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**RELATIONSHIPS, HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING: INSIGHTS FROM
BANGLADESH**

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Camfield, L, Choudhury, K, and Devine, J**

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Correspondence

The Secretary

Wellbeing in Developing Countries ESRC Research Group (WeD)

3 East 2.10

University of Bath

Bath BA2 7AY, UK

E-mail wed@bath.ac.uk

www.welldev.org.uk

Tel +44 (0) 1225 384514

Fax +44 (0) 1225 384848

A large print size version of this paper is available on request.

Working Paper Submission

For enquiries concerning the submission of working papers please contact Ian Gough by email: i.r.gough@bath.ac.uk or by writing to the above address.

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SUMMARY

Although Bangladesh is known as one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world, its people seem to enjoy levels of happiness that are higher than those found in many other countries. This includes 'developed' countries where people have larger per capita incomes and can access a wider range of public services and goods. The paper explores this apparent paradox by analysing primary quantitative and qualitative data, and engaging with existing literature on happiness and objective wellbeing in Bangladesh. The data and analysis presented here contributes to the limited knowledge we have of the construction and experience of happiness and life satisfaction in contexts of extreme and persistent economic poverty. It identifies and offers insights into the 'personal' as well as social or 'relational' values and goals that people in Bangladesh consider important to achieve happiness in life. This, we argue, leads to a better understanding of the role of social and cultural context in the construction of people's happiness. In the conclusion, we reflect on the policy implications of our findings.

KEY WORDS: Bangladesh; Developing countries; International Development; Happiness; Quality of Life; Culture; Poverty; Relationships

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Related readings:

Rojas M. (2005) *A conceptual-referent theory of happiness: Heterogeneity and its consequences*. Social Indicators Research, 74, 261-294.

Tiberius, V. (2004) *Cultural differences and philosophical accounts of wellbeing*. Journal of Happiness Studies 5: 293-314.

Uchida, Y, Norasakkunkit, V, Kitayama, S. (2004) *Cultural constructions of happiness: theory and empirical evidence*. Journal of Happiness Studies, 5, 223-39.

Correspondence to:

Dr Laura Camfield, Research Officer for Quality of Life,
Wellbeing in Developing Countries ESRC Research Group,
University of Bath, UK
Tel: 0044 1225 384525; email: l.camfield@bath.ac.uk

RELATIONSHIPS, HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING: INSIGHTS FROM BANGLADESH

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the developing world. Ever since its Independence in 1971 the country has struggled to shed its reputation as a “test case for development” (Faaland and Parkinson, 1976:193), and an “international basket case” (Henry Kissinger, 1974, reported in Hartmann and Boyce, 1983:22). Although these labels may have reflected a genuine concern for the harsh reality that faces many in Bangladesh, they also served to create a crude and oversimplified image of Bangladeshis as being always ‘poor’, in every domain of their lives, not only the economic. More recent themes such as ‘chronicity’, vulnerability, and insecurity perpetuate this negative association, rooted as they are in notions of poverty (Sen and Hulme, 2004).

The persistence of a poverty focus in Bangladesh brings into sharp relief recent reports claiming that Bangladeshis report a higher level of happiness than many other countries (including Britain) where people enjoy significantly larger per capita incomes and access to a wider range of basic services and goods (Worcester, 1998). An important part of this anomaly is that it contradicts the view that higher rather than lower incomes (a key component of ‘objective’ definitions of poverty) are associated with positive appraisals of quality of life¹. Indeed intuitively it would seem that a first crucial step to attain happiness is simply to avoid poverty, especially in its extreme forms. However some level of caution is required when applying these judgments. Poverty and happiness may be unlikely partners, but they are not wholly incompatible. For example Biswas-Diener and Diener’s (2001) study of the life satisfaction of slum dwellers in Calcutta finds *inter alia* that the respondents report satisfactory social lives, rewarding family lives and a belief that they lead moral lives. Thus they conclude that “while the poor of Calcutta do not lead enviable lives, they do lead meaningful lives” (Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2001:349). One of the key aims of this paper is to advance our understanding of the construction and experience of happiness and satisfaction with ‘life as a whole’ in contexts of extreme and persistent poverty.

¹ Another explanation of this anomaly is that objective poverty is an academic concept and therefore shouldn’t be expected to correlate well with more bottom-up notions like subjective poverty or happiness (Sumner 2004). Our thanks to Mariano Rojas for this observation.

The study of happiness in contexts like Bangladesh also allows us to address a second debate that focuses on the extent to which the definition and experience of happiness is culturally specific. In a recent exploration of this theme, Uchida et al. (2004) compare empirical evidence from European-American cultural contexts with that of East Asia. The authors identify two distinct experiences. Thus in the European-American context, happiness is more associated with the achievement of personal individuated goals, while in the East Asian context happiness seems to depend much more on the realisation of positive social relationships “of which the self is part” (Uchida et al., 2004:226). This distinction has particular resonance for a study of happiness in Bangladesh where social relationships are the crucial locus of power and identity, and pervade the entire gamut of life activities for all people, irrespective of class, gender or age. Relationships are therefore a constituent attribute of personhood, as well as the principal mechanism through which people pursue their livelihood strategies (Devine, 2005), and cushion the effects of insecurity in various aspects of their lives (Wood, 2006). This paper will therefore also offer insights into the significance of the ‘personal’, as well as the social or ‘relational’ in the construction of happiness, and as such begins to explore how judgements of happiness are influenced by social and cultural contexts.

2. HAPPINESS IN BANGLADESH

Given the emphasis on poverty studies, it comes as no surprise to find that there has been very little research into the experience of happiness or wellbeing in Bangladesh². What evidence we do possess however indicates that subjective wellbeing is intertwined with the daily activities and choices people make in Bangladesh. Furthermore, we can identify a set of life domains (employment, health, education, and so forth) that are perceived as being crucial for wellbeing by the vast majority of people³, even if there are profound differences in the way different people experience these domains. The researchers we review also differ in the relative weight they give to specific domains in terms of their influence on wellbeing. This may be because a weighting is being attributed on the basis of the subjective preferences of the respondent, the researcher, or the funding organization,

² Our perspective on the relationship between happiness and wellbeing has been influenced by Uchida et al (2004) who define happiness as an emotional concomitant to people’s appraisal of the quality of their lives.

