



Happiness in early childhood

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Abstract

This research was conducted based on three considerations. Firstly, childhood is a critical developmental stage that forms the foundation for the psychological well-being and future learning development of children. Secondly, the prevalence of child and adolescent behavioral problems is increasing, assumed to be caused by unhappiness. Thirdly, studies related to happiness in early childhood in Indonesia are still lacking. Therefore, this study aims to explore the meaning, situation, and parties associated with happiness in children. Our study is exploratory using a qualitative approach. The respondents include 51 children aged 4 to 6 years. The research took place in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. We interviewed the respondents and later analyzed the data using content analysis. The latter consist of three coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The results show that, 1) the meaning of happiness refers to positive affects (55%), activities (28.9%), getting something (8.89%), positive physical conditions (4.44%), and affiliation (2.22%), 2) The situations that make children happy are activities (36.61%), learning (11.61%), entertainment (9.82%), and sports (2.62%), 3) The parties who make children happy are families (77.92%), extended families (3.90%), non-family (19.48%), God (1.30%) and toys (1.30%).

Keywords: *happiness, early childhood*

Introduction

Childhood is a critical stage of development that forms the foundation for psychological well-being and future learning development (UNICEF, 2016). One of the factors that influence a child's development is the psychological well-being, often known as happiness (Husted, 2017; Anand, 2016). Holder (2012) summarized that, based on various research, happiness is proven to affect the creativity, cognitive development, and emotional maturity of children. These factors also influence their ability to adapt to the social environment.

However, not all children would experience happiness throughout their stage of development. Some research shows that psychological ill-being or unhappiness is indicated by the emotional and behavioral problems that occur in childhood which affect the developmental process and daily life (Shoshani & Sione, 2017). Similarly, Gimpel, Holland, Gelder, Lopez, and Andreasen (in Wiguna, 2010) found that emotional and behavioral problems in children have an impact on cognitive development disorders, learning diffi-

culties caused by low concentration, poor memory, and inappropriate behaviour, causing an increase in delinquency and crime in adulthood. Furthermore, various emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents are caused by physical illness, inadequate parenting, domestic violence, poor peer relations, and poverty. Multiple types of stressors can precipitate children to perceive the environment and themselves negatively, resulting in various kinds of emotional and behavioral problems (e.g., destructive and impulsive behavior, disruption of friendships).

Researches related to happiness have long been one of the main focuses in psychology research, especially in positive psychology and other social sciences (Martin, Perles, & Canto, 2010). Happiness is a positive emotional state which is subjectively determined by each person (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Modern western psychologists, especially those who are focusing on postmaterialism, view that the meaning of happiness includes prosperity, satisfaction, joy, pleasure or state of delight, and meaningfulness of life, which ultimately plays a role in the psychological well-being and social health of the community

(Demirbatir, 2015; Ghasempour, et. al., 2013; Lyubomirsky, 2005; Diener, et. al. in Snyder & Lopez, (2007); Seligman, 2002).

Theoretically, psychological well-being itself is a small part of the concept of well-being, broadly referred to as the optimal psychological functions and experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Psychological well-being is seen as a eudaimonic approach (a human development that focuses on the idea of living a good life) or happiness based on the meaning of life goals and actualizing the potentials for prosperity, can be defined as a condition of individual well-being that functions positively. The characteristics of individuals with psychological well-being show self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others (Rabito-Alcon & Rodriguez-Molina, 2016; Ryff, 2014; Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Ryff & Singer, 2006; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Related to this definition, humans have two positive functions to improve their psychological well-being. Firstly, individuals can distinguish between positive and negative things and define happiness as a balance between the two; and second, individuals are emphasizing life satisfaction as the primary key to achieving well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Many experts agree that our pleasure, happiness, and life satisfaction reflects our psychological well-being (Rabito-Alcon & Rodriguez-Molina, 2016; Guney, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In other words, the level of psychological well-being and satisfaction towards life will increase as a person becomes happier. Another study also supported the idea that happiness is one of the critical factors that influence one's psychological well-being (Ghasempour et al., 2013). Our study is in line with Seligman (2002) who stated that happiness that comes from our psychological strength helps to ensure a pleasant and meaningful life. Based on that explanation, we can conclude that psychological well-being is an individual condition characterized by the happiness that derives from self-acceptance, personal growth, life goals, environmental mastery, autonomy

or independence, and positive relationships with others.

