By definition, happiness is subjective and therefore its meaning and how it is understood, along with the language that we use to describe it, varies between individuals and across cultures (Kitayama and Markus, 2000). Even within one person happiness holds multiple meanings; it can for example refer to either an emotion (how happy were you yesterday?) or an evaluation (how happy overall is your life?) and it can be considered across the whole life or as it refers to specific life domains. It varies depending upon contextual factors such as the mood that the person is in when the question was asked or the questions that were asked immediately preceding the question about happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnographic research about happiness offers one possibility not simply to measure wellbeing but to understand the complex interplay of factors that contribute to an explanation of what it means when someone says that their life is good or bad. It is likely that the ways that individuals answer such questions, and therefore any conceptualisation of wellbeing, will be rooted in a particular cultural ideology (Kitayama and Markus 2000). Triandis argues that while 'the good life' is preferable across cultures the factors that predict subjective wellbeing (i.e. the things that people consider when they evaluate their life against some 'ideal good life') vary (2000:15).

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller description of the complexities of the concept of happiness see Griffin (2007) "What do happiness studies study?"

Kitayama and Markus (2000) believe that survey methodology is inadequate to address these nuances of subjective wellbeing and advocate for research which provides “thorough and dense descriptions of the lived world of the people under study” (2000:153). Torras (2008) similarly suggests that policy needs to find ways to take subjectivity and quality into account and should be informed by a nuanced and qualitative discussion about the ultimate ends to which the policy aims.

This paper is based upon fieldwork conducted with young Lao people aged approximately 16 – 25 years who volunteered with Non-Profit Associations (NPAs)<sup>2</sup> in Vientiane, Laos between October 2012 and October 2013. These young volunteers occupy a unique position at the crossroads of a country that continues to be affected by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly emerging civil society. Using a collaborative and ethnographic approach, this research utilised three main methods for collecting data with young people; participant observation, participative research workshops and interviews. Participant observation took place mainly in two NPAs where I became a volunteer and spent long periods of time building relationships with the young Lao volunteers and learning about their lives in their natural environment over the course of the year. I facilitated a series of research workshops in each of these two NPAs with the aim of opening up spaces for discussion, where participants had opportunities to grapple with the complexities and contradictions of happiness. In line with the participatory ethos of the research these workshops evolved differently in the two different projects based upon the interests and needs of the particular volunteers and organisations involved, but they both used a mix of discussion and creative approaches (art, drama, games etc.) to address emerging questions related to happiness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 young Lao volunteers whom I met through participant observation and workshops. These three methods did not take place in isolation but fed into and informed each other, reflecting the naturalistic focus of the research aiming to recognise and appreciate the complexity of the subject under study and search for ways to holistically represent this complexity.

The first stage of data analysis was a thematic analysis looking at the things that young volunteers say make them happy. This initial analysis was fed back to participants in two workshops (one in each of the two main NPAs) and after much discussion 12 broad and interconnected themes were agreed:

- Having a warm family
- Having good friends
- Having a person I love and that loves me
- Having a role as a volunteer
- Having good health
- Having a high education
- Having money
- Being together and going places together
- Being able to help other people and society

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<sup>2</sup> Non-Profit Associations is the term used in Laos for Lao-based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

- Being “*jai yen*” (cool hearted)<sup>3</sup>
- Being able to do the things that I want to do
- Being able to dream and follow my dreams

It would, however, be grossly over-simplifying everything that young volunteers said about these themes to suggest that there are twelve distinct and separate things that make young volunteers happy. Young volunteers suggest that there are multiple connections between all twelve of these themes and that the themes sometimes support each other but at times there can be tensions between them. Except in workshops or interviews where I specifically asked them about different areas of their lives, young volunteers rarely talked about any of the themes as distinct areas of their lives. The themes are simply building blocks that combine in multiple ways in order to explain how young Lao volunteers in Vientiane think about happiness and the things that make them happy. Happiness, and the limitations to happiness, were often expressed in the ways in which these themes sometimes complement each other, coming together to support the young volunteers, and in the ways in which they, at other times, push and pull against each other causing challenges and often requiring difficult decisions to be made.