³ See for example Choudhury 2005, Mahmuda 2003, Nabi et al, 1999, Mahbub and Roy 1997.

rather than being derived from the data using inferential techniques. This however is not clear from the literature reviewed.

One of the first studies exploring the nature of wellbeing in Bangladesh was carried out by Mahbub and Roy (1997). In this study, the authors used a variety of participatory 'rapid appraisal' approaches to identify and explore key indicators of wellbeing. The main indicators were money, fixed income [salary], three meals a day, children and children's education, small family size, health, access to medical services, and a peaceful life. Although there were some differences, both men and women identified the same indicators independently. However, in exploring the connections and casual pathways, the authors noted that the experiences of men and women were very different. Thus women considered the health of the main male wage earner in the household as the precondition to achieving the other indicators. Men on the other hand prioritised their own education as this opened up greater possibilities in seeking income.

Working within the discipline of psychology, Khatun et al. (1998) carried out a study to develop a scale for measuring the psychological wellbeing of rural women in Bangladesh. They proposed a scale with five dimensions: self-confidence, self-esteem, conscious thinking, knowledge about the social environment⁴, and life satisfaction. This was administered to 53 women. The study found a strong linear relationship between life satisfaction and self-confidence; and a significant relationship between knowledge about the social environment and both self-confidence and life satisfaction. By comparing respondents from different socio-economic backgrounds, the authors also found evidence that higher socio-economic status had a direct and positive impact on psychological wellbeing.

As part of the 'Consultations with the Poor' study⁵, Nabi et al (1999) conducted fieldwork in rural and urban sites in Bangladesh, which identified having employment opportunities, or cultivable land with cattle and oxen (both of which generate savings and capital) as the main factor for wellbeing. Other important factors were having a good house, healthy and

⁴ The items from the 'Knowledge about social environment scale' covered women's empowerment, social relationships, gender equality in employment, and so on.

⁵ The 'Consultations with the Poor' study was a World Bank funded initiative synthesising participatory poverty assessments and new participatory fieldwork from over 70 developing countries. It was published in three volumes: "Can Anyone Hear Us?" (Narayan and Walton, 2000); "Crying Out for Change" (Narayan et al, 2000); and "From Many Lands" (Narayan and Walton, 2002).

relaxed family members, good clothing, sufficient food, and the ability to educate your children.

Finally, Mahmuda (2003) conducted a study into wellbeing among residents of Dhaka, the capital city. She makes a strong argument that people in Bangladesh have a clear perception of what is required to achieve wellbeing. The three wellbeing indicators most frequently reported were economic solvency, education, and health. However Mahmuda's study also confirmed important class and gender differences in the definition and experience of wellbeing. For example, poorer people defined their wellbeing more tightly around basic subsistence needs such as food intake, income adequacy, and housing security. Richer people instead emphasised personal security, savings, peace of mind, and status. In terms of gender, women placed greater emphasis on care for and within the family, while men focused on self-education and income. This study is consistent with Khatun et al's (1999) findings.

3. METHODS

This paper reports initial findings from two components of a five year research programme carried out in Bangladesh by the Wellbeing in Developing (WeD) Countries ESRC Research Group⁶. The first study is an exploratory piece of research into individual quality of life (QoL) that contributed to WeD's ambition to incorporate measures of subjective wellbeing into its research programme⁷. The QoL study was one of set of research instruments implemented in six sites (two rural, two peri-urban and two urban sites from two different Districts) in Bangladesh⁸. The main criteria used to select respondents for the QoL study were gender, age (18-44 and 45+), religious affiliation (85 percent were Muslim, 15 percent Hindu), and socio-economic status⁹. The methods used consisted of semi-

⁶ The WeD Programme is carrying out detailed and intensive fieldwork in rural, peri-urban, and urban sites in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. For more information see <http://www.welldev.org.uk>.

⁷ The exploratory quality of life data from all countries is also being used to develop a cross-cultural measure of QoL, provisionally called the WeD-QoL (see Camfield, McGregor and Yamato 2006).

⁸ The other main research instruments applied in each site were community profiling, a Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ), income and expenditure survey or monthly diaries with 'core households', welfare regime analysis, and process orientated research.

⁹ Although the sample for the QoL was not large, the decision to consider age, gender, socio-economic status and religious affiliation in the selection of respondents helped in some way to acknowledge the great heterogeneity that exists across persons in Bangladesh. Happiness

structured interviews (n = 68), the Person Generated Index (n = 22, urban sample only), (Ruta et al, 2004), and focus group discussions (n = 240). The interviews and focus groups¹⁰ included more abstract questions on the characteristics of households and individuals living well or living badly, an 'ideal' person, and an ideal village or community. However, the analysis offered in this paper focuses only on the interview questions on personal happiness. A quantitative measure of happiness was attained by asking respondents open-ended questions about how happy they were with their life 'as a whole' and coding their answers retrospectively¹¹. Further questions were asked about their sources of happiness/ unhappiness, happiest/ unhappiest memories, and hopes/ fears. These created a matrix of attributions of happiness. While these attributions may not represent the respondents' actual sources of happiness, due to the difficulty of accurately predicting what will provide sustained happiness, the expectation of subjective wellbeing is likely to be a factor in their choice of goals and strategies.

The second study is a household-level Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ), which asked standard survey questions about respondents' happiness with their life as a whole¹² and with specific 'domains of life' such as food sufficiency and housing. These questions were only asked to the household head who in Bangladesh is usually a middle-aged male, although other questions were asked to the senior spouse and individual household members. Although this introduces inevitable gender and age biases, we found that the RANQ scores were not very different from those of the exploratory QoL research and other surveys, which used a more balanced sample. This suggests that while the reasons for happiness vary considerably across these groups, the level of happiness is fairly stable. While the sample size of the RANQ (n=1,500) obviously gives its data more

is ultimately an individual construct and it is important not to assume homogeneity when making statements about what constitutes a happy life in a particular country context.

