

The Use of Qualitative and Ethnographic Research to Enhance the Measurement and Operationalisation of Gross National Happiness

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce ethnographic and qualitative research as a valuable addition to previous quantitative surveys in order to measure, test and operationalise Gross National Happiness in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Ethnographic research and anthropological theory can reveal valuable insights into everyday practices and experiences of and with GNH and GNH-related policies on the ground level. In today's world, GNH, and other happiness and well-being surveys have become a global phenomenon, with Bhutan leading the field. However, no reliable method has been devised to test and advance this project. The essay argues that qualitative research can be of exceptional value for Bhutan's policy makers and international researchers, because it goes beyond quantifiable means in order to gain insight into the causes and effects of GNH-led policies.

Keywords: ethnography; qualitative research; Gross National Happiness

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Introduction

In the early 1970s, the Kingdom of Bhutan entered the world-stage with a new approach to development and modernisation. Conscious of the difficulties that other Himalayan nations (such as e.g. Nepal) have experienced during processes of rapid modernisation¹, Bhutanese policy-makers adopted a unique strategy that aims to preserve Bhutan's spiritual and cultural values whilst bringing about economic and technological development. This strategy is underpinned by the concept of 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH). It emanates from the idea that society's happiness, quality of life and 'social progress' can be measured in more holistic terms than more standard economic indicators such as Gross Domestic/National Product (GDP/GNP). GNH has become a 'key indicator' that assesses the society's levels of social and psychological wellbeing. It is assumed that this project will lead to economic, environmental and, more importantly, cultural sustainability. GNH "*resides in the belief that the key to happiness is to be found, once basic material needs have been met, in the satisfaction of non-material needs and in emotional and spiritual growth*" (Bhutan 2020 (1999) cited in Denman et al, 2008: 479).

This view is intimately connected with traditional Buddhist ethics and Buddhist perceptions of economy. To quote Ardussi (2005)

It was the declared obligation of the civil head of state to maintain law and order so that its subjects could devote themselves to leading a moral life and strive for a better rebirth in the next (cited in Bates, 2009: 2).

Bhutan's leading role in the world

In light of current developments in the Western, capitalist world - most notably, the global economic 'meltdown' in 2008 - Bhutan's unique project "*captured the imagination of the*

¹ e.g. increased migration from rural to urban spaces and threats to traditional cultural values (Mitchell, 1976)

larger world" (Thinley, cited in Larmer, 2008:4). Even before, many scholars concerned with ethics in economy called upon Western policy-makers to rethink their priorities, in order to "*facilitate a wiser and more compassionate appreciation of our place and purpose in the world*" (McDonald, 2003: 2-3). Today, more and more economists and Western scholars realise that measuring income and economic advances alone cannot tell us anything about what makes life 'good' or 'less good' (Mathews et al, 2010: 3).

In the beginning of the 21st century, most nations throughout the world find themselves dissatisfied with standard economic indicators (such as GDP or GNP) and consumer capitalism. Since autumn 2008, a new trend emerged in public discourse: is there no other way than quantifiable means to assess the successes and failures of economy and governance? Has money and the need for more and more monetary profit led to an unsustainable system, which in the end is bound to collapse? Is the correlation between money and happiness as simple as Western economists make it look?

Most recently - in November 2010 - the British Prime Minister David Cameron announced the formation of a £2m *National Wellbeing Project*, in order to identify key areas raising the population's wellbeing. Similar to Bhutanese policy makers, Cameron argues that standard economic measures such as GDP "*do not give the full picture*" (BBC News, 2010). He is following in the footsteps of former US senator R. Kennedy (1968), who famously said that "*GDP measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile*" (cited in BBC News 2010). Other nations such as France or Japan attempt to include human wellbeing in their assessments of policies, but by far not to the extend of Bhutan's unique project.

Bhutan has the advantage of being involved with GNH since the early 1970s, when the 4th dragon king of Bhutan famously stated:

Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product" (Jigme Singye Wangchuck (1972), cited in Bates, 2009: 1).