Wierzbicka (2004) suggests that, in order to compare emotions across languages and cultures we need to develop an awareness of the shared ‘cultural scripts’ that groups of people use to talk about emotions. Wierzbicka uses the idea of ‘scripts’ to refer primarily to the shared ways that people express emotions, but in this paper I widen the concept to the shared ways that groups of people conceptualise and ascribe meaning to different emotional experiences. Through a close ethnographic reading of the data focusing on the ways in which the above themes connect, resist and combine, three common shared scripts about happiness emerged. This paper describes and explores these three happiness scripts which are:

- The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person
- I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life
- I am happy when I follow my heart

Composite vignettes are used to illustrate the ways that these scripts are visible in the lives of the research participants. Composite vignettes avoid compromising the individual confidentiality of young volunteers by sharing such detailed accounts of their circumstances, but also to reflect that the scripts themselves are shared. Consideration is also given to the possible origins of these scripts. The final discussion section of the paper looks at the implications of these shared scripts for understanding happiness and for the inclusion of a consideration of the concept of happiness in public policy.

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase *jai yen* and its opposite *jai hawn* translate respectively into English language as “cool-hearted” and “hot-hearted”, but the connotations in Lao language are somewhat different to those of the English translations. *Jai yen* is associated with doing things slowly, being relaxed but also employing a deliberate process of calm thoughtfulness in order to solve a problem in an unrushed manner. In contrast, *jai hawn* is related to being in a rush and speaking and doing things overly quickly, thereby risking making mistakes.

## II. Happiness Script 1: “The Way to be Happy is to be a Good Lao Person.”

The link between ‘happiness’ and ‘virtue’ has occupied philosophers across different cultures for many centuries (Engstrom & Whiting, 1996). Similarly, this first happiness script emerged from a link that the research participants frequently made between being happy and doing the right thing. All of the research participants who made this link connected doing the right thing to a clear sense of national identity and pride in being Lao, expressing the belief that if they conform to a particular story about what it means to be a good Lao person then they will be happy.

This is a script that is grounded in the importance of family and community; the individual is ascribed a social role which they must adhere to and they have certain duties with respect to their family and community that they must fulfil. This script is underpinned by three beliefs that research participants expressed about happiness:

- Other people know better than me what will make me happy.
- If I conform to the social norms and follow the moral rules that have been taught to me then I will be happy.
- The individual must play their part in promoting collective happiness; the group being happy will make the individual happy.

### **Vignette 1: the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.**

In an interview, Toi, an 18 year old young volunteer is talking about a common ritual that takes place at Lao religious festivals where children express their love and respect for their parents and the elders in their family. She tells me:

Since I was young until now I wanted to tell my parents that I loved them, but I couldn’t because I was so shy.

Her friend, Sai, a 19 year old female volunteer who is also being interviewed encourages Toi, saying:

It is what Lao young people must do because our parents gave us life and we must give back to them. It will give them happiness and it will give you happiness.

She continues, linking this duty to Buddhism:

Buddhism has been the religion for Lao people since our ancestors [...] It’s like another law for us. Buddhism teaches us how to be a good person, it teaches us to make [other people] happy.

A short time after the interview, Sai tells me unexpectedly that tomorrow will be her last day of volunteering at the NPA where she has been an active and regular volunteer. She has recently expressed how happy it makes her to be a volunteer and I am surprised by her news. She says that, as she gets closer to her graduation, her

parents have told her that she has to concentrate on her studies; she will miss being a volunteer but she trusts her parents and knows that they want her to be happy. She says that, even though she is sad to leave, she is sure that she will be happier if she does what her parents tell her to do.

A few months later, Sai has invited me to visit her home. I ask her what her plan is for the future and immediately she tells me that she will work for 2 or 3 years after she graduates and then she will marry her boyfriend and have 2 or 3 children. I ask if she will go back to work after she has children and she said yes, after 3 months. She says that if she follows this plan, like all Lao women, she will be happy.

I try to ask whether this is what she wants to do or what she feels she ought to do...but Sai looks confused and says that she doesn't understand the difference. Her English language is good and we attempt this conversation in both English and Lao but I cannot explain my question. She changes the subject and we go to pick some vegetables to cook for dinner.

The idea of a traditional Lao culture is problematic for many reasons including those related to diverse geography, a complex political history and multiple indigenous ethnicities and religions.<sup>4</sup> Different stories about what it means to be Lao and about the nature of Lao people have been told and retold to support different political agendas (Evans 1999). Evans (1998, 1999) describes how the current political regime has used this story-telling to their advantage, strongly promoting a story of what it means to be a good Lao person which weaves together elements of socialism and Buddhism with ideas about the nature of traditional Lao culture. This story is normative - it tells people how they ought to behave, and it does so with reference to the collective benefits available for Lao society if individuals follow this code of behaviour in order to fulfil their traditional role and duty in the family and Lao society.