¹⁰ Interviews were carried out in Bangla by local researchers of the same gender who had worked in the site for at least a year previously and were fluent in both Bangla and English. The interviews were not recorded, however detailed notes were made in Bangla and English both during and after the interviews.

¹¹ The coding of the level of happiness was checked against the original responses and found to be almost literal, which could be due to the economy of Bangla, or that many of the population are 'survey literate' so their responses were unconsciously framed in survey response categories.

¹² These questions have been used successfully in many developing countries during the last 20 years (see, for example, Moller, 2006), and the World Values Survey has used a 'General Happiness Question' with a representative sample of the Bangladeshi population since 1996 (see www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

power¹³, the QoL data on reasons for and sources of happiness enables us to contextualise people's responses to the 'global' and domain specific happiness questions, and to explore their motivations.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

Regardless of their age, gender or location, 79 percent of the individuals sampled during the exploratory QoL research described themselves as happy, and 38 percent of these said they were 'very happy'. This high figure is supported by RANQ findings, which took the level of happiness of the respondent (usually the household head) as a proxy for the household as a whole. On this basis 80.6 percent of the surveyed households characterised themselves as happy, and 12.6 percent of these were very happy.

These findings will come as no surprise to students of international surveys on quality of life, which frequently report 70 or 80 percent of respondents describing themselves as 'happy' or 'satisfied' in response to questions like "how happy are you with your life as a whole" (see Cummins 1995, 1997). The findings are also consistent with statements reported above about Bangladeshis enjoying a comparatively high level of happiness despite their low incomes. However, the findings contrast with the results of the World Values Survey, which has tracked a decline in happiness in Bangladesh from a high of 85 percent in 1995 to 70 percent in 1996 and 60 percent in 2000.¹⁴ Surprisingly, the gradual decline in happiness has occurred over a period of time in which the country's human poverty index has dropped from 61 percent in 1981/83 to 36 percent in 2000 (Sen and Hulme, 2004) and there has been a notable rise in its Human Development Index value from 0.365 in 1993 to 0.520 in 2003. The anomaly identified earlier is highlighted again, for although the relationship between income and wellbeing is a complex one, there is some consensus that for those with lowest incomes, the ability to satisfy basic needs has a significant impact on wellbeing

¹³ The sample size for the Resources and Needs Questionnaire (n=1,500) is equivalent to that used in national happiness surveys, see World Database of Happiness http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness/hap_nat/reports/Nreport/NA94.HTM

¹⁴ Inglehardt et al 2004 gets an even lower figure for Bangladeshis' subjective well-being (0.54 out of 5 or 'medium low') when he combines the life satisfaction and happiness scores. However, this may be an artefact of the method of questioning as the developer of the Personal Generated Index (an individualized measure of subjective quality of life similar to Cantril's Ladder [1965]) had a similar experience when using satisfaction/ dissatisfaction rather than good/ bad as the question stem during piloting in Bangladesh (Ruta et al, 2004).

(Veenhoven, 1991, Diener and Lucas, 2000). In the case of Bangladesh therefore, one would expect an increase in happiness as key social and economic indicators improve, unless these improvements are outweighed by an exponential increase in expectations. Elsewhere for example, Easterlin (2003) has used the relative-income hypothesis to explain the stability of happiness levels in Europe and America despite large increases in GDP over the past 50 years.

The combination of RANQ and QoL data allows us to begin addressing the apparent anomaly presented in the case of Bangladesh. First we are able to examine how the definition and experience of happiness differs when we consider age, gender and other socio-demographic variables such as occupation. A greater awareness of the heterogeneity of people's experiences is an important corrective to the findings of more generalised data sets that deal mostly with higher levels of aggregation. Second, our data allows us to explore the impact of perceived 'adequacy of income' and 'basic needs satisfaction' on people's perception of their overall quality of life. Finally, and perhaps more crudely, the data offers insights into what Bangladeshis, despite their poverty, have to be so happy about.

4. 2 Happiness – a varied experience

One of the key differences in the experience of happiness is related directly to levels of wealth. The RANQ results suggest that people who perceive their households as economically rich (in comparison with others in the research site)¹⁵ are happier, as almost a third of respondents reported they are 'very happy' and only 6 percent of them reported they are 'not too happy'. The pattern is reversed for people who perceive their households as economically poor as only 5 percent stated they are 'very happy' and a third reported they are 'not too happy'. However, there is much less difference in perceptions of overall happiness between people who considered themselves rich and those who considered themselves average. Taken together the findings lend support to the view that wealth positively impacts on subjective wellbeing, but also to the 'threshold' theory that once people's basic needs have been satisfied, the returns from income in terms of improved quality of life are diminished (Helliwell, 2003, Layard, 2005).

¹⁵ Respondents to RANQ were asked to classify themselves as rich, average, or poor in relation to others in the research site.

Table 1: Happiness by self assessed socio-economic status ¹⁶

Self assessed economic position	Very happy	Fairly happy	Not too happy
Rich, n=146	31.5	62.3	6.2
Average, n=714	15.8	74.5	9.7
Poor, n=640	4.7	62.0	33.3
All households (n = 1,500)	12.6	68.0	19.4

Source: RANQ, Bangladesh

Given the significance of economic status, it is perhaps not surprising to find some relation between occupation and happiness. However in the context of Bangladesh, discussions around occupation are compounded by considerations of caste status, financial insecurity, and social isolation (for example, home workers). The figures in table 2 report on the main occupation of the household head during the last month. Although the household head is not necessarily the only wage earner, in the context of Bangladesh they are likely to be the most important, and the status of the household will be largely determined by their occupation. Professionals appear to be the happiest of all the occupational groups with 22.1 percent of them reporting themselves to be 'very happy' and only 4.1 percent 'not too happy'. Professional work here refers to jobs (cakri) that usually involve a contract and a fixed salary. These are much sought after jobs in Bangladesh as they offer regular income and a range of other financial benefits, including status. Nargish (2004) for example found that the reason why people invested so much in their children's education was that they would be in a better position to secure professional jobs later in life. She also found that once educated, young people often refused to consider non-professional work and preferred unemployment.

