

CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF REPRESENTATIONS OF HAPPINESS IN RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN PROVERBS: SEARCH FOR POINTS OF CONTACT WITH HOFSTEDE'S DIMENSIONS

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Abstract. In this article, I present the results of research into cultural differences in the folk perceptions of happiness of the Russian and American people that enter into their actual happiness experiences. I started from the premise - widely accepted in paremiology - that proverbs are one of the important sources of such information. Based on this idea, I conducted a cross-cultural analysis of Russian and American proverbs on happiness. The research reveals differences in 1) emotional ratings of the happiness experience, and 2) behavioral expectations towards happiness. In approximately half of Russian proverbs, happiness and a happy state are treated in a negative tone, unlike in American folklore, where happiness is regarded in the traditional way as a positive emotion. A passive position towards happiness is found in 62.2% of the Russian cases presented. In American culture, passive expectations concerning the achievement of happiness are found in only 6.2% of all cases. I discuss the correspondence between the attitudes towards happiness presented in national proverbs and actual happiness experiences, as well as the religious roots of the cultural differences in happiness experience. In particular, I consider how Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions of national cultures enter into the perceptions of happiness in national proverbs. The research extends the conceptions on cultural differences of the Russian and American people and contributes to the revealing determinants of the cultural differences in the happiness experience.

Keywords: happiness; proverbs; cross-cultural research; Hofstede; Russian culture; American culture; folklore.

Introduction

Paremiologists [1, 2] believe that proverbs - concise traditional statements of apparent truths about different aspects of social life - allow us to "capture" national color of different cultures. At the same time, they emphasize that paremiologist's findings should be added with the help of using additional research methods; they state that proverbs must be considered important, but not the only source of information about saliences of national cultures. In the article I describe the results of my research of Russian and American representation of happiness presented in the proverbs (Notes 1). These results require interpretation taking into account the reference hereinabove, i.e. the findings must be considered as assumptions concerning cultural traits of happiness experience that should be further verified on the actuality. In the present article, I make only first

steps in this direction, and analyze to what extent the national “theories” of happiness presented in the proverbs correspond to Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions [3-5] and to the values of Orthodoxy and Protestantism widespread in Russian and American society, respectively.

As a source of Russian proverbs, I used *Proverbs of Russian People* by Vladimir Dal’ [6]. Though this collection of proverbs was created and published for the first time in 1853 and had older statement of some proverbs, it remains today the most complete Russian proverbs collection. Modern dictionaries of Russian proverbs [7, 8], published after near hundreds years, reproduce proverbs, in a shortened form, from Dal’s collection, having almost nothing novel to add. Moreover, in most cases, the novelties concern only the modernization of the language of these proverbs but do not affect their meanings. In the most complete proverbs collection, “*A Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs*” by V.M. Mokienko, T.G. Nikitina and E.K. Nikolaeva [9] the majority of Dal’s proverbs are included, some of them in a modernized form. Unlike the other aforementioned dictionaries, this one contains several proverbs about happiness which are absent in Dal’s dictionary. In the present research I do not take them into consideration. However, further, for data base verification, the consideration of these proverbs is desirable. In the selection of Russian proverbs for content-analysis I did not exclude those of them that sound somewhat in an old-fashioned way. I have followed this strategy that reveals on the representative sample deeper structures in Russian perception of happiness. For the same reason, I also did not demark proverbs according to time of gathering the proverbs and to their popularity in different social classes. The similar principle is underling the selection of American proverbs.

As a source of American proverbs on happiness “*A Dictionary of American Proverbs*” (Notes 2) by W. Mieder, S.A. Kingsbury, and K.B. Harder [10] was used. This particular Dictionary is widely used in analyses of American culture, and it has the reputation of being representative and relevant for cross-cultural studies. For example, Weber and colleagues [11] analyze the proverbs from this Dictionary for identification of the source of the differences in tendency to risk-taking among the members of different cultures. The proverbs’ view on risk-taking corresponds to differences in behavior of the persons of collectivistic and individualistic culture. Members of collectivistic cultures (Chinese culture was considered) are more risk-seeking in financial sphere as social network insurances against the possible downside in such risks than the members of individualistic cultures (American cultures was taken). However, the Chinese are less than Americans seeking social risks because this risk-seeking tests social relations.

