Urban Bhutanese High School Youth Conceptions of Happiness

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to explore urban Bhutanese high school youths’ conceptions of happiness in relation to Bhutan’s dominant cultural discourse of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This research is undertaken in context of a limited understanding of youth happiness in Bhutan, particularly from the perspective of its Eastern collectivist cultural conceptions. Moreover, it is undertaken in a context in which Bhutan’s government has launched an initiative called Educating for Gross National Happiness, which aims to bring Bhutanese young people more fully into the project of balancing the country’s stated emphases on spiritual and economic growth. I argue that Bhutan is on the cusp of social change that necessitates an inquiry into its contemporary understandings of happiness. Framed within a social constructionist paradigm, the research situates the happiness-related narratives of over 16 Bhutanese youth – all of whom were interviewed individually or participated in focus groups – within a web of contexts, in which their responses were inductively thematized and analyzed in relation to the concept of GNH. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the youth's stories of happiness are explored in context of their personal and social domains. Psychological, sociological, and Bhutanese cultural theories of happiness (GNH), as well as emerging critical discourses of happiness, likewise inform the design of the inquiry. This dissertation contributes to a deepening of understandings of happiness from Bhutanese youth’s perspectives, and adds to the ongoing Bhutanese discourse on Educating for GNH. It reveals a paradoxical situation in which there exists a philosophical resonance between GNH and youths’ values and beliefs, but a tension in terms of the ways in which these resonances are put into practice institutionally, particularly in schools. The dissertation further highlights the need for continued scholarly deliberations on the discourses and practices of happiness in Bhutan, in order to translate it meaningfully into school cultural practices and structures that can enhance young people’s wellbeing.