In contrast, artisans are the unhappiest among all the occupational groups with 40 percent claiming to be 'not too happy' and only 8.3 percent 'very happy'. Artisans stand at the opposite end of the spectrum to professionals. Their work has few formal contracts, their ability to secure income from their work is very irregular and often seasonal, suggesting a connection between financial insecurity and happiness. Moreover, many artisans either come from minority backgrounds or are considered to be of low status. Few

¹⁶ The 2002 World Values Survey for Bangladesh reports that 88.2 percent rich (high) were very or quite happy, compared to 81.7 percent average (middle), and 71.1 percent poor (low).

Bangladeshis aspire therefore to be artisans. Both home-workers and agricultural labourers (paid by the day) also report high levels of unhappiness, certainly in comparison with farmers¹⁷, and in both cases social isolation is an important factor. Additionally employment conditions are precarious and often exploitative, with some home-workers not receiving cash income at all, and agricultural workers dependent on the outcome of local pay negotiations with richer and more powerful landowners.

Table 2: Happiness by occupation

Occupational Category	Very happy	Fairly happy	Not too happy
Farmer, n=241	7.9	73	19.1
Agricultural labourer, n=131	1.5	56.5	42.0
Artisan, n=60	8.3	51.7	40.0
Non-agricultural (rural), n=95	15.8	70.5	13.7
Transport, n=131	3.8	74.8	21.4
Professional, n=172	22.1	73.8	4.1
Home-workers, n=64	15.6	56.3	28.1
Commercial, n=311	17.6	68.3	14.1
Not in labour force, n=107	15	62.6	22.4
All Categories, n = 1,500	12.6	68.0	19.4

Source: RANQ, Bangladesh

As the RANQ survey was administered to the household head, it is not possible to extract information on gender and age differences. Although the QoL study was designed as an exploratory qualitative study rather than a quantitative one, it used both age¹⁸ and gender in its sampling procedure and therefore offers some insights into different perceptions of what constitutes a happy life.¹⁹ According to the QoL data, young females appear to be the happiest group overall with 86 percent reporting themselves as either very happy or happy. It is important to note, however, that these

¹⁷ We are indebted to Geof Wood for reminding us of the need to distinguish between the happiness level of farmers and agricultural labourers.

¹⁸ Young was defined as 18-45 years old, while old was over 45 years old.

¹⁹ the small sample size, especially when broken down further by age and gender, means that any conclusions are tentative ones, which require further empirical support.

differences are marginal as the range for happiness scored across all groups is relatively narrow (the lowest reported score was 72 percent and the highest 86 percent). However if we focus on those reporting themselves as very happy, we find that older males do significantly better than the other groups, including young females. However, age seems not to be the only explanatory factor here for when we look at older females we find that they are the group that least frequently reports that they are very happy. The accounts of older men suggest that the combination of age and gender determines quite significantly the possibility of experiencing happiness in life.

Table 3: Happiness by age and gender²⁰

	Very Happy	Happy	Not too happy
Older males, n = 21	52	29	19
Older females, n = 14	25	50	25
Younger males, n = 18	33	39	28
Younger females, n = 15	33	53	13
All Categories, n = 68	38	41	21

Source: QoL, Bangladesh

4.3 Happiness and needs satisfaction

The relation between the quality of everyday living conditions and the experience of subjective wellbeing is a complex one. At some level however it is reasonable to assume that the satisfaction of everyday basic needs contributes positively to perceived happiness. In this section we want to explore this relation further by focusing on the specific domains of health, housing, food sufficiency, and clothing. Later in the paper we will refer to education. To put the findings below in perspective, it is worth noting that only one or two households reported having a ‘more than adequate’ provision of health care, food, or clothing.

Health is a core determinant of wellbeing in that it facilitates participation in a whole range of life activities (Doyal and Gough, 1991, Nussbaum, 2000). In his study of life crises in Bangladesh, Davis (2005) found that ill health was the most important factor causing crises in households, and that an average of 18 percent of household income was spent on health-related costs. Ill health therefore is a major factor in reproducing patterns of poverty

²⁰ To make the table easier to read, percentages have been rounded up or down so may not add up exactly to 100%.

and impoverishment. Only two households interviewed for RANQ reported having 'more than adequate' health provision. Of those who considered their health care to be not adequate, only 8 percent claimed to be very happy. Similarly, only 16 percent of those with 'just adequate health care' claimed to be 'fairly happy'. The RANQ findings report a positive relationship between health care provision and happiness.

Households who describe their housing facilities as 'more than adequate' are much happier than households who have 'just adequate' or inadequate housing (41 percent are 'very happy' compared to an average of 13 percent). Conversely 27 percent of households who reported inadequate housing also described themselves as 'not too happy'. The RANQ reports in detail on a range of indicators of housing quality such as type of house, roof, toilet, and the presence of electricity. For all indicators except the presence of electricity, those reporting more than adequate provision also seem to enjoy higher levels of happiness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, food shortage has a negative effect on happiness, and food sufficiency has a positive one. Thus 35 percent of households in RANQ with a shortage of at least one food item (e.g. vegetable proteins) report themselves as 'not too happy', compared to an average of 19 percent. Also, 44 percent of those households claiming to have an inadequate provision of food describe themselves as unhappy. If the findings on food shortage provided few surprises, the same cannot be said of clothing. While having adequate clothing might seem like a less 'basic need' than having adequate food, RANQ respondents valued them equally. Thus 43 percent of households reporting an inadequate provision of clothing were 'not too happy' compared to an average of 20 percent. The fact that we find an equally positive relationship between inadequacy of food and inadequacy of clothing is interesting. One way of explaining this builds on Adam Smith's characterisation of deprivation as that which separates one from society. Thus objective poverty only impacts on happiness when it takes away people's ability to socialise without embarrassment (Kenny, 2005). Examples of this would be the inability to afford shoes in 18th century England, or by extension, adequate clothing in 21st century Bangladesh. Below we return more specifically to the overall significance of 'socialising' for wellbeing.