For content-analysis I selected a total of 193 proverbs, including 95 Russian and 98 American, in which the words of “happiness”, “happy” are the keywords and “happiness” and “happy people” are directly defined. Preliminary readings and comparisons of Russian and American proverbs allowed me to find the essen-

tial differences in the tonality and the mode of description of happiness. Reflecting on the meaning of the proverbs and finding their interpretations and nuances of meaning allowed me to formulate the research hypothesis:

In cultures in which a passive attitude towards happiness achievement is a leading trait, the negative aspects of happiness experience are simultaneously emphasized; on the contrary, when the active position towards happiness achievement is dominant, then a positive evaluation of "happy" and "happiness" is a leading trait.

I have codified the proverbs using the following four categories - a passive / active position towards happiness achievement and a positive / negative evaluation regarding happiness on the basis of the keywords used in the proverbs for the definition of happiness. Let us consider the logic of the codification.

In the case of a passive attitude towards happiness achievement, happiness and the events associated with this experience (for example, success, peace of mind, family well-being) are described independently from the person's efforts, and are granted from others ("from above", fortune, other people, and so on). For example, in Russian folklore there are the proverbs like "Happiness is a bird that perches where it chooses". The phrase "perches where it chooses" tells about the independence of happiness from a person. Happiness is described as the results of the own person's efforts in the proverbs with an active position towards happiness. For example, a Russian proverb says that "Each person is the maker of his / her own happiness", and an American proverb has it that "Happiness is for those who make it and for those who search for it". The words "maker", "make it", and "search for" manifest an active position towards happiness achievement.

Negative consequences (for example, negative emotions as a consequence of uncertainty and inconstancy of happiness), which is sometimes connected with happiness experience, manifest a negative side of happiness. For instance, a Russian proverb states: "If you are happy, this annoys everyone". The word "to annoy" signalizes about envy and negative emotions that are displayed by other people in response to your happiness. Happiness is described as the absolute good in the positive estimation of happiness experience. An American proverb says: "Happiness is the best reward". The phrase the "best reward" manifests a positive tonality in happiness perception.

After codifying the proverbs according to positive / negative emotional ratings and active / passive behavioral expectations towards happiness, the analysis of the frequencies and the cross tabulations of data was conducted with the statistical software SPSS 17.0 for Windows.

Position towards happiness achievement and cultural differences in the evaluation of happiness experience

Happiness is ordinarily considered a positive feeling and experience in human life. However, there are such nuances in happiness that may force to

doubt in its only positive influence on our lives. Thus, the ambiguousness of happiness can contribute to an unfavorable life development, and happiness of a person with negative qualities leads to doubts in fairness of the distribution of happiness among people. Such doubts are presented both in Russian and American proverbs. According to the results of the conducted research ($\chi^2 = 13.376$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), a negative evaluation is presented in 46.3% of all the Russian proverbs on happiness ($N = 95$) and it less presented in American proverbs (21.4%, $N = 98$).

In Russian folklore, negative aspects of the happiness experience are most often connected with the risk of an unfavorable development of events. Moreover, Russian proverbs say sometimes that happiness weakens a person and reduces criticality of perception and control over the development of a situation ("A happy man sowed corn, but weeds grew"), and that happiness is not only positive for a person ("Happiness and unhappiness travel in one sledge", "Happiness is a two-edged sword"), and that it is sometimes unreliable ("Do not trust happiness! Do not hope that happiness is a success guarantee!").