The complex and historic relationship between communist rhetoric and Buddhist teaching (*dharma*) is particularly interesting here<sup>5</sup>. While the current political regime in Laos is communist in little more than name the rhetoric of solidarity (*samakii*) is still strong in Lao society<sup>6</sup> and participants in the current research expressed strong connections between happiness, positive relationships and solidarity. Stuart-Fox (1996) observed that, despite apparent fundamental conflict in the paths to happiness presented by Buddhist dharma and communist ideology<sup>7</sup>, after the end of the war in 1975, the current government used the language of happiness to argue “the compatibility of socialism and Buddhism on the grounds that both aimed at putting an end to suffering (*dukkha*). The essence of the Buddha’s teaching was the attainment of freedom from suffering and the attainment of true happiness (*sukha*), while ‘the supreme goal of the revolution is to liberate the nation, to liberate the people so that they can be free of suffering, and to make all men happy’” (Stuart-Fox 1996:136).

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to be clear that, because of the location of the research almost all of the research participants self-identified as belonging to the majority Lao ethnic group, as being Buddhist and all live in or very near to Vientiane Capital City, although some grew up in other provinces.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about this fascinating topic see Stuart-Fox’s 1996 book “Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos”.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, High (2006). “Join Together, Work Together, for the Common Good - Solidarity”: Village Formation Processes in the Rural South of Laos.”.

<sup>7</sup> The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) believed that “the only merit that mattered was to be gained through working with the new government for the material well-being of all” whereas in Buddhist dharma “true happiness lies in turning inward to the discovery of the mind and a deepening conscious self-awareness” (Stuart-Fox 1996:135/137).

As can be seen in Vignette 1, above, the research participants most often expressed their Lao identity and sense of doing the right thing in terms of their duty to their family. They often referred to reciprocal roles within the family; the love and care that they receive from their family is important for their happiness and, in turn, they have a responsibility to take care of their family and particularly their parents. In a research workshop identifying the things that the young volunteers thought were most important for their happiness, one participant made a comment that clearly expresses this commonly held view:

The thing that is most important for my happiness is having parents who encourage me. Parents are the main pillar for the family and they are the people who give us birth and help us with everything, even if the children are bad, our parents don't say that we are other people's children, they always said we are their children and therefore in my life my parents will always be loved by me.

The debt owed to parents implicit in the above quotation translates into practice as a duty to acquiesce to their parents' will and demands. One of the things that I was repeatedly told when I arrived in Laos to do my fieldwork was that the biggest difficulty that I would face when asking young Lao people questions was that they would tell me what they thought that I wanted to hear. As I asked questions about happiness and heard answers that seemed to me more about duty and obedience I started wondering if the research participants were indeed telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, when I asking young volunteers directly about this I was repeatedly told, often accompanied by some confusion about the question, that doing their duty to their family and their society made them happy.

### III. Happiness Script 2: “I Will be Happy if I Have the Things that I Need to be Comfortable and Have an Easy Life.”

While the script saying that happiness is being a good Lao person tends to look backwards to a reimagined traditional Laos<sup>8</sup>, the country is also looking and moving forwards into the modern world. In the recent past it has been suggested that this modernisation has happened in Laos more slowly than in other countries in the ASEAN region (Jerndal 1998; Rehbein 2005) but in the last 5 years commentaries suggest that the rate of change in Laos, or at least Vientiane, has rapidly picked up speed (Asian Trends Monitoring, 2013).

Unpublished MSc. research conducted by Sisaleumsak in 2012 into Lao female garment factory worker's perceptions of modernity finds that the women's ideas about modernity fit into two categories; modernity as consumption and modernity as *saduak sabai*. Sisaleumsak says of the term *saduak sabai* that:

[...] this is a term which has no simple and ready translation in either English or Lao. *Saduak sabai* can be used many different ways in Lao language to mean such things as easygoing, good facilities or even being happy. (Sisaleumsak 2012:68)

Finally she comes to a working definition of *saduak sabai* as “a set of values that includes ease, comfort, contentment and freedom” (Sisaleumsak 2012:68).

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<sup>8</sup> For further reading on this topic see Evan's 1998 book "Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975".

I did not ask young volunteers directly about modernity, but the phrase *saduak sabai* was frequently used by young people and is central to the second of the three happiness scripts identified here. However, while Sisaleumsak (2012) suggests that consumption and *saduak sabai* are two distinct sets of understanding about modernity, young volunteers in this research talked about consumption in terms of the ability to purchase a life that is *saduak sabai*. Furthermore, young volunteers associated a life that is *saduak sabai* with a happy life. Therefore the three core beliefs about happiness underpinning this script are:

- A happy life is one which is *saduak sabai*.
- The things that will make life *saduak sabai* are external to the individual.
- These things could be purchased if the individual had enough money.