The fact that there are positive relationships between the satisfaction of selected basic needs and happiness helps explain the importance of another variable, i.e. location. The WeD Research Programme in

Bangladesh began with a premise that one of the most obvious changes to occur in the country during the past 20 years has been the gradual rise and proliferation of urban centers. The capital city (Dhaka) epitomises this process not only with its geographical expansion but also the radical changes that have occurred to its demography. This transformation has led to a greater sense of connectedness and integration in the country; which has resulted in complex patterns of benefits and disadvantage. To capture this dynamic WeD decided to use distance as a proxy and chose research locations that offered different degrees of connectedness to Dhaka. First, two districts were chosen to carry out the research. One of the districts (Dinajpur) is relatively distant from Dhaka while the other (Manikganj) is relatively close. In each district, two urban sites were then chosen (Baniknagar²¹ in Dinajpur and Aloknapur in Manikganj). Second, in each district two rural sites were then chosen with one site being relatively further from the urban site than the other. If we look at the RANQ data by site, we find that both urban sites (i.e. Baniknagar and Aloknapur) have higher percentages of respondents in the 'very happy' category and lower percentages in the 'not too happy' category. This suggests that households living in urban areas are generally happier than those in the rural areas. If we then examine all three sites of Dinajpur (ie. Baniknagar, Shantipur and Telkupa) 26 percent of respondents claimed to be 'not too happy'. In contrast, only 13 percent reported the same in the three sites of Manikganj, which is on the outskirts of Dhaka and enjoys relatively good communication with the capital city. One of the most obvious explanations behind the finding that people with greater proximity to Dhaka and other urban sites are generally happier is that these locations tend to provide more opportunities and services (for example more hospitals, schools, shops, entertainment centres and so forth) that are considered central to the satisfaction of core needs.

²¹ The names of all sites surveyed as part of the research have been anonymised.

Table 4: Happiness by location from RANQ

	Very happy	Fairly happy	Not too happy
Manikganj, n=750			
Aloknagar, n=250	15.2	78.8	6.0
Bichitropur, n=250	8.8	70.4	20.8
Achingaon, n=250	13.2	74.8	12.0
Dinajpur, n=750			
Baniknagar, n=250	25.2	59.2	15.6
Shantipur, n=250	7.2	58.8	34.0
Telkupigaon, n=250	6.0	66.0	28.0
All Sites, n=1,500	12.6	68.0	19.4

Source: RANQ, Bangladesh

5. CONSTRUCTION OF HAPPINESS

In this section of the paper we turn our attention to the main sources of happiness described by the participants in the QoL research. This involved a more inductive approach to identifying areas that people considered important to the construction of their happiness, as well as differences in the way people valued these areas. In some cases, the qualitative findings from the quality of life research are consistent with quantitative findings from the RANQ. However, they also offer important new insights, especially around the significance of relationships in the construction of wellbeing (an area that could not be successfully measured in the RANQ).

5.1 Income and happiness

As might be expected, perceiving one's socio-economic status as equal to or better than others in the community was also a significant source of happiness for the participants of the QoL study. The participants focused particularly on income, which not only enabled them to fulfill personal basic

needs but also those of their families. Having a good socio-economic status therefore demonstrated personal capability (what a person is able to do or be), as well as household strength, often indicated in the association made between having income and a household's reputation. Being able to look after one's household is an important source of good reputation (sunam).

Older men associated regular incomes with leading comfortable lives, meeting their own needs and those of their family, and providing for their children. This was considered a life achievement in itself and a source of great satisfaction ("I am doing very good business, and am taking care of all of my children perfectly"; "[I am] skilled in work. My family is maintained by this business. With what I earn I can maintain the family expenditure, within these earnings my children are satisfied"). Younger men also explained that sufficient incomes enabled them to meet their family's needs, but experienced this more as an indication of their personal success, capability, and independence. For example, one respondent asserted that "with what I am earning I can fulfill my family's needs" (the interviewer also recorded that "his parents did not leave him any wealth, he is earning and running his family solely through his own efforts"), and another respondent stated that "[I] have my own house in this city... and shop in the central point of the city"

Younger men also made strong links between good health and happiness but the relation between the two rests clearly on the contribution health makes to earning capacity ("I can work... my health is good and I can earn much money, and spend that money without thinking").

Older women linked the economic success of their households and their sons to their own security²² and also saw it as confirmation that they had brought their sons up well. They also valued good health in a similar way to young men, because it enabled them to carry out their daily activities and be less dependent on their children. Younger women also related sufficient household income to their happiness, but this usually entailed some reference to their husbands. Household income depended therefore on having good husbands who were able, hard working, and responsive to the needs of their families ("[the respondent's] husband does not look at other

²² As there is usually a substantial age difference between wives and their husbands, and remarriage for widows is not common, women are reliant on their children for support in later life. Their relationship with sons is particularly important, as sons are expected to offer their parents sustained financial support and ultimately a home. Daughters, on the other hand, tend to move away from their natal home at marriage and although they remain attached to their natal home, they must also assume responsibility for the care of their elderly in-laws.

women, earns a halal income²³, and provides and enables them to meet the needs of their children”). A few young women mentioned health as it enabled them to better fulfill their household duties.

