# Representation of Happiness in Russian and American Culture (student youth case)

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## Abstract

The features of happiness' state representation in Russian and American culture are analyzed on the student sample from the position of qualitative methodology. Participants in the study were Russian (n=76) and American (n=50) students. During the interview, students were asked to describe the state they experienced happiness. Further processing of interview scripts was carried out using content analysis. To determine differences in the frequency of accessing the content analysis categories, the Fisher φ-angle transform criterion was used. Two strategies were identified in the verbal representation of happiness' state: subject-oriented and object-oriented. The culture differences in referring to different categories manifested in the following: American respondents defined happiness as a state of involvement in life events; reflecting the peculiarities of relations with family, with the opposite sex; enthusiasm for some business. The state is described in procedural characteristics. The representation of happiness' state by Russian students was reliably more often connected with categories that describe the duration; variability of the happiness' state; a reflection of its atypical in terms of representation in the subject experience.

# Introduction

Modern psychology could be characterized by an ever-increasing interest in studying the level of happiness, subjective well-being, which can be explained by the shift from the "disease psychology paradigm" to "health psychology paradigm" [Myers, 1999]. American tradition, adopted as the basis of positive psychology, is widely spread and developed in other cultures, in particular, in Russian psychology [Argyle, 2003; Seligman, 2000; Seligman, 2009; Bonivell, 2009]. Psychological research implemented in line with this approach reveals significant differences in the average indicators of happiness and life satisfaction among representatives of various countries that are similar in their economic and political structure [Ciarrochi, Parker, Kashdan, 2015; Christopher, 1999; Giovanni, 2004]. It can be assumed that there are different ways of thinking formed by the culture that mediate differences in understanding of what the concept of happiness is.

The problem aspect in the described situation is the question of the studies' validity that compare the levels of happiness and subjective well-being among representatives of different countries, since the understanding and significance of these concepts may vary significantly depending on cultural background. M. Argyle also points out the problematic nature of this approach, noting the significance of happiness category content researches in various cultures. "This topic should be a priority," notes the author [Argyle, 2003].

Russian methodologists A.L. Zhuravlev, A.V. Yurevich note that the attention of modern researchers is drawn not so much to the study of the psychological content of happiness, as to identifying the factors that determine happiness and subjective well-being. In this approach, the boundaries between the structural elements of happiness and its prerequisites, factors influencing it are blurred, which creates obstacles to the delineation of this concept and analysis of its internal structure [Zhuravlev, Yurevich, 2014, p. 719]. The category of happiness in modern psychological literature is often synonymous with categories of subjective well-being and life satisfaction. However, such an actual identification leads to the fact that the level characteristics of general life satisfaction and the determinants of happiness are studied, while the description of happiness itself as a state experienced in time is leveled.

Factors that determine the characteristics of subjective well-being and happiness among residents of different countries were considered by different authors. It was shown that for individualistic cultures, significant factors are: the level of self-esteem [Diener, 1985]; the predominance of a positive emotional state; satisfaction with the degree of freedom [Oishi, Diener, Lucas, Suh, 1999]. Among the factors that determine the level of happiness and subjective well-being in collectivist cultures, there are: the degree of satisfaction with relationships with family and friends; degree of autonomy (in the family, school, profession) [Ryan, Deci, 2001]. Studies by V.Chirkov and R.M. Ryan showed that the low perceived level of autonomy from parents and teachers among students in Russia and the United States is associated with a lower level of subjective well-being [Chirkov, Ryan, 2001].

A review of these studies suggests a predominance of a sociological approach in searching for determinants of happiness' state. It is also important to note that the categories "happiness" and "subjective well-being" are presented as equivalent [Ryff, 1996]. Meanwhile, an appeal to the study of the happiness phenomenology from the position of representing the happiness' state in Russian and American culture seems to be relatively new. In the framework of current study, happiness is viewed as a "temporary" state of a person, in contrast to a "stable" state, which in its content appears as an equivalent of the concept of "life satisfaction". This approach allows us to determine the subjective characteristics that reflect the features of experiencing the happiness' state in Russian and American

culture, that determines the novelty of the present study [Prokhorov, 2014].

Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of the happiness' state representation in Russian and American cultures (based on student sample). This article analyzes the verbal components of representation. The main hypothesis of the study was the assumption that in verbal representation of the state of happiness, it is possible to distinguish general and specific tendencies in connection with cultural belonging.

## Materials and Methods

An empirical study was organized and conducted in 2015-2017 in order to study the happiness' state representation in Russian and American culture. The study involved 76 Russian students from Perm State National Research University (46 female, 30 males; average age – 20,3 years) and 50 American students from Lyndon State College (Vermont, USA) and Delta State University (Mississippi, USA) (22 female, 28 males, average age – 20,4 years).