### **Vignette 2: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life.**

Pom is a young man aged 19 who volunteers with one NPA, works and studies business every evening. It is sometimes difficult to manage the demands of all these different roles and Pom is often running late and seems a little stressed. He laughingly says that the thing that would make him most happy right now would be to sleep until late in the morning, but he is not hopeful that this will be a possibility any time soon!

Despite his busy schedule Pom is very sociable and he often drinks beer with his many friends in the bars in Vientiane. Although he obviously enjoys this aspect of his life he says that he also often feels pressure to go out drinking and that if he didn't go he would offend his friends. Looking exhausted he adds that if he doesn't go out drinking when they ask then his friends might stop inviting him.

Pom prides himself on wearing the latest fashions and having the latest gadgets. Pom asked his parents for an iphone for his birthday but they couldn't give him the full amount so he carefully saved the remaining money from his salary. He does not have the latest model but says that it is better to have an old model than a phone that is not an iphone because an iphone is what everyone wants to have.

Pom often compares himself to other people. He says that "I have everything that other people have, I have a house, a motorbike, everything, but now I have a small house, I will be happier when I have more money and can have a bigger house, now I have a motorbike but I don't have a car like other people".

Over the period of time that I know him he expresses different opinions about money. In one conversation he says that he thinks that it is more important to be happy than rich because he knows that it is possible to be rich and unhappy, but his most consistent, if slightly apologetic, opinion is that the most important thing for his happiness is money. Pom says that he "cannot live without [money] because money can buy all things. If I don't have money I don't have food, I can't go anywhere, I can't do anything. Money is not happiness but money will make me and other people and my family happy".

Pom believes that making money in order to buy them the things that he thinks will make him and his family comfortable is the best way that he can help his family. This can be used to illustrate how the happiness scripts weave together the twelve key themes identified above related to the things that young volunteers say make them happy. Pom cares deeply about his family (theme: having a warm family) and has identified that the way that he can help them (theme: being able to help other people) is by being able to buy (theme: having money) the things that he believes will make his family's life easier (theme: being able to do the things I want to do). He is studying

hard (theme: having a high education) in order to achieve this dream (theme: being able to follow my dreams) of building a new house for his family.

The 1986 Party Congress and its implementation of the New Economic Mechanism were a significant turning point in Laos' history, marking the abandonment of socialism in all but name and formalising the direction in which the government had been moving for some years towards a market based economy (Askew et. al 2008). The two decades since 1986 have seen Laos opening up to outside influences, renegotiating its place in a changing political regional landscape and experiencing economic growth of up to 8% per year (Asian Trends Monitoring, 2012). In relation to the latter point, Askew et. al (2008:186) point out that this growth is even higher in Vientiane where in 2005 the economy grew by 11%. These political and economic changes have also translated into changes in Lao people's day to day lives, although these changes are not distributed equitably and do not have equal impacts for all Lao people. In 2007 in Laos there were 24.9 mobile phone contracts for every 100 people but by 2012 the number of contracts had risen to 101.9 per 100 people. In 2005, 0.9 out of 100 Lao people had access to the internet whereas by 2012 this had risen to 10.7 out of 100 people with internet access<sup>9</sup>. During my time in Vientiane it was rare for me to meet a young person who did not have a mobile phone, although these varied greatly in functionality from very basic through to the latest iphones. Similarly the large majority of young people had access to the internet, either through their mobile phones or through public internet 'cafes', and social networking (particularly facebook) was a common and important part of their lives.

As their people's lives change, it is likely that Lao young people's perception of the things that they need in order to make their life comfortable will change. The current research suggests that these perceptions are also affected by the research participants' comparisons with people around them and the perceived status that certain belongings and behaviours confer. One example of this is a newer, bigger house, which was repeatedly mentioned by young volunteers as something that they dreamed of buying or building, either for themselves or for their family, in order to have a happier life. However, this building of new houses is not purely a dream for the future. New houses (along with new commercial premises) are currently being rapidly built all over Vientiane and it was less common for me to visit a young volunteer in a house that was not undergoing some level of construction work.

One of the core beliefs of this happiness story is that the things will make life *saduak sabai*, and therefore happy, are external to the individual. One of the things that many young volunteers believe will make their life *saduak sabai* is approval from others and/or to be perceived to have a higher status in the eyes of society. Although status and approval cannot be purchased directly, many of the young volunteers believe that there are things that they can purchase for themselves and/or their family which will either impress others or make others like them more. It is only one of many different examples, but a new house is considered a visible demonstration to other people of wealth and modernity, a symbol of status and of their relative position within the village, and a source of great pride – a feeling that research participants link very closely to happiness.