5.2 Relationships and happiness

One of the key findings of the QoL research was the significance of people’s networks of relationships in the construction of their happiness. In the context of Bangladesh, people are essentially constituted through interpersonal, intergenerational, and inter-group relationships (White, 1992, Devine, 2005). These relationships are always malleable, and in the process of negotiating the terms of any relationship people acquire both a sense of identity (often a common identity) and a sense of position within the relationship. Thus if we take the case of the family, we can see that it gives husbands and wives a shared identity, but it also identifies specific roles and responsibilities for each within the relationship.

5.2.1. Households and happiness

From the QoL research it is evident that there coexists elements of emotion and pragmatism in the way people described the value of their relationships with family members and spouses. While these relationships were intrinsically important sources of happiness for all groups, they were also instrumentally valuable for securing tangible or material benefits²⁴, and intangible or symbolic goods such as respect, influence and authority. Older men strongly valued close and harmonious relationships with family members to the extent that they even enabled them to ignore physical hardship (the interviewer of one older male respondent recorded that, even though “at times he doesn’t get enough to eat, still he is happy as he has a good relationship with the rest of his family”). Good relationships among their family members also meant that their home lives were peaceful, which was both a source of happiness in itself and an indicator of their influence and leadership (“We have consensus, that’s why we are happy.... everybody obeys what I say”). Finally their status as household head was enhanced when married sons continued to live in the joint household, which

²³ ‘Halal’ refers here to an income secured in a way that is considered legitimate.

²⁴ For example, according to Rojas’s study in Mexico (2006c), household income was a better proxy for wellbeing than personal income or expenditure, suggesting that in Mexico at least there are material benefits to living with your family.

also had implications for how the household was regarded in the community.

Younger men gave experiential reasons for valuing close relationships with their family members (“living with my entire family I feel happy”) and a peaceful home life (“at home there is no quarrel”). They were also more aware of the material benefits of cooperation and mutual assistance, which are often facilitated by living in a joint household (“We can better ourselves, as in time of crisis we can get financial support”). Crucially however young men were aware that the possibility of securing material benefits in this way depended on their wives developing a good relationship with the rest of their family. Parents in general were considered an important source of advice (“[I] have good parents, they always provide me with good advice”) and material and emotional support (“my parents love me very much ... my parents provide [me with] money whenever I need”); and this was reciprocated with love and gratitude (“when I see [my parents] I feel happiness”; “I can look after my parents”). The significance of advice is also evident in the way young men valued their friendships. While friendship is valued because it enables recreation and comradeship, this is overshadowed by the fact that friends are a valuable source of information and advice.

The same mix of sentiment and pragmatism occurs in women’s descriptions of their family relationships. For example, older women valued being treated affectionately by sons and daughter-in-laws as much as receiving material support (“[the respondent’s] sons take good care of her... provide her with shelter, food and clothing... when she is unwell they rush around trying to make her well”; “[the respondent’s] daughter-in-laws are good and take good care of her”). Living with their sons also allowed older women to enjoy the companionship and assistance of their grandchildren, which seemed to evoke happy memories from their own childhood. A few older women recalled how their parents’ home was a place of love and security (one respondent told the interviewer that her “father’s home was comfortable” and that her parents “brought her up with much affection”) and these childhood experiences served as a benchmark against which they assessed the quality of their later life.

Younger women focused instead on the quality of their personal relationship with members of their husband’s family, primarily their husband’s mother,

sisters, and sister-in-laws.²⁵ They expressed satisfaction at pleasing their parents-in-laws (“it feels good to see [the elders] happy”), not only because their reputation as good wives or daughter-in-laws was based on the quality of these relationships, but also because parents-in-law were often regarded as surrogate parents who provided warmth and affection equivalent to that experienced in their natal home (“they treat me as their child... they are like my parents”). Young women felt proud when they were respected by their marital families, especially when they were included in decision-making. For example, one young woman told the interviewer that ‘every member of her family, her mother-in-law, brothers and sisters in law respect her very much...they depend upon her for many decisions and love her’. Like young men they also acknowledged the economic and material benefits of living in a joint family.

5.2.2 Spouses and happiness

For younger women the most crucial relationship was with their husband. A good husband provides for his wife’s and their family’s needs, and is also respectful and acknowledges her competence (“ [Her husband] inspires [the respondent] and appreciates all the work that she does. This makes her feel good and brings happiness”). Participation and consultation in decision-making was singled out as an important indicator of a happy marriage (“[the respondent] has a good relationship with her husband, her husband takes care of her and discusses with her before taking any decision”). Younger women also talked romantically about their intimacy with their husbands (“[the respondent’s] husband loves her very much”; “[the respondent’s] husband is attentive toward her, and comes close”). For older women however it was more important to have a husband who was alive and physically able, as even the presence of a ‘bad’ husband increased their physical and material security. This is consistent with earlier findings stating that older women associated the economic success of their household with their own personal security. In Bangladesh women are particularly exposed to all kinds of risk as they grow old. They are more dependent on their families for survival than older men, while widows and women without families are among the most vulnerable groups in Bangladesh (RIC et al, 2000). For older women, having a good relationship with their husbands

²⁵ Marriage in Bangladesh is predominantly patrilocal. New brides therefore have to make a double adjustment in their lives: to their new husbands, often strangers at the time of marriage, and to their husband’s household. This period of adjustment is a particular time of stress that impinges very directly on women’s ability to achieve happiness in life (Ewing 1991).

simply meant being treated well (“[the respondent’s] husband is good ...does not beat her, quarrel or drink”). However older women also happily recalled their early married life when their husbands were more attentive, just as they remembered with fondness the security of their natal home. We can actually identify three separable aspects to women’s relationships with their husbands, which might affect their happiness: their intimate relationship (personal), the relationship between their two families (familial), and the cultural framework of expectations which supports their marriage (societal) and helps determine their degree of happiness and security.

The quality of the relationship with their wives was also important to older and younger men. Older men spoke of the importance of mutual understanding (“[I] have a good wife... [In my household] both husband and wife are of similar mentality”) and care (“My wife is taking care of me perfectly”), and also happily recalled their early married life. Younger men (like younger women) focused much more on the romantic aspects of their relationships (“[the respondent] and his wife had a love marriage²⁶”, “[the respondent] loves her very much and she loves him”), but also mentioned their wives’ good qualities and talents as a housewife or partner (“[the respondent’s] wife is well behaved, loves him very much and does not make demands which are beyond his ability”).