Based on the above explanation, our study aims to explore the meaning of psychological well-being, situations, and parties or conditions involved. The research questions proposed are: (1) What is the meaning of happiness in early childhood?; (2) What situation makes children happy?; and (3) Who makes children the happiest?

Method

The research used a qualitative approach with the aim of exploring and understanding the meaning of subjective well-being for some individuals. This also includes examining the meaning, situation, and parties that relates to psychological well-being. Fifty one children, aged 4-6 years old, were involved as the research subject. The research was located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Written documents in this study were in the form of verbatim transcripts of the interviews.

We used qualitative interviews to obtain knowledge about the subjective meaning that one has about the topic of the study. Data collection was done through in-depth interviews using open questions arranged in an interview guide. Data analysis included the following steps: (1) Reviewing all available data from various existing data sources, namely from interviews and observations; (2) Data from previous studies were reduced or made into abstraction. Abstraction is an attempt to summarize the core, process, and statements needed; (3) The researcher conducted content analysis by compiling the abstraction in units to be categorized. Categorization was conducted using coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (in Putri & Wicaksono, 2017), there are three steps in the coding process, namely; (a) Open Coding: The process of identifying categories, properties, and dimensions; (b) Axial Coding: The process of organizing data by developing relationships between existing categories; (c) Selective Coding: The process of selecting the most basic categories, then validating relationships between categories that are systematically linked; (4) The final step of this analysis process is checking the validity of the data.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The Meaning of Happiness

Based on the understanding of children aged 4 to 6 years, the meanings of happiness are positive affection at 55% (35.56% for positive emotions, such as happy, cheerful, delight, joy; expressions such as laughing and smiling at 15.56%, and the absence of negative emotions such (e.g., sad, not crying) at 4.4%), activities at 28.9% (20% playing, 4.44% traveling, 2% each for helping and learning),

getting something at 8.89%, positive physical condition (e.g., not feeling tired, healthy) at 4.44%, as well as showing affiliation (based on number of friends owned) of 2.22%.

Data distribution shows that children interpret happiness as engaging in play activities and showing positive emotions. There are 18 children (20% of the 28.89% who responded) chose play activity as a representation of happiness. Meanwhile, as many as 16 children (17.76%) remain to believe that positive emotion is the best predictor of happiness. The results regarding the meaning of happiness can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The meaning of happiness

The Meaning of Happiness	Numbers	Percentage
Positive affect	50	55.56%
Positive emotions	32	35.56%
Happy	16	17.78%
Cheerful	6	6.67%
Delight	6	6.67%
Joy	4	4.44%
Expressions	14	15.56%
Laughing	8	8.89%
Smiling	6	6.67%
Absence of negative emotions	4	4.44%
Not sad	2	2.22%
Not crying	2	2.22%
Activities	26	28.89%
Activities	26	28.89%
Playing	18	20.00%
Going out	4	4.44%
Helping parents	2	2.22%
Studying	2	2.22%
Getting something	8	8.89%
Being given to good	6	6.67%
good	2	2.22%
Positive physical conditions	4	4.44%
Positive physical conditions	4	4.44%
Not feeling tired	2	2.22%
Healthy	2	2.22%
Affiliation	2	2.22%
Having many friends	2	2.22%
Grand Total	90	100.00%

Table 2. The situations that make children happy

Situations that Make Children Happy	Numbers	Percentage
Activities	79	70.54%
Activities	41	36.61%
Learning	13	11.61%
Traveling	11	9.82%
Eating	8	7.14%
Reading books	2	1.79%
Helping mother	1	0.89%
Writing stories	1	0.89%
Drawing	1	0.89%
Cleaning	1	0.89%
Watering flowers	1	0.89%
Reflecting on the mirror	1	0.89%
Eating and drinking	1	0.89%
Going out with family	1	0.89%
Going back to hometown	1	0.89%
Playing	23	20.54%
Playing	23	20.54%
Entertainment	11	9.82%
Holiday	7	6.25%
Reading comic books	3	2.68%
Watching TV/movies	1	0.89%
Sports	3	2.68%
Playing soccer	2	1.79%
Playing badminton	1	0.89%
Getting something	14	12.50%
Receiving a gift	14	12.50%
Technology	9	8.04%
Playing gadgets/HP	9	8.04%
Affiliation	5	4.46%
Social Interaction	5	4.46%
Being loved by father	2	1.79%
Family gathering	1	0.89%
Seeing many people smile	1	0.89%
Joking around	1	0.89%
Special day	3	2.68%
Special Day	3	2.68%
Birthday	3	2.68%
Achievement	2	1.79%
Achievement	2	1.79%
Being complimented by teacher	1	0.89%
In heaven	1	0.89%
Grand Total	112	100.00%

The Situations that Make Children Happy

As seen in Table 2, the situations that cause psychological well-being (happiness) are activities (36.61%) such as learning, traveling, eating, reading books, helping mother, writing stories, drawing, cleaning, watering flowers, reflecting on the mirror, eating and drinking; which includes playing (20.54%), studying in kindergarten (11.61%), entertainment (9.82%: going on vacation, reading comic books, watching TV/movies), sports (2.62%).