#### IV. Happiness Script 3: "I am Happy When I Follow my Heart."

It quickly became apparent to me that the word heart was important to understanding the Lao language and, in particular, to understanding how Lao people communicate about emotions. Many Lao words for emotions are

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<sup>9</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr?display=graph>

composite words that include the Lao word *jai* (heart)<sup>10</sup> including many of the words that are commonly translated as happy or that are closely related to happiness. When I talked to young volunteers about happiness they regularly used both the phrases ‘the things I like’ (*sing ti khoi mac*) and ‘the things that my heart likes’ (*sing ti jai khoi mac*). As I asked questions, trying to understand the distinction between these two phrases, some young volunteers told me that they meant exactly the same thing but others told me that ‘the things that my heart likes’ is stronger and related more to a deeper, internal focused feeling.

A focus on the heart and on self awareness means that this third happiness script starts with an emphasis upon the individual. However, the individual is a starting place and the themes related to helping other people are central to this script. As one research participant commented; “*we must just start from ourselves... If we want to make other people happy we have to be really happy first then we can make them happy.*” Having the freedom to define happiness in their own way and to do the things that they believe will make them happy were also important to the research participants.

The key beliefs underpinning this script are:

- Happiness comes from what I feel inside rather than what I have outside.
- The best way for me to help other people is to do the things that make my heart happy.
- The first steps to happiness are self awareness and mindfulness.

The script is different from the previous two scripts in that it is inherently multiple, since following their heart will mean different things to different people. In order to respect this characteristic, I offer two short vignettes to illustrate the third happiness script.

### **Vignette 3: I am happy when I follow my heart**

Keo is a 21 year old man and talented musician who started volunteering about six years ago when he was a high school student. When he became a volunteer he discovered that he had a talent for teaching music and started leading activities.

Before he was a volunteer Keo didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life but, with support, he realised that he wanted to use his talents to help other people. When Keo talks about happiness he says that he is happy to have had the opportunities that he has had and that it makes him happy to, in his turn, share these opportunities with other young people. He also emphasise the importance of music to his happiness:

I always play music and sing [...]sometimes when I have problems and conflicts I just play the music and sing a song and after that I forget that problem and my body or my feeling is good [...]yeah [...] and it makes me feel happy when I play the music with the students and they sing and I play the music [...]

Keo offers the following personal definition of happiness:

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of these words can be seen at <http://www.retire-asia.com/lao-heart-culture.shtml> (last accessed 24/9/13)

Happiness means we can stay together, we can work together, we can feel together, we can share ideas together and thinking and everything we want together. I think happiness is standing with someone in heart and mind, happiness is to understand people...what they need and they want and to create their life and your life together. That is happiness I think.

#### **Vignette 4: I am happy when I follow my heart**

Whenever I ask Phet about happiness one of the first words that he uses is ‘freedom’. He says that freedom is the most important thing for his happiness because:

(If I have freedom) I can do everything that I want to and no-one controls me.

Phet talks about the things that make him happy being ‘the things that I do from my heart’ and ‘the things that my heart wants to do’.

Phet has chosen a lifestyle that is quite different from the traditional or expected lifestyle for Lao young adults. He has turned down fulltime jobs in favour of taking various part-time and short-term pieces of work. Some of these pay well and this allows him to do other things that he wants to do including volunteering and travelling. He works hard for short periods of time but then takes time to relax.

However, Phet is clear that his responsibilities to family and friends are sometimes more important than his individual dreams. Phet acknowledges that while his family are supportive of the choices that he makes they sometimes find his life quite difficult to understand. Although he dreams to move to another province in the future, right now he feels that his heart wants to stay with his mother in Vientiane. Similarly, one of the projects that took up a lot of Phet’s time while I was in Vientiane was working with one of his close friends (“who I think like a brother”) to develop a business that is his dream. For Phet, “a freedom life” means being free to do the things that his heart wants to do and many of the things that his heart wants to do are about helping other people fulfil their dreams.