5.2.3 Children and Happiness

Children are a crucial source of happiness for a number of reasons. First becoming a father or mother is a hugely significant part of life in Bangladesh. Second being a ‘good’ parent by ensuring that children have a good upbringing and are successful in life is fundamental to the reputation of individual parents and the household as a whole. This latter aspect emerged frequently in QoL interviews (‘I have brought up my children as good people... everybody tells me that my sons are good, this gives me happiness’). In part this reflects the permeability of the relationship between parents and children: a father’s honour and reputation depend on the actions of his children, and vice versa. This dynamic is ever present, even when the child becomes an adult.

²⁶ A ‘love marriage’ is a phrase used to describe a marriage in which husband and wife have fallen in love before marriage. This is distinct from the more common ‘arranged marriages’ in which the families of the spouses take a more active role in setting up the marriage, often without the spouses meeting until discussions are well advanced.

Education is the factor that has most influence on people's sense of happiness in relation to their children, and this is confirmed by the RANQ data. 43 percent of RANQ respondents who claim to be 'very happy' also reported that their children's education is 'more than adequate'. All parents (irrespective of age and gender) prioritised the education of their children and took great pride in fulfilling their duty in this regard. However the reasons for this changed when referring to sons and daughters. Thus education was presented as an important means to ensure sons became established in life and secured good jobs, and daughters would be offered good marriage arrangements. For both older men and women (but more so the latter), fulfilling their duties to their children was an important way of securing some form of security in later life²⁷ ("When I gave birth to a son I was very happy, I thought this son will care for me in my last days"). Both older men and women were happy to be receiving care from sons ("children look after me – I don't have any need for food and clothing" (older man); "[the respondent's] sons take good care of her, give her shelter, food and clothing" (older woman) as this testified to their good parenting skills.

Younger men and women similarly mentioned the importance of having well behaved, caring children ("My children are studying, their future will be good ...and they are obedient"), being able to provide for them in childhood, and seeing them happy and successful in their future lives ("Even if [the respondent] is having a hard time, she is happy if she knows her [married] daughter is happy"). Young women also expected their children to be a source of comfort and security in later life, though this was mentioned less frequently than it was by older women. For example, households who are living well have both girls and boys because "...girls will understand the mother's worries and pains better than a boy. On the other hand a boy can ask his wife to take care of his parents and let them rest by taking care of the household work". Young men made fewer references to their children, but these included feeling pride and satisfaction in having well-behaved children, or simply on "...hearing his son utter 'baba' [father]".

5.2.4 Community relations and happiness

With the exception of older women, all groups made connections between their happiness and a desire to be respected and/or influential beyond the immediate confines of the family relationship. Older men valued the ability to participate in and influence the affairs of the community ("Participation in

²⁷ See Wood's analysis of "dependent forms of security", where poor people use strategies that are embedded in social relationships to increase the 'predictability' of their lives (2006).

social activities and recognition from society [are cause for happiness]... the villagers call upon me when they face any problem... they abide by any decision I suggest"). Older men in particular were also keen to draw attention to their participation in initiatives that increased the public good, for example, building schools and other cultural institutions. This is a source of pride and good reputation (sunam). Younger men also valued having good relationships and reputation, but this was more for their material benefits ("Good relationships with the wholesalers means that they give us good prices and advise us when we purchase from them. They allow us to take credit, which means my business prospers"). Younger women were much more concerned that their households were respected with the community and not gossiped about ("People don't say bad things about [the respondent's] household, they are respected by others"). However, they also valued being respected for their achievements outside the family ("The [school] children [the respondent] teaches admire her... and respect and obey her"), including assisting those in need ("If anyone, especially women are facing problems such as domestic violence, I can help with advice... and when I do I feel happy").

The link between positive relationships and happiness often rests on some notion of good reputation or status. The QoL data offers some insights into what contributes to good reputation and respect. For example, old men and younger women both stressed the significance of the household head's level of education as a source of respect. Older men spoke of past achievements in their education, profession, and their religious and ethical practice, which made them feel they were respected in the community. Being able to help others in need ("when people face problems... I do whatever is possible"), behaving morally ("I don't like lies and never tolerate that, I always give good advice, I oppose bad actions"; "I did not neglect my duties during my service (employment). I did not take bribe."), and leading a good religious life ("...if someone does not practice religion he faces obstacles, and may lose his wealth") were also highlighted by older men.

As mentioned earlier, older women seem to give less importance to the relation between their happiness and good relationships within the community. However they described the reassurance and comfort they derived from religious practice ('I have lead my life according to Islam - this gives me peace in my mind'; '...in times of trouble she prays, it helps her remain calm and is a source of mental strength'). Religious practice seemed to be less relevant for younger women whose personal moral character, which is always vulnerable to external scrutiny, was their main source of

satisfaction. Younger men also derived satisfaction from their moral integrity (“Honesty... I can judge what is good and bad... this prevents me from being corrupted”), but this was often in the context of their reputation and relationships within the community (“People gain a good impression of me... I can mix with others”).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the high levels of happiness found in Bangladesh may seem counter-intuitive, given the number of people in the country who have to struggle everyday simply to survive, other research suggests that the relationship between national wealth and subjective wellbeing or happiness is weak, even in poor countries (e.g. Schyn, 2003). While others have argued that income is a better predictor of subjective wellbeing in poor countries than rich ones (Veenhoven, 1991, Oishi et al, 1999), there is ample evidence suggesting that other sources of wellbeing are almost equally important (e.g. Diener and Diener, 1995:96). For example, Fuentes and Rojas’s study in two Mexican cities (2001), which was later extended to the five central states of Mexico, found that the economically non-poor were only 6 percent more satisfied with their lives as a whole. In this context satisfaction with education was more influential than satisfaction with income because its effect spread across all seven ‘domains of life’, while satisfaction with income only affected the economic and job domains (Rojas 2006a).