A non-structured interview was used as the main feature of data collection. Respondents were asked to recall the situation when they felt happy and talk about it. Further recordings were analyzed. Respondents were offered the following instructions:

*"Remember please the moment from your life when you felt happy. Tell us why you felt happy, what emotions did you experience, what feelings did you have?" The study received 126 videotapes, representing a free narration about events related to experiencing a state of happiness. A script was compiled for each video interview (interviews in English language were translated into Russian).*

Script analysis of video interviews was carried out using the content analysis procedure. The unit of context is a separate self-report, the representation of happiness' state. The elements of the content made by the respondent were analyzed. The content unit can be formulated in the form of a sentence, statement or phrase. The frequency of mentioning categories in the text is recorded thematically (segmental calculation). If the text contains several sentences belonging to the same category, it should be considered as one mentioning of the category.

The statement of the subject, expressing a complete thought or feeling is an empirical indicator of categories. It can include from one word to several sentences. In the selection of statements, we base on the fact that, firstly, it always affirms or denies something, secondly, the same statements expressed by various sentences can be attributed to the same category.

To identify significant differences and conduct a comparative analysis of the frequency of verbal categories occurrence in the representation of happiness' state among Russian and American respondents, the Fisher φ-angle transform criterion was used. The φ-angular Fisher criterion transform is designed to compare two samples according to the frequency of the effect occurrence. The criterion assesses the significance of differences between the percentages of the two samples in which the effect is registered.

## Results

The result of the first stage of the study was the development of content analysis matrix categories, reflecting various positions in the representation of happiness' state by American and Russian respondents. It was shown that the process of perception and subsequent representation of one's own emotional states goes through two stages: first, the immediate experience of emotional experience; secondly, the structuring of existing experience through verbalization. In the structuring and perception of emotional experience, two strategies can be distinguished: an internal and external observer. In this

context, we have identified the subject and object strategies in the verbal representation of happiness' state (Table 1). Under subjective strategy, the state of happiness is represented through personal experience, sensations — individual and personal characteristics. With object strategy, situational and external expressive characteristics become an emphasis in the verbalization of personal experience of happiness' state.

**Table 1 – Strategies of happiness' state representation in Russian and American culture**

| Representation strategy | Description Methods | Content analysis categories fixed |
|---|---|---|
| Object strategy | Representation of the expressive characteristics of the happiness' state | Representation of happiness through facial expression; through sound and speech means of expression; representation of the behavioral characteristics of happiness' state; representation of happiness through vegetative characteristics |
| | Representation happiness' state in connection with the external characteristics of objects | Description of the relationship to the described events and situations; description of the state through the sensations of a certain modality arising on an external stimulus; through the phenomena of nature, objects of the surrounding world, through metaphorical images |
| Subject strategy | Representation of external empirical characteristics and properties of happiness' state | Description of the dynamic characteristics of the state of happiness (duration, variability); of ambivalent characteristics in experiencing a state of happiness; of the intensity level and severity of happiness' state; description of the causes; description of the typical appearance of the state, representation in the subject experience |
| | Representation of the characteristics of happiness experiencing | Description of happiness' state through a general emotional tone, as well as internal sensations; description of the localization of sensations in any organ; description of the state experience in connection with changes in other mental processes; awareness of emotions as experiencing attitudes to needs |

The developed categorical content analysis grid was subjected to expert evaluation in order to ascertain the validity of the proposed criteria. The experts were invited to list of semantic units distributed in categories and to express the degree of agreement or disagreement with the legitimacy of their correlation. The average percentage of experts' total overlap was 95.7%, which can be interpreted as high consistency with minor exceptions.

In accordance with the hypothesis, as a result, general trends and specific ways of representing the state of happiness for Russian and American cultures were identified. Among the invariant characteristics of the verbal representation of happiness' state are the categories "description of the state of happiness through a general emotional background, internal sensations"; "description of attitude to events and situations"; "description of the state of happiness through metaphorical images". Interpreting the results, we can assume that in the representation of happiness' state, both Russian and American respondents tend to refer to categories reflecting the nature of subjective emotional experiences, internal sensations, reflecting the reaction to any objects and phenomena. The structure of verbal representation in both cultures also includes a category reflecting the nature of the subject's attitude to events or situations, defined as the source of happiness. An invariant feature is the frequent reference to metaphorical images, expressions that emphasize the "imagery" of the category "happiness" itself.

The variability in verbal representation of happiness' state is determined by the following differences. American respondents reliably more often turn to categories describing expressive characteristics of happiness: "representation of happiness' state through mimic means" ($\varphi * emp =$ 4.133; p≤0.01); "representation of happiness' state through speech and sound means" ($\varphi * emp = 3.543$; $p \leq 0.01$). In describing the causes of experiencing happiness, American representatives more often refer to the following categories: "family relations" ($\varphi * emp = 1, 705$; p≤0.05); "relationship with the opposite sex" ($\varphi * emp = 1, 685$; p≤0.05); "dedication for favorite business" ($\varphi * emp = 2,270$; $p \leq 0.05$).

