



Gross national happiness

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996 words

29 May 2008

Philippine Daily Inquirer

English

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One often hears a Filipino or oneself saying, or chirping, "Mababaw lang ang kaligayahan ko." When translated literally, it almost sounds like "My joy is shallow," but what it really means is "It takes so little to make me happy." It, in fact, suggests that there is a deeper, fuller joy than what is apparently caused by that "little."

There's been much ado about the recent research findings that challenge the so-called Easterlin Paradox that has long been held—that happiness does not necessarily increase with income. That is, after a point of satiation has been achieved.

Now come the new research findings from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business showing "a clear positive link" between wealth and "subjective well-being" based on global surveys.

They show that the facts about income and happiness turn out to be much simpler than first realized. Namely: 1) rich people are happier than poor people; 2) richer countries are happier than poor countries; 3) as countries get richer, they tend to be happier.

I am tempted to exclaim, but of course! Does poverty make anyone happy? Well, it does for those who choose and embrace evangelical poverty and give up material possessions in exchange for a life of simplicity and oneness with the poor. But these special people who practice non-attachment are by no means destitute, they are simply non-attached to the trappings of wealth and power. Free, in other words. "Free-er" because they chose to be free, and therefore happier. Else why would they choose such a life?

In 1974, Richard Easterlin's research findings made him conclude: "More money does not make people happier" and "Most people could increase their happiness by devoting less time to making money, and more to non-pecuniary goals such as family and health." That became gospel truth. Money can't buy you happiness. But it sure can move you from below the poverty line to above the poverty line. And who among those who have crossed the line would say that below the line was a better and happier place for him/her? I suspect there might be some—those who did violence to themselves in order to have more for themselves and their families, those who sacrificed the non-material sources of their joy in order to cross the divide.

What price money then? What price happiness?

Sure, it's easy to say one is prone to happiness when the basic needs have been met—at least the most basic in Abraham Maslow's so-called hierarchy of needs, which includes more than just the material. And all other things being equal in people's lives—which is definitely not the case—the one with greater purchasing power is happier. Not necessarily true, the Easterlin study would show.

As Filipinos, we take pride in the fact that we are always smiling or laughing. This is supposed to be a gauge of our inner well-being. But are we happy because of, or in spite of? Are those smiles really indicative of our collective feeling of well-being as a people?

There are so many things that are not right in this country but suicide is not an epidemic here. What is it about us that makes us so resilient as a people? Our genes, the weather, our family setup, our festive culture, our music, our religious faith?

Definitely not our politicians or our government. We would be a notch happier if they were not the way they are.

A good number of those who threaten in glaring daylight to end their lives in order to get out of their misery do not really intend to call it quits, after all. Consider those despairing Filipino men who climb up the tall billboards and who send firemen running with their ladders. All they want is to air their grievances about their estranged wives, employers, oppressors.

It does not take long for them to soften. A little attention is all they want. And they get live TV coverage too, aside from promises to make things right.

But I suspect the Easterlin Paradox is more applicable to the Philippines than the new study is. Our gross domestic product (GDP) does not necessarily reflect our gross national happiness. Or to put it the other way around, our GNH is not necessarily a result of our GDP. The Easterlin Paradox might as well be the Filipino paradox.

Wharton economists **Betsey Stevenson** and Justin Wolfers now contend that the Easterlin Paradox was flawed. Maybe the Filipino race is flawed? The two economists found that the wealthiest countries in terms of GDP per capita ranked near the top in the happiness rating while the poorest were at the bottom. Also, within each country surveyed, higher incomes translated to higher ratings of life satisfaction. But Easterlin who is with the University of Southern California faculty is sticking to his guns and saying that recent surveys support his thesis.

Andrew Oswald, who calls himself a “happiness economist” connected with several prestigious universities, says the bulk of evidence is on Easterlin’s side and that “There is no extremely strong evidence that we are no happier than in the 1970s across the industrialized countries.” “Economic growth,” Oswald says, “buys only the most marginal amount of happiness for a country that is already rich. But in developing countries, there is very little dispute—economic growth make people happier.” On the other hand, the Wharton people contend that there is no evidence of a satiation point, that the rich countries that still get richer, become happier still. How much happier can they get? Would someone who has five cars become happier with six cars?

If research tools can measure happiness, can they measure true happiness? How happy are you? What would make you really happy?

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