Since then, Bhutan has become the leading nation in the development and application of this alternative governmental strategy, and much can be learned from Bhutan's journey towards a more humanistic approach to economy, development and governance.

In addition, GNH is closely connected to sustainable development, which is defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Bank Report 2003, cited in Ezechieli, 2003: 15). Sustainable development has a holistic ‘triple-bottom-line’ whereby a balance between economic growth, socio-cultural equity, cultural preservation as well as environmental management and protection is emphasised (Ezechieli, 2003: 15). Wangchuck (2006) stresses that Bhutan's dedication to sustainable development is closely entwined with Buddhist principles of respect and balance between human beings and their natural habitat (ibid: 68-9).

Today, most empirical evidence suggests that the human impact on nature is more severe than previously assumed, and may lead to widespread devastation of the planet's ecological environment. Again, Bhutan is playing a leading role in the protection of natural resources: since 1995, 26 percent of the total land area in Bhutan has been designated as national protected areas, making Bhutan one of the most important biodiversity hotspots on the globe (Conservation International, 2007; Wangchuck, 2006: 68). Moreover, Bhutan's commitment to environmental protection is manifest in national laws: for example making industrial and commercial activities (such as e.g. copper mining) illegal if they threaten the natural environment. Another policy, which ensures that Bhutan's forest areas never drop below 60 percent, puts Bhutan on top of the list of the least deforested nations in the world (Wangchuck, 2006: 19). Environmental preservation is one of the most important pillars of GNH, signifying the Bhutanese understanding of the close relationship between human wellbeing and the natural environment. Again, this insight is of particular importance in

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the 21st century, making Bhutan an exemplary nation, from which other governments can learn.

These examples are just a brief illustration of Bhutan's leading role in the development of a new approach to society, state and the world as a whole. The unique project of GNH can provide important understanding and evidence of the interconnectedness of human happiness and life-as-a-whole, which is of uttermost relevance for the entire world in the 21st century. Yet, the Western world is 'hungry' for numbers and quantifiable means, through which the *Four Pillars of GNH* can be measured, tested and illustrated. The issue of *how* to measure and operationalise GNH is yet to be resolved, and it is to this end that I argue that qualitative and ethnographic data can provide a unique insight into the workings of GNH on the ground-level, and therefore enhance quantitative illustrations.

Measuring and Operationalising GNH

GNH is a rather 'new' concept (in comparison to e.g. capitalism or feudalism), that has a vast appeal to other nations. Similar to Bhutan, for example, Great Britain is attempting to measure potential indicators of happiness and wellbeing, including education, environment, inequality and healthcare. However, very much like Bhutan itself, statisticians at the UK's *National Wellbeing Project* face difficulties in deciding *what* exactly should be measured, or *what* kinds of questions should be asked. National statistician J. Matheson told the BBC that devising a reliant survey must go "*beyond happiness*" and that the measure must be "*sustainable over time*" (BBC News, 2010). No decision has been reached at this point, of how exactly this survey should be devised and operationalised. The UK Office for National Statistics is currently undergoing a nation-wide, public survey, giving citizens, organisations and businesses the opportunity to make their voices and views on this project heard (ONS, 2010/2011). In a diverse, multi-cultural society as the UK, finding a common denominator by which to assess

and test well-being becomes a huge task, and there is surely a long road ahead for British policy makers.

It would appear obvious that Bhutan's model of GNH would require some kind of reliable, testable, numerical measurement of happiness. McDonald (2003) emphasises the "*operationalisation of measures capable of accurately monitoring developments*" as the primary task of Bhutanese policy makers (ibid: 18). The *Journal of Bhutan Studies* as well as publications available through the *Gross National Happiness Commission* suggest various means to operationalise GNH and measure its success and failures. For example, Donnelly² (2005) suggests that as happiness is defined as the "*sum of satisfaction*" of various "*life domains*" (such as e.g. health, family and community, personal and spiritual development, etc.), happiness can be "*predicted from cognitive measures of domain satisfaction*" (ibid: 349). She concludes that each life-domain satisfaction can be measured through self-report surveys, which then allow policy-makers to invest more effort in domains where satisfaction is reported to be low (ibid: 349-50, 366).