The results show that American respondents are more likely to describe the state of happiness through involvement in life events, which may reflect the nature of relationships with the family, with the opposite sex, or involvement in any kind of interest. Happiness in the representation of American respondents appears as a condition due to procedural characteristics.

A variation feature that manifested in the American sample is the description of the external expressive characteristics of the happiness' state expression – the description of smiles, laughter, phrases accompanying this state.

The variable component of the verbal representation of happiness' state in Russian culture is represented by the following categories: "a description of the dynamic characteristics of happiness (duration, variability)" ($\varphi * emp = 2.487$; p≤0.01); "family event" ($\varphi * emp = 1,718$; $p \leq 0.05$); "journey" ($\varphi * emp = 3.141$; $p \leq 0.01$); "personal achievement" ($\varphi * emp = 1,749$; $p \leq 0.05$); "description of the typical appearance of the state of happiness" ($\varphi * emp = 1.653$; $p \leq 0.05$); "description of the experience of happiness due to changes in other mental processes" ($\varphi * emp = 2,198$; $p \leq 0.05$); "awareness of emotions as an experience of attitude to needs" ($\varphi * emp = 3,910$; $p \leq 0.01$); "description of happiness' state through the sensations of a certain modality" ($\varphi * emp = 3,636$; $p \leq 0.05$).

In other words, for Russian respondents it is more common to describe the state of happiness in the context of referring to the dynamism and variability of happiness' state, its atypical in terms of representation in subject experience. On the basis of the obtained results, it can be assumed that description from the standpoint of inner experiences is typical for Russian culture, while this description is developed and affects changes in the cognitive sphere, reflects the phenomena of the motivational sphere - desire, expectation.

Unlike American respondents, Russian students, describing the causes of a state of happiness, reliably more often reflect events, results, new experiences - characteristics that reflect the result, the completeness of the action. For Russian culture is peculiar orientation at a certain fixed point in time.

## Discussion

As it was previously said the aim of this study was to identify the characteristics of the happiness' state representation in Russian and American cultures (based on student sample). Interpreting the results, we can assume that there is a general trend in the representation of happiness' state at verbal level that is connected with regularity in addressing strategies for describing the state. Thus, the prevailing strategy is the position of subject description. From this descriptive point respondents more often pay attention to the causes of the emotional state, characteristics of internal experiences that accompany this state. Such result correlates with the theoretical propositions that the main characteristic of the mental state image is focusing on internal experiences. From the inner experiences of the state position, the attention of the subject shifts to the description of attitudes towards events and situations, their expression through metaphorical images. This indicates an appeal to the object strategy, an

external observer, in which the state is reflected in connection with the objects of the external world.

The variability at verbal representation level of happiness' state is characterized by the different content of these strategies.

From the American respondents' point of view, happiness is defined as a state of involvement in life events; reflecting the peculiarities of relations with the family, with the opposite sex; dedication for any business. Happiness in the representation of American respondents appears as a condition due to procedural characteristics. A variable feature that manifested in the American sample is the description of the external expressive characteristics of happiness' state – the description of smiles, laughter, phrases that accompany this state, referring to categories of physical warmth. Based on the obtained results it can be concluded that American respondents are more likely to appeal to the object description of the external expressive characteristics in representation of happiness. The data obtained also correlate with the theories of the stream by M.Chikesentmihayi [Chikesentmihayi, 2013] and the subjective well-being of M.Seligman [Seligman, 2000], M. Argyle [Argyle, 2003], where happiness is characterized by being included in a certain process, the living state.

The variability at verbal level of representation among Russian students manifests in referring to the categories describing the duration and variability of happiness' state, a reflection of its atypical in terms of representation in the experience of the subject. Russian respondents more often turn to the description of happiness from the position of internal experiences, based on reflection, while this description is developed and affects changes in the cognitive sphere, reflects the phenomena of the motivational sphere – desire, expectation. That also correspond with similar results obtained by I.A. Dzhidaryan, N.V. Vinichuk/

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# Представление о счастье в русской и американской культуре (на примере студенческой молодежи)

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**Аннотация**

Особенности представительства счастья в русской и американской культуре анализируются на основании оценки выборки студентов с позиции качественной

методологии. Участниками исследования были русские (n = 76) и американские (n = 50) студенты. Во время интервью студентов попросили описать состояние, в котором они испытывали счастье. Дальнейшая обработка сценариев интервью проводилась с использованием контент-анализа. Для определения различий в частоте доступа к категориям анализа контента использовался критерий преобразования Фишера φ-угла. В представлении состояния счастья были определены две стратегии: предметно-ориентированная и объектно-ориентированная. Культурные различия в обращении к различным категориям проявляются в следующем: американские респонденты определяли счастье как состояние участия в жизненных событиях; отражающие особенности отношений с семьей, с противоположным полом; энтузиазм по поводу достижения своих целей. Представление состояния счастья российскими студентами достоверно чаще было связано с категориями, которые описывают продолжительность; изменчивость состояния счастья; отражение его нетипичного с точки зрения представления в предмете опыта.

## Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

## Ключевые слова

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