The Parties Who Make Children Happy

As presented in Table 3, the parties that make them happy are family (77.92%, including the nuclear family of 74.03% and the extended family/grandmother at 3.90%), non-family (19.48%, which includes friends at 16.88% and teacher at 2.60%), God (1.30%) and toys (1.30%).

Discussion

Table 1 presents the meaning of happiness in early childhood. More specifically, it

shows that happy children tend to show positive affect (55.566%). The most prominent affects are positive emotions (35.56%); activities (28.89%) in which the most favorite activities are playing (20%); getting something (8.89%) when the child feels happy when given something (6.67%) compared to giving something (2.22%); positive physical condition (4.44%) which includes healthy (2.22%) and not feeling tired (2.22%); and affiliations or have a lot of friends (2.22%). Positive affect receives the highest response because happiness is often described in the form of positive affect and life satisfaction (Singh & Jha, 2008; Kuppens, Realo, Diener, 2008; Diener, 1984). Thus, it is indicated that the findings are in line with Aloia and Brecht (2014) who state that positive affect is positively correlated with happiness, mental health, and self-esteem; and negatively associated with depression and stress.

Furthermore, compared to expressions (laughing and smiling) and the absence of negative emotions (not sad and not crying), po-

Table 3. The parties who make children happy

Parties Who Make Children Happy	Numbers	Percentage
Family	60	77.92%
Extended Family	3	3.90%
Grandmother	3	3.90%
Nuclear Family	57	74.03%
Younger sibling	10	12.99%
Father	4	5.19%
Mother	11	14.29%
Older sibling	10	12.99%
Parents	22	28.57%
Non-family	15	19.48%
Teacher	2	2.60%
Teacher	2	2.60%
Friends	13	16.88%
Friends	13	16.88%
God	1	1.30%
Allah	1	1.30%
Allah	1	1.30%
Toys	1	1.30%
Toys	1	1.30%
Toys	1	1.30%
Grand Total	77	100.00%

sitive emotions are the most prominent positive affects. Positive emotions play an essential role in happiness because positive emotions are generally considered an excellent way to improve well-being broadly (Bastian, Kuppens, Roover, & Diener, 2014). In detail, in the component of positive emotions themselves, the aspect of pleasure gets the highest response compared to the other elements (17.78%). These results support Eryılmaz's (2012) study which showed that individuals with more positive and satisfying experiences, as well as fewer unpleasant experiences, are considered happy individuals.

Meanwhile, if the definition of happiness is reviewed in terms of activities, then playing (20%) is the most favorite activity compared to traveling (4.44%), helping parents (2.22%), and learning (2.22%). So, based on the results of data analysis that has been done, it can be concluded that the meaning of happiness according to the understanding of children aged 4-6 years is having positive emotions and playing. A research conducted by Nairn and IPSOS MORI Social Research Institute (2011) which compares the lives of children in United Kingdom, Sweden, and Spain reveals that the UK ranks lowest compared to the other two countries about child well-being. This is because: (1) children in the UK have fewer opportunities for pleasant outdoor activities, (2) there are government regulations that cut funding for local playrooms, causing a particularly detrimental effect to the well-being of children from lower socioeconomic groups, and (3) lack of parental support. The research is one of persuasive evidence about the role of play for the happiness and well-being of children as a whole.

There can be no doubt that children like to play (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). Playing is a biological, psychological, and social need that is important for the development and well-being of healthy individuals and communities, where the elements of play usually include pleasure, a sense of freedom, and joint construction through the use of specific rules or rhythms (Singer, 2015; Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005) in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, (2012)). In addition, children in early childhood like to play, because it is an

essential feature embedded in their education, and also because playing is an instinct that already exists in each of them (Singer, 2015; Ejieh, 2006). The children's ideas in play are generally centered on doing fun activities that are free, being outdoors, and being together with friends (Singer, 2013). All types of games, from fantasy to rough and tumble ones, have an important role in children's development because playing is a lens that children must go through to enjoy their world (Goldstein, 2012).