One possible origin for this happiness script is the theory of education for sustainable development promoted by PADETC<sup>11</sup> and in particular by PADETC’s founder Sombath Somphone. PADETC holds a unique and influential position in Lao civil society and specifically in the field of youth volunteerism in Vientiane. PADETC promotes a model of sustainable development where four balanced pillars of development (the environment, culture, heart and mind, and the economy) support a ‘roof’ (or ultimate goal) of “Genuine National Happiness, a concept of joyful living inspired by the Bhutanese idea of Gross National Happiness” (PADETC 2008:4). The ‘foundations’ of this model of sustainable development are good governance and education, which will provide the people who are able to govern well and in such a way that leads to Genuine National Happiness. PADETC considers that the pillar that has most been neglected is the pillar of ‘heart and mind’ and this is where they place much of their focus,

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<sup>11</sup> “PADETC, the acronym of Participatory Development Training Centre in English has been purposefully chosen to sound like the Lao term Pa-Dec which means fermented fish. Pa-Dec has a very distinctive flavor and is ubiquitously found in every Lao kitchen and universally used in everyday Lao cooking. Just as Pa-Dec is uniquely Lao and an indispensable ingredient in Lao food, PADETC, too, as an indigenous all-Lao organization rooted in Lao culture and society, is committed to make a unique and distinctive contribution to the development of Laos.” (PADETC 2008:35)

coining the phrase that “the heart of education is education of the heart”. A few of the research participants in this study are or have been volunteers with PADETC and the founders of both of the NPAs in which most of the research participants volunteered had been volunteers with PADETC, and these ideas were reflected in many conversations that I had with research participants.

However the ideas that the search for happiness is one of self-discovery and that happiness is to be found inside the individual’s heart and/or mind is not confined to this very specific group of young people in Laos. Reaching back to a past before the Buddhist dharma was appropriated for political ends, this script draws on Buddhist spiritual values such as awareness of mind, compassion and mindfulness. Following Young’s theory of modernity, this script also reaches forward, past high modernity’s “brute comfort and material success” to late modernity with its focus on “self-discovery and expression, it is not so much arrival as becoming and self-fulfilment, not of hard work rewarded, but of spontaneity and expressivity anew” (2007:2). Research participants reflected this script in comments relating to Buddhism but also in comments related to secular inspirational quotations that they have read on social media, to song lyrics and to motivational talks and seminars that they had attended.

## V. Discussion

The twelve themes relating to the things that the research participants said make them happy and listed at the beginning of this paper, address Veenhoven’s (2002) question about the most likely things that people (in this instance young Lao volunteers in Vientiane) consider when they rate their own happiness. The happiness scripts that are at the core of this paper suggest, however, that these themes offer only a partial answer to the deeper question of how young volunteers in Vientiane think about and understand happiness. The twelve themes can be woven together into an infinite number of different stories, each illustrating an underlying set of similar beliefs held by young volunteers in Vientiane. The three scripts discussed illustrate the most common of these belief sets emerging from an ethnographic analysis of my data looking at how young volunteers understand happiness and the things that make them happy. They provide a set of structures to look below the surface of the twelve themes and a framework for considering how these themes sometimes fit neatly together, how there is sometimes tension between the different themes and how young volunteers can seemingly hold conflicting views about happiness simultaneously. They move us from a consideration of what young volunteers in Vientiane think is important for their happiness to a consideration of how young volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness.

However, whilst these scripts represent how young volunteers understand happiness, they do not necessarily represent the realities of their lives. For example, that young volunteers say having a warm family is important for their happiness does not actually mean that all of the young volunteers have a warm family. Not having a warm family is not only the absence of a condition that young volunteers think is important for their happiness but can indicate the presence of unhappiness, thus demonstrating a connection between happiness and its opposite. In Laos language the opposite of *kuam-suk* (the word most commonly translated as ‘happiness’) is *kuam-tuk*, generally translated as ‘suffering’, and in the situation where a young volunteer does not have a warm family it seems that there is the possibility for two types of *kuam-tuk*, suffering related to any problems or difficulties within the family and suffering that is related to your family not living up to the shared script of how a Lao family should be.

This point can be illustrated using the example of San, a young female volunteer who participated in the research. San’s mother died when San was in her fourth year of primary school and she now lives with other relatives while her father lives in a different city with his new wife. San talks about several different aspects of this situation which affect her happiness. She thinks that proximity to her parents is important to her happiness and yet she has been separated from both her parents. San’s relationship with her aunt, one of the relatives that she lives

with, is challenging since San wants both to continue her education and to be a volunteer but her aunt doesn't value education and doesn't understand volunteering, thinking that San should instead be earning money. In addition to her obviously very real desire to live with her father, it seems that San has a normative sense of how her life should be. The theme of 'having a warm family' features in all three of the happiness scripts, but is particularly strong in the script that says that 'I will be happy if I am a good Lao person'. In the interview, when she talks about the things that make her happy and the things that are important for her happiness San almost exclusively talks about having a warm family – and when she does talk about other things such as education or volunteering it is in the context of the support and/or lack of support that she gets in these areas from members of her family. On a separate occasion I chatted to San as we watched a football match being played at the centre where she volunteered. I asked her whether she had enjoyed a research workshop that she had taken part in the previous weekend. She said that she had enjoyed it but that all of the other volunteers talk about happiness being 'having a warm family' and she doesn't have a warm family, so it makes her sad when they say that. She went on to say that families are important for Lao people and that she doesn't understand why her family is not warm and does not take care of one another in the way that most Lao families do. Not only does San think that having a warm family would make her happy, but she compares herself and her family to the other volunteers and to the shared script saying that they will be happy if they are good Lao people, and she finds that they do not compare well. Therefore, the scripts tell us something about the ways that the research participants understand happiness but they can also have an impact upon their happiness.