Our findings from Bangladesh confirm the view that other factors besides income are important contributors to wellbeing. Participants in the QoL research clearly value their family and community relationships, their competences and achievements, the knowledge that they have done all they can to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities in life, and that they have acquired a level of social respect and recognition. Of these, it is the centrality of various types of relationships that emerges strongly from our findings. This is consistent with other studies internationally, which suggest that relationships are highly correlated with subjective wellbeing (Myers, 1999, Diener and Seligman, 2002). This may be because ‘relatedness’ is a ‘fundamental psychological need’ and central to eudaimonic as well as hedonic wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2001). In fact, in the context of

Bangladesh relatedness may be both more important than autonomy, and the main means through which autonomy is realized (Devine et al, 2006).

Our analysis confirms that relationships have intrinsic and experiential value in that people enjoy relating to others and this fulfils a need for affiliation, identity, and recreation (Nussbaum, 2000). However relationships also have instrumental value and this can move causally in both directions. Thus on the one hand, good relationships are considered important because they potentially lead to material benefits and even higher incomes (“Good relationships with the wholesalers means that they give us good prices and advise us when we purchase from them”). On the other hand, material benefits and higher incomes are seen to strengthen relationships (“With what I am earning I can fulfil my family’s needs”).

Given the importance of relationships to people’s subjective wellbeing, should we conclude that the development industry’s historical focus on increasing their income has been misplaced? Not entirely. The data presented here demonstrates that men and women of all ages value having a secure personal or household income, both as a prophylactic for the stress caused by financial worries, and as the basis for a range of activities or ‘ends’ which contribute to their happiness. For young men in particular a good income is an important goal. However, while the instrumental value of income is not in doubt, the extent to which in itself it can make people happy is less obvious. Quite often income is seen as valuable only in so far as it enables people to succeed in areas of their life they consider important (for example, sustaining meaningful personal relationships), or to live according to their ideas about what will make them happy. This perspective is encapsulated in Rojas’s ‘conceptual referent theory’ of happiness, which proposes that people’s judgments of life satisfaction or happiness are dependent on their ‘conceptual referent for a happy life’, or what they understand by ‘being well’ (2005, 2006b)²⁸.

²⁸ The Conceptual Referent Theory is supported by the results of a large survey in Mexico that used simple summary statements (for example, “happiness is accepting things as they are”) to test whether there was a relationship between people’s satisfaction with life and their endorsement of one of eight different conceptual referents (stoicism, virtue, enjoyment, carpe diem, satisfaction, utopian, tranquility, and fulfillment). Rojas used multilogit techniques to show that the probability of choosing a particular conceptual referent was influenced by people’s socio-economic and demographic situation, and concluded that while no referent could be considered as superior in producing happiness, some were clearly inferior (for example, utopian and carpe diem).

If it is the case that rather than seek relationships to improve their income, people seek income to improve their relationships, and secondly, that it is the relationships rather than the income that make people happy, then perhaps international development practice needs rethinking. While viewing relationships mostly as a 'social resource' captures some of their importance to life in Bangladesh, it fails to capture the meaning, pleasure, and strength people derive from their interactions and connections with others. If maintaining good relationships is an important goal for individuals, then perhaps relationships, and the issues of self esteem and "intra-psychic autonomy"²⁹ that often lie behind them, should become a development goal as well. At a minimum this would mean that development interventions would be scrutinised for their potential effects on community and household relationships and consequently on the happiness of members of those communities and households. The effects of interventions on relationships is an area that is not currently addressed, possibly due the difficulty of measuring changes in the quality of people's relationships. However, there is some evidence that participation in development projects can create anxiety and tension in people's core relationships, which implies a reduction in their subjective wellbeing. For example, Goetz and Gupta's (1996) study of micro-credit interventions with women in Bangladesh observed an increase in domestic violence against some of the female borrowers. Also, Devine and Ueda (2006), report that some Bangladeshi women who took on paid work outside of the home experienced emotional and physical pressures from husbands, families, and community, despite the fact that their earnings contributed significantly to household incomes. These examples remind us that relationships are a key locus of power and therefore it is important not to naively romanticise the way we think about poor people's relationships (see, for example, Geof Wood's description of the 'Faustian bargain' where "the pursuit of immediately needed security places [poor people] in relationships and structures which then displace the longer term prospects of a sustained improvement in their livelihoods" [2003:455]). Although our findings highlight the centrality of relationships for wellbeing, we need to remind ourselves that many of the relationships that poor people use to secure their livelihood are hierarchical, exploitative, and sometimes violent. Relationships are important precisely because they are often the immediate cause of people's unhappiness and poverty. It is this

²⁹ Western ego psychologists define intrapsychic autonomy as the ability to maintain enduring mental representations of sources of self-esteem and comfort, which enable flexible adaptation to new environments. Its value in a developing country context is affirmed by Ewing, a psychological anthropologist working in Pakistan, who identifies it as a key factor in the successful integration of a new bride into her husband's household (1991).

ambiguity that makes increasing the profile of relationships in development intervention such a difficult and yet urgent task.

For most people in Bangladesh the critical issue they face is one of poverty and survival, and this more than anything else contributes to their experience of subjective wellbeing. Our findings highlight the centrality of relationships to people's subjective wellbeing, and offer an exciting avenue for future research into the everyday dynamics of dealing with poverty. Relationships determine individuals' values, choices, actions, and indeed the construction of self. More than any other factor, they determine what people are able to do or be, and what they actually achieve or become (what Sen, the prize-winning economist, calls capabilities and functionings [1985]). They may even influence people's "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004 in Devine et al, 2006). These intrinsic and instrumental links between relationships and happiness, we would argue, go some way to explaining the role of social and cultural context in the construction of people's happiness in Bangladesh.

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