Actions and circumstances of life that do not in themselves seem to be positively associated with happiness present most of negative moments in happiness experience as is expressed in American proverbs. An American proverb says: "Motherless husbands make happy wives"; certainly, the proverb means that a spouse must restrict the influence of his mother on the family; such attitude does not seem to be absolutely good, for instance, for his mother. However, negative aspects of happiness experience are less often presented in American proverbs. Americans often perceive happiness as a concrete goal in life (for example, a close-knit family, health, work, success, and so on) that can be achieved through certain efforts (which are often described in the proverbs). And so the ephemeral features of happiness, like unpredictability and unreliability of happiness, are treated as obstacles to the achievement of happiness that must be overcome.

The distinctions between Russians and Americans are also in the position regarding how to achieve happiness ($\chi^2 = 40.144$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). In Russian proverbs, a passive position towards happiness is found in 62.2% of the Russian cases ($N = 37$). In American culture, passive expectations concerning the achievement of happiness are found in 6.2% of all cases ($N = 74$).

I assumed at the start of my research that a passive attitude towards happiness achievement correlates with a negative estimation of happiness, and vice versa. The obtained data partly confirmed this hypothesis (table). There is a significant connection between ratings of the happiness experience and behavioral intentions towards pursuing happiness ($\chi^2 = 19.125$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 1$). However, the cross tabulations analysis of a passive position and negative evaluation, active position and positive evaluation do not show unambiguous results. In the case of a positive rating of the happiness

experience, an active position towards achievement of happiness is observed in 55.9% of all cases (N = 111), and a passive position towards achievement of happiness is presented in only 7.2% of all cases. An approximately equal amount of “negative” proverbs present passive and active positions (18.0 and 18.9%, respectively). That is, there is a significant connection between an active position and positive rating of the happiness; however, we cannot conclude validly that such a connection is present in the case of passive behavioral expectations towards happiness and a negative rating of happiness.

**Position towards achievement of happiness and rating
of the happiness experience (N = 111*)**

Position towards achievement of happiness	Rating of the happiness experience					
	Positive			Negative		
	Russian proverbs, % (N = 37)	American proverbs, % (N = 74)	In a total, %	Russian proverbs, % (N = 37)	American proverbs, % (N = 74)	In a total, %
Active	8,1	79,7	55,9	29,7	13,5	18,9
Passive	18,9	1,4	7,2	43,2	5,4	18,0

* Differences arise in the total number of cases from the analyzed Russian (N = 95) and American (N = 98) proverbs because in some proverbs active and passive positions toward achievement of happiness are not clearly presented, and therefore they were excluded from the analysis.

According to table, there are explicit differences between Russian and American representations of happiness in folklore. In 79.7% of all the American cases (N = 74), a positive rating of the happiness experience and an active position towards happiness are simultaneously presented. In Russian proverbs, a passive position towards happiness and a negative evaluation of happiness are simultaneously often presented (in 43.2% of all the Russian cases, N = 37). A possible explanation for the obtained results can be found in that Russians less often formulate conception of happiness in terms of concrete events or goals (as I have mentioned, such definitions of happiness are widespread in American culture); they regard happiness as rather something ephemeral and unpredictable that may (or may not) make life beautiful. Such characteristics of happiness explain why Russians are largely passive about achieving happiness and reconciled to their state when happiness is lacking. It is indeed difficult to actively pursue happiness without a clear representation of what happiness is.

There are also well-known differences between dominant religious systems in Russian and American societies; religious values are likely to influence the attitudes towards happiness. Orthodoxy, the most widespread religion in Russia, encourages humility, acceptance of everything “as is”, and the superiority of the spiritual world over the material aspects of life. Moreover, happiness in Orthodoxy is not considered an absolutely positive feature in human

life. Suffering is given importance; thus, it is considered that if a person suffers, he / she overcomes sin and therefore becomes better and draws nearer to God (but it is not necessary that person becomes happier). In such a religious framework, the large number of proverbs with negative ratings of happiness and the predominance of passive attitudes towards happiness in Russian culture is not surprising. Protestantism, which is dominant in American society, is oriented instead towards the success and well-being of life on earth, and happiness is considered a sign of God's love. In American society, happy people are regarded not only as leading "a desirable life but also as good people who will likely to go to heaven" [12: 162-163]. Such a religious position corresponds closely to the American proverb's treatment of happiness as the best thing in life and as one of the important goals in life.