It is vital to remember that there are several layers of construction involved in the development of the three scripts. The beliefs that underpin the scripts are developed by young research participants in response to the important influences in their lives and to different aspects of their social contexts. Subsequently I, as social researcher, influenced by Wierzbicka's (2004) theory of cultural scripts, am observing, choosing, interpreting and shaping these beliefs into common scripts that are shared by many of the young volunteers in Vientiane who participated in this research. This is not an arbitrary process but is based on a close analysis of a range of data collected over two years of intensive fieldwork; the scripts do represent the most common ways that the research participants think and talk about happiness, but they do not reveal any 'truth' about happiness in a positivist sense of objective and verifiable truth.

On several occasions research participants in the current study suggested that some ways of looking at happiness are more 'real' than others, but this distinction may simply show a preference for one or more script over another. An example of this is a young volunteer Noy who, reflecting upon the link between happiness and development, makes the following distinction:

Happiness is not when you get whatever you want [...] that is not the real happiness. Real happiness is when we see the people, all the people, are happy. Sometimes in development they just increase GDP but they don't care about other things [...] other people's lives [...] that's why I don't think it is sustainable development. Sometimes they just [...] they look for their own happiness but destroy other peoples' lives.

Noy's definition of 'real happiness' draws on two of the happiness scripts outlined above. He invokes the duty to other people that is so central to the script that 'I will be happy if I am a good Lao person' and the value of sustainable development which feeds into the script that 'I will be happy if I follow my heart' in order to contradict the script that 'I will be happy if I have the things I need to be comfortable and have an easy life'.

However, when Noy tries to further define real happiness he gets confused and ends up having to admit defeat.

I don't think that real happiness is about thinking. Sometimes there is no clear rule because eating the cake makes you happy but by eating it you are destroying yourself because when you eat too much cake you become fat. I don't mean that there is no real happiness just that some things that we think have much happiness are really like imaginary happiness. Sometimes we just imagine something will make us happy. So that's why I don't know what the real happiness is.

Noy is implicitly struggling with the question of whether there anything more real than the happiness scripts that we follow and, if there is, how we can ever know. This paper doesn't offer an answer to these complex philosophical questions; it simply seeks to highlight the existence of these scripts and to illustrate that the ways people understand happiness are socially constructed in response to the social, political and religious contexts in which they live.

The idea that the ways that people understand happiness are socially constructed does not, however, mean that the concept of happiness is not useful or important. Veenhoven's (2002) point still stands that their subjective experience affects people's quality of life. The 12 identified themes relating to what research participants say make them happy, that cut across the same research participants' three most commonly shared happiness scripts, would be a good starting place for beginning to identify well-being indicators for this particular group of young people. However, in order to be meaningful, such indicators would need to take into account the meanings that people ascribe to these themes and the ways that they push and pull against each other.

Happiness scripts offer one way to examine these ascribed meanings and highlight the vital need to challenge and interrogate our assumptions and understandings of happiness; which has obvious implications for the consideration of happiness in social policy. As Torras (2008) points out, even choices about which objective social indicators to use involve assumptions and elements of subjectivity; the happiness scripts offer a structure to examine the reasons that these choices have been made and, if necessary, to challenge them. I argue that a consideration of subjective experience is a vital part of any holistic model of social progress or development and yet that, in order to be meaningful, such a consideration needs to be underpinned by rich nuanced research looking at realities of people's lives and the reasons that they understand happiness in the ways that they do. In other words, when happiness is considered in policy development it should be done with an awareness of what happiness script (or combination of happiness scripts) is being followed, and why.

This idea of interrogating and challenging the happiness scripts is also applicable at the individual level and as the research progressed I became more interested in the research participants interest, willingness and ability to question their own understandings of happiness. When I had first started planning the research methodology I was influenced by Co-operative Inquiry and had hoped that the young volunteers would engage in the research as co-researchers<sup>12</sup>. However, the challenges of working with this model in the Lao setting and in the context of a PhD project quickly became apparent, and I opted for a looser participative methodology. But, as the fieldwork period progressed I realized that, while the young volunteers might not be truly co-researchers in the Cooperative Inquiry sense of the term<sup>13</sup>, they were in one sense co-inquirers who were enthusiastically learning about their own beliefs and attitudes as a result of participating in the research process.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about Co-operative Inquiry, see: Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London, Sage.