Based on previous studies, play activities prove to be fun for children because it not only fulfills their need but also produce positive emotions, release excess energy, strengthen empathy and sensitivity to others (tolerance) through perspective taking, optimize brain growth, sharpen imagination and creativity, and improve their long-term health and also cognitive-motoric-emotional-social-mental development (Sharif, 2014; Singer, 2013; Goldstein, 2012; Whitebread, Basilio, Kovalja, & Verma, 2012; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2010; Haney & Bissonnette, 2011; Bell, Pellis, & Kolb, 2010; Kuo, et. al., 2008; Apache, 2005; Casby, 2003). Lack of opportunities to play for children, or a ban on playing, can cause children to suffer in both the short and long term period. These limitations will have an impact on psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, reducing their capacity to communicate which also causes them to be more aggressive (Goldstein, 2012; Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2010; Almon, 2003). With the support of adults, adequate play space, and various kinds of game materials, children have the best opportunity to become healthier, happier, and more productive members of society (Goldstein, 2012).

Second, related to situations that can make children feel happy, the results of the analysis as presented in Table 2 show that the circumstances that make children feel happy are activities (70.54%) where the most prominent activities are daily activities of 36.61% which include learning in kindergarten (11, 61%), traveling (9.82%), eating (7.14%), reading books (1.79%), and helping mother, writing stories, drawing, cleaning, watering flow-

ers, reflecting on the mirror, eating and drinking, each had the same percentage of 0.89%. Then, other activities such as traveling with family or going back to hometown at 0.89%; play at 20.54%; entertainment at 9.82% which is including vacation (6.25%), reading comic books (2.68%), and watching TV/movies (0.89%); and sports (2.68%) which includes playing soccer and playing badminton of 1.79% and 0.89% in a row. Another situations that can make children happy other than activities are getting something or given a gift (12.50%), technology or playing mobile phone (8.04%), affiliation or social interaction (4.46%) in the form of being loved by father (1.79 %), gathering with family (0.89%), seeing many people smile (0.89%), and joking around (0.89%); special days in the form of birthdays (2.68%), and achievement (1.79%) such as being praised by the teacher and being in heaven each of 0.89%.

Based on the explanation above, learning activities in kindergarten are aspects of daily activities which could make children happy. This is because in an educational perspective, student happiness is found in many ways related to school and support from teachers where through the practice and positive teaching methods conducted by teachers, in addition to improving academic abilities and student achievement, it can also improve student well-being (NSW Government, 2015; Eryilmaz, 2015; Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Ash & Huebner, 2001). Therefore, schools should always try to integrate the process of learning activities with the development of students' psychological well-being in parallel, integrated, and complete way because learning activities in schools can hone children's skills, so that later children can manage their environment effectively (NSW Government, 2015; Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003). Meanwhile, aspects of achievement in the form of being praised by teachers and in heaven are aspects that get the lowest score (only responded by two children) because children in early childhood have not considered achievement as something that makes them happy. Children in early childhood are generally very active (for example, likes to run around) so spending time in school is not for

achievement, but for activities that involve physical activities such as playing (running, jumping, throwing), writing, embroidering, etc. (Sharif, 2014; Reunamo, et. al., 2014; Pate, et. al., 2013; Tucker, 2008). Activities in the form of physical activities are proven to have a direct impact on children's health and well-being and serve as a robust strategy to prevent or minimize the occurrence of chronic diseases in the future (Tremblay, Boudreau-Lariviere, & Cimon-Lambert, 2012).

Third, the results of the analysis as presented in Table 3 show that the parties that made children the happiest were family (77.92%), which consist of extended family (3.90%) and nuclear family (74.03%). Meanwhile, other parties, including non-family (teachers and friends), god, and toys, only get responses of 19.48%; 1.30%; and 1.30% in a row. The findings in this study strengthen the previous research, highlighting that families have a positive relationship with children's well-being (Ruini, Vescovelli, Carpi, & Masoni, 2017; Gilligan, et al., 2017; Pannilage, 2017; Stradzins, et. al., 2011; Holder & Coleman, 2007). It is certain that families are an integral part of society in fostering happiness in children (Botha & Booysen, 2013). Families that function well are critically important in ensuring that every child have a good childhood and positive life opportunity, as well as optimize their performance and productivity, ultimately increasing their level of happiness (Botha & Booysen, 2013; The Children's Society, 2012).