Hofstede's model of culture and differences in national representations of happiness in the proverbs

The Dutch social scientist Geert Hofstede, drawing on the results of the cross-cultural research conducted in the period of 1967-1973 in 72 countries, defines four couple of indicators for characterizing national cultures. These dimensions are: "large / small power distance", "individualism / collectivism", "masculinity / femininity", and "strong / weak uncertainty avoidance", which are considered as the particular value orientations of people in everyday activity [3]. Later, on the basis of the research by Michael Bond of 1991 and the research by Michael Minkov of 2010, respectively, "long-term versus short-term orientation" and "indulgence versus restraint" were added as new cultural dimensions [13]. Hofstede's model of cultural distinctions has been repeatedly verified and is widely used in cross-cultural research.

Positions towards happiness achievement presented in American and Russian proverbs correspond to the small and large power distance, respectively. Russia, with a large degree of power distance, stands out in this dimension. According to Hofstede, power distance is "the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" [14: 88-89]. A low power distance shows that people do not take for granted unequal distribution of power in society and believe that everyone can reach high social status; such view is not widespread in the culture with large degree of power distance.

Happiness can be considered as one of the most valued resources that is unequally distributed in society. Such approach is developed in sociology of emotions, where the nature and strength of emotions connect with the social status and the role of people in the system of social interactions, i.e. persons with a different status are different in the degree of emotionality and often experience more different emotions [15-18]. As Turner notes: "emotions are unequally distributed across the class system in societies; and their

distribution operates in a manner very similar to the distribution of other valued resources in a society” [17: 350]. Moreover, a happy person has characteristics (such as success, luck, intelligence, and friendliness) that make him / her attractive to other people and, therefore, he / she more influences others. In this framework, some Russians’ passivity towards happiness achievement can be explained by the cultural values of large power distance. In Russian proverbs, happiness is often considered a fate (that is not always attractive), something that does not depend on an individual and is not available to everyone. This position is in accordance with the acceptance of unequal distribution of power (and related resources) in Russian society. Contrary, Americans believe that the potential for happiness is not limited to only some people; this position is in accordance with the values of small power distance. More than 93% of all the proverbs present happiness as the result of a person’s own activity. Moreover, in American folklore there are no proverbs that consider happiness as something underserved (such view is sometimes presented in Russian proverbs).

The next cultural dimension - “uncertainty avoidance” - corresponds partly to the obtained folklore differences in perception of happiness. Hofstede describes uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations” [14: 88-89]. He demonstrates that US scores below average on “uncertainty accepting”; Americans do not ordinarily feel threatened by the ambiguous or unknown situations, and are open to new experiences in all the spheres of life. At the same time, Russian society seeks to avoid uncertainty and ambiguous situations, and is willing to control the future. Some researchers [19] have proposed that in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, people take more risks than in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance.

As I have demonstrated above, Russians often associate negative rating of happiness experience with the risk of unfavorable development of events (“Happiness is not a horse; it does not travel on a straight road”, “Happiness is not to be relied upon”). In 31.1% of all Russian proverbs, happiness coincides with unpredictable and risky events, versus 4.3% of American proverbs. The negative ratings of uncontrolled aspects of happiness experience with simultaneously a passive position towards happiness achievement, in turn, can be explained by the wish to avoid uncertainty in life that is characteristic of Russian culture. In American folklore, unpredictable and uncontrolled aspects of happiness are seldom fixed (the “risky” cross-domain constitutes only 4.3% of all the proverbs); such position, probably, manifests that Americans do not connect happiness with risk for themselves or their immediate family. Happiness is ordinarily considered to be under the control of a person. However, all the unpredictable and uncontrolled in happiness is evaluated negatively. Thus, Americans, as well as Russians, do not approve risk and uncertainty in happiness. Such viewpoint

partly contradicts to the relaxed attitudes towards uncertainty and ambiguity of American culture proposed in Hofstede's model.

