

## 2. Conceptions of Happiness and Aspirations for Change

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### Introduction

This paper contains a discussion of what the peasants in a central highland village in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) consider to be "the happy life."<sup>1</sup> This investigation is one component of a broader field study attempting to ascertain Factors Underlying Modernity with special reference to Receptiveness to Innovations. An examination of what the peasants consider to be "the happy life" was deemed relevant to the broader study. The study was conducted in a village located within the administration district of Kandy. The village itself is not accessible by motor vehicle and lies about one mile off the highway connecting two district capitals. It is a peasant village the inhabitants of which are in frequent contact with the nearby urban milieu.

### Theoretical Background

Some of the earliest pronouncements on "happiness" in the sociological tradition are to be found in Durkheim's elaboration of that concept.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, similar notions have been expressed by other pioneering writers such as Marx and Comte.<sup>3</sup> However, it appears that Durkheim's formulation provides a more systematic elaboration of the concept in terms of definitional criteria as well as methodological potential.

Durkheim's interest in the "happiness" concept was related to his evolutionary thesis on the division of labor in society. He attempted to demonstrate that contrary to the utilitarian assumptions held by classical political economists, the need for happiness was unrelated to the progress of the division of labor. Taking suicide rates as the most objective index of "average unhappiness" Durkheim attempted to show that urbanization and civilization cannot be associated with increasing happiness. And by suicide he meant the "true" or "sad" types, not the altruistic.<sup>4</sup> "What statistician," he asked, "would hesitate

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Canadian Council of Southeast Asian Studies Meetings, York University, November 1976. The authors are grateful to John Gartrell and Gwynn Nettler for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper. The research project (of which the present paper describes only one component) was begun in Summer 1973 under the auspices of a Canada Council grant awarded to the senior author. A detailed description of the overall project, the village, and other information are reported in Gordon Hirabayashi and P. A. Saram, "Factors Underlying Modernity: Birth Planning Preferences in Rural Sri Lanka," *Asian Profile*, Vol. V, No. 1, February, 1977.
- 2 Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, George Simpson (trans.), (New York: The Free Press, 1964) pp. 233-55.
- 3 See for example, Comte cited by Durkheim, *ibid.*, p. 251.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 246-47.

to see in the progress of general mortality in the midst of a determined society a sure symptom of the weakening of public health?"<sup>5</sup>

Durkheim argued that unlike in the case of production or differentiation, there are limits to the capacity for happiness. The condition of happiness is a golden mean, a healthy state, a harmoniously developed constitution of man consisting of moderating faculties. A man who has very little capital as well as one whose fortune is excessive are both outside of "the limiting zone".<sup>6</sup>

Durkheim's most instructive explication is perhaps his distinction between pleasure and happiness. Happiness, he contended, was something besides (and not something equal to, or more than) the sum total of pleasures. Pleasure is something eventual, local and ephemeral. Happiness is constitutional and dispositional. Pleasures do not add up to make happiness; on the contrary, most often pleasure depends upon happiness.<sup>7</sup> Even the population in less developed areas seem to provide the evidence that life is generally good, for they seem to prefer it to death. To them, "the illusions of hope" rather than the accumulation of pleasures, seem to provide a vital force for the sustainment of life.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in his most emphatic statement on the subject Durkheim concluded that since the progress of the division of labor is independent of the variations of happiness, there is no scientific basis for the comparative study of happiness.<sup>9</sup>

Since Durkheim's pioneering contribution there have been several post-war efforts at studying happiness. These studies have dealt with such diverse aspects of the problem as conceptual clarification, measurement, socio-economic location, temporality, happiness zones and happiness prescriptions.<sup>10</sup>

## Methodology

The village consists of 70 households. Its inhabitants belong to the two ethnic groups known as the Sinhalese and the Ceylon Moors. Since the broader field of study dealt with the topic of Receptiveness to Innovations with reference to the use of modern contraceptives, only the 'ever-married' population was considered to be the subject group. The total number of 'ever-married' Sinhalese (the group described in the present paper) was 127 and the total of 'ever-married' Ceylon Moors was 27. It was possible to interview 58 males and 66

5 *Ibid.*, p. 249. In his essay on the conceptual analysis of poverty Whyte has cited several theoretical sources to illustrate the point that aspirations as well as states of contentment are to a great extent conditioned by relative access to opportunity structures, Donald R. Whyte, "Sociological Aspects of Poverty: A Conceptual Analysis," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 2/4, 1965; on some Canadian dimensions, see Whytes' footnote 56.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 236-37.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 245-46.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51. Weber too seems to have concluded that neither science nor technology constitute the "way to true happiness," Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (trans. & eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 143.

10 For a review of these studies including some personal reflections, see Gwynn Nettler, *Social Concerns*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 15-32.