This interest and learning was expressed in different ways. Several volunteers indicated that they had never thought much about their own happiness before and that they found it interesting. After an interview one young man expressed his thanks for my questions and said “I’ve never thought about these things before, they are very interesting questions”. Similarly, another young volunteer said after an interview: “I think when you ask me questions it is good because it makes me think, and some things that I think are new.”

On multiple occasions I would hear volunteers exclaiming in workshops that “this is so interesting!” especially during exercises where they got to hear different views about the same topic or question from different groups or individuals. On one occasion, during an animated group conversation about happiness and romantic relationships involving 6 young volunteers who were already very close friends, the young woman who was helping me with translation paused mid-sentence to say “it’s so interesting...to hear what all my friends think. Usually we don’t talk together like this.”

Other young volunteers, through the experience of being involved in the research process, demonstrated the process of challenging the happiness scripts that they held. One example of this occurred during a discussion with a group of young volunteers after watching the international documentary “Happy”<sup>14</sup>. I asked the group of young volunteers whether their opinions about happiness had changed during watching the film, there was a long pause and then one young man spoke very hesitantly and shyly, saying:

Before (watching the film) I thought that having money to spend is the most important thing for happiness, but I changed (after watching the film). It is not necessary to have lots of money, it is more important that we are just satisfied in what we have and then we will have happiness.

When he finished saying this there was enthusiastic applause from the rest of the group and the young volunteer smiled broadly.

However, thinking about happiness is not always comfortable and some ways of sharing thoughts about happiness can even have a negative impact rather than a positive one. The young volunteer discussed above who felt sad when she heard other young volunteers talking about how important their warm families were to their happiness, may not agree that it is a good thing to think and talk about happiness. Another volunteer discussed how he used to talk with a friend about what will make them happy in the future but they have decided to stop having these conversations so often “because I see many people in Laos who they think like this they are not successful because they don’t concentrate on what they do now”. The question, therefore, becomes one about what *kind* of conversation about happiness is a good one? I would argue that a useful conversation about happiness is one that enables its participants to become aware of the happiness scripts that they follow so that they can interrogate these scripts and make choices about whether particular scripts are useful in their lives.

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<sup>14</sup> “Happy; A Documentary” (<http://www.thehappymovie.com>) is an internationally released film made up of a series of case studies from around the world of people talking about the things that are important for their happiness.

## VI. Conclusion

Nuanced qualitative data about people's everyday experiences is necessary in order to understand the complexities of the factors that are important for people's happiness and, therefore, for policy-makers to make decisions about the indicators that they use to measure well-being. The thematic analysis outlined briefly at the beginning of this paper provides a set of themes that could be used as a base for developing such indicators for this very specific group of young people. Any indicators, however, would need to take into consideration the interactions between these themes since they do not represent areas of people lives that exist in isolation from each other.

Such research can also provide crucial insight into the ways that people develop beliefs about happiness in response to the important influences in their lives and to different aspects of their social contexts. Since these influences are multiple the resulting beliefs may also be multiple and potentially conflicting. I suggest that identifying commonly held happiness scripts that people follow in the ways that they conceptualize and ascribe meaning to happiness offers one way to untangle these complexities. These happiness scripts make the socially constructed nature of the ways that people understand happiness explicit and, therefore, I further suggest that an important part of their value is in the opportunity that they provide to challenge and interrogate the assumptions that we hold about the things that make life good.

In conclusion, I suggest that the research upon which this paper is based offers three learning points for decision-makers interested in the consideration of happiness within social and development policies. Firstly I argue the importance of rich qualitative research in order to make choices about the meaningful use of well-being indicators. Secondly, in making explicit the socially constructed ways that people understand happiness, such research can also remind us of the need to interrogate the ways that happiness is considered in public policy and to remain critical of the scripts underpinning the use of such indicators. Thirdly I argue that, in addition to its importance at the policy level, such a critical approach to happiness is also beneficial at the personal level in order for individuals to challenge their own beliefs about happiness. My final suggested learning point and suggested area for future research, therefore, is that a consideration of happiness in policy might be widened to include not only indicators that promote happiness but also the possibility of promoting opportunities for people to develop the critical thinking skills and to have the types of positive interactions that enable them to consider and challenge the happiness scripts that they follow.

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