As regards the rest of the classical dimensions of culture - "individualism / collectivism" and "masculinity / femininity", the finding of the points of contact with the folklore's perception of happiness looks currently problematic. For this purpose, an additional analysis of proverbs, from the point of view of the cross-domain of happiness, must be conducted. Such analysis can be made by the identification of keywords applying in the proverbs' descriptions of happiness. For instance, it will be interesting to test the hypothesis that in individualistic cultures (like in the USA) happiness is the result of person's own achievements, and in collectivistic cultures (like in Russia) happiness mostly depends on the relations with other people. Such proposition is discussed in the works of Y. Uchida, V. Norasakkunkit, and S. Kitayama [20] and L. Lu and R. Gilmour [21]. The dominance of masculine and feminine values in, respectively, American and Russian folklore perception of happiness can be revealed by the analysis of human characteristics typical of a happy person. Masculine characteristics [22, 23] are connected with the qualities that promote success, professional activity, leadership and winning. Feminine characteristics are those traits that require cooperation with other people, that involve caring for and understanding others, and they indicate a priority of values of quality of life. Generally speaking, they "incorporate traits that are differentially associated with man and woman" [22: 170].

Hofstede's model will be verified at the level of folklore psychology in cases of the description of a happy person by the masculine traits in American proverbs and feminine traits in Russian proverbs. From the conducted analysis, I conclude that an American preference for achievement and an active position towards happiness inclines them to masculinity, and passivity of Russians in pursuing happiness shows their femininity. Such positions correspond to Hofstede's model. However, as I mentioned earlier, the verification of the degree of correspondence of folklore's representations of happiness to the values of "individualism / collectivism" and "masculinity / femininity" requires a preliminarily codification of proverbs by "happy" cross-domains and "happy" human characteristics. This is one of the tasks for further research.

Conclusion

The hypothesis that a close relation exists between passive attitudes towards happiness and finding some negative sides in this experience, as well as between an active position towards happiness and positive rating of this emotion experience has been partially confirmed. An active position is strongly connected with an exceptionally positive perception of happiness experience. However, the obtained data do not unambiguously support a

connection between passivity in relation to happiness and finding negative sides in this experience. For a verification of the correspondence of proverbs' conceptions of happiness with the dominant value orientations in different cultures, I have compared these conceptions with the dimensions of Russian and American cultures presented in Hofstede's model. Uncertainty avoidance, as well as a large power distance of Russian culture, explains partly a passive position of Russians towards happiness presented in a large number of the proverbs. An active position towards happiness, presented in the majority of American proverbs, agrees with the value of small power distance. However, Americans' openness to novelty and rather weak uncertainty and risk situation avoidance is not reliably supported.

According to the European Values Survey and World Values Survey (website), in 2006, 29.1% of Russians answered the question: "Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, or not at all happy?", that they were "not very" happy or "not at all" happy. At the same time, the proportion of American people who said they had some degree of unhappiness was only 7.1%. Do the differences in happiness level connect with the social norms and cultural values of Russian and American society? Can the passivity / activity towards happiness achievement and the finding positive / negative moments in happiness experience influence persons' identification themselves as happy? Are the connections of "activity-passivity" and "positive-negative" stable? Do they play the same role as "the systems of names" in societies considered in cultural anthropology, especially in C. Levi-Strauss works [24]? Are they in the mind of people? And are they not always at the conscious level? Do they influence actual "happy" behavior and attitudes toward happiness? Does a position towards happiness achievement influence the revealing of negative sides in happiness experience, or vice versa? We can answer such questions only after further research on actual practices of happy people in different cultural contexts.

Notes

1. Some results of the research have been presented in the proceeding of the 2nd Russian Research Conference on Individuality Issue in Contemporary Psychology (Shkurko, 2012). The conference was held on October 12, 2012, in Vladivostok (Russia) and was organized by Far Eastern Federal University.
2. In the article, I have given literal translations of Russian proverbs instead of their probable analogues among American proverbs.

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