Research on the influence of families on children's well-being or happiness has developed rapidly over the past few decades. A study conducted by Pannilage (2017), has succeeded in finding that children feel unhappy when there is disharmony and violence within the family, unstable family income, family discrimination for sociocultural reasons, and lack of love, attention, and affection. Further, Brown, Manning, and Stykes (2015) also show that: (1) children living outside the family tend to be less healthy compared to those living with their families, (2) there is no difference in the level of happiness of children with single parents (mother or father only), biological parents who are married to stepparents, and

families who live together without marriage. A slightly different study by Botha and Booysen (2013) concluded that: (1) children who live in families that are not functioning well, have low levels of happiness and feel less satisfied than those who live in balanced families, this means having good relations in the family are very beneficial for the happiness, and life satisfaction of family members; (2) a high level of attachment in a family (illustrated by how close family members are to each other) will also increase one's happiness and satisfaction. In essence, these findings confirm the importance of family, and how the family functions, to improve the happiness of family members both individually and as a whole.

Meanwhile, based on the response of children who feel happy to be in the nuclear family (74.03%), parents are those who have the most dominant role (28.57%) compared to the independent role of the mother or father (respectively 14.29% and 5.19%), as well as younger siblings and older siblings with the same proportion of 12.99%. The role of parents as a forming agent for happiness in children is due to a bond or relationship formed since the child was a baby. The relationship between parents and children from infancy tends to be the foundation for all other associations that shape the lives of individuals in the future (Indumathy & Ashwini, 2017; Bowlby, 2008). Adults who report having healthy, high-quality relationships (including support, nurturing, love) with their parents during their childhood, are shown to have a better level of happiness than those who do not (Indumathy & Ashwini, 2017; Stafford, et. al., 2016; Botha & Booysen, 2013; Mellers, 2010; Bowlby, 2008; Amato, 1994).

Additionally, children who are cared for and have responsive relationships with parents from infancy also tends to feel closer and safer around their parents and are at a lower risk of experiencing health problems and psychological disorders growing up (Mellers, 2010; Bowlby, 1988). According to The Children's Society (2012), to increase children's happiness, parents can begin to play an active role in decision making that can affect their lives, establish a caring and warm relationship, and spend time with them. Ther-

efore, we conclude that the relationship between children and parents in the family is significant because it is a source of love, trust, intimacy and security that parents give to children (Indumathy & Ashwini, 2017; Botha & Booysen, 2013). Instinctively, children want and need a positive and loving relationship with those closest to them (The Children 's Society, 2012). Healthy relationships between children and parent at an early age can make happy memories that the children can reflect on in the future.

In the end, based on those discussions, it can be concluded that it is imperative to know the meaning of happiness in early childhood, what situations can make children feel happy, and who makes children happy. A number of studies have shown that happy children will succeed in various domains of life, including marriage (family), friendship (social), health (physical), income and work, and longevity (Manago & Vaughn, 2015; Saphire-Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Dush & Amato, 2005; Lyubomirsky & King, 2005; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). Therefore, the study of happiness in children especially at an early age has several benefits. For example, developing methods for assessing happiness in children can provide a means for evaluating the impact of community, school and government initiatives on the well-being of children (NSW Government, 2015; Holder & Coleman, 2007). Also, identifying the correlations and predictors of happiness in children aids parents, educators, practitioners, and researchers in determining the strategies to increase their happiness (Thompson & Aked, 2009; Holder & Coleman, 2007). Furthermore, by comparing the factors that influence happiness in children with adolescents and adults, we can begin to understand the factors that contribute to the development of more effective policies and practices (Statham & Chase, 2010; Camfield & McGregor, 2009; Thompson & Aked, 2009; Rojas, 2008; Holder & Coleman, 2007).

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, some conclusions are drawn as follows: (1) The meaning of happiness in children aged 4-6 years shows positive affects (55%), carrying out activities (28.9%), getting something (8.89%), having positive physical conditions such as not feeling tired and healthy (4.44 %), as well as affiliations. (2) The situations that make children happy are activities (36.61%) such as learning, traveling, reading books, helping mother, writing stories, drawing, cleaning, watering flowers, reflecting on the mirror, eating and drinking, playing (20.54%), studying (11.61%), doing entertainment activities (9.82%: vacation, reading comics, watching TV/movies), sports (2.62%). (3) The parties that make children happy are family (77.92%), namely the nuclear family (74.03%) and extended family/grandmother (3.90%), non-family (19.48%), which includes friends (16.88%) and teachers (2.60%), God (1.30%) and toys (1.30%).

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