Ruut Veenhoven (2005) - founding father of *Happiness Studies* and the *World Database of Happiness* - defines happiness as the "*degree to which a person enjoys his/her life-as-a-whole*" (ibid: 287). He argues that this form of happiness is universal, and can be measured using 'self-reports' in "*general population surveys*" (ibid: 287) - that is, surveys, in which people assess how much they enjoy their 'life-as-a-whole', by means of scales ranging from 1 (Dissatisfied) to 10 (Satisfied)³. As GNH relies on quantifiable data in order to

² It is important to note, that Suellen Donnelly centres her argument around Positive Psychology, which is concerned with the study of positive traits. As she argues, it is a new trend in Western psychology "*away from analysing the past, towards working on an improved future*" (Donnelly, 2005: 347).

³ This form of 'direct measurement', relies on self-report questionnaires, which researchers design with the help of several standardized rating scales (as developed by e.g. Thurstone,

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measure its success, a mean has to be found. Veenhoven suggests that the subjective answers of *life-satisfaction surveys* should be combined with statistical data about life-expectancy, leading to an estimate of '*happy life years*', indicating how happy and long people live in a country (ibid: 288). GNH is, in this context, a quantifiable mean, resulting from "*descriptive statistics of general tendency*" (ibid: 301). The obtained data can then be compared over time (measuring the success of e.g. GNH-related policies) and even across countries (e.g. in the World Happiness Database) (ibid: 304).

I argue that while these means to measure GNH are important, they could be enhanced by qualitative and ethnographic data. Ethnography is the main research method of Social and Cultural Anthropology - the 'study of human culture', and is defined by Taylor (1871) as "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*" (cited in Pelissier, 1991: 77). As such, anthropology is concerned with the study of the physical and socio-cultural development of human beings and their behaviours within a socio-cultural context. By means of ethnographic research, that is, participant observation and other qualitative research methods, anthropologists aim to identify how socio-cultural beings think and how their Weltanschauung is reflected in modes of thought (Pelissier,

Guttman or Likert). Usually, these surveys contain questions concerning attitudes or beliefs about a certain topic (in this case: life satisfaction). The advantage of these scales are that they are simple and easy to conduct, as well as allowing researchers to repeat and compare their data. However, these scales are said to be too one dimensional and unreliable (Trochim, 2006; Pennington, 1999: 78 - 84). Veenhoven (2005) proposed self-report surveys, with common questions such as "*Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you currently with your life as a whole?*" (ibid: 297). Respondents answer by choosing a number from 1 (Dissatisfied) to 10 (Satisfied) (ibid: 297).

1991: 76). The central aim of ethnography is to understand people's actions and their experiences and perceptions of the world from an *emic* perspective, and how these individual idiosyncrasies motivate actions and vice versa (Brewer, 2000: 11).

This anthropological endeavour is similar to the method of measuring GNH, in order to understand the significance and everyday manifestation of GNH-policies on the ground level. It is here, where qualitative, ethnographic research can provide important clues about GNH-led policies. While quantitative surveys (as mentioned above) can tell us much about *how* common and wide-spread a phenomenon or sentiment is (Alasuutari, 1995: 22), qualitative, ethnographic research can shed light on the '*why*' of said phenomenon's commonality. That is to say, rather than only measuring *how many* people identify e.g. economic security as a source of happiness (such as in e.g. Zangmo, 2008: 3), ethnographic research is able to provide insight into *why* respondents identified economic security as the most important factor of happiness. Of course, *how* and *why* are not mutually exclusive concepts that can be investigated in isolation, but they are closely entwined. Thus, Bhutan's policy makers would benefit from using ethnographic research to enhance and complement quantitative statistics.

In his tribute to Gross National Happiness, T.S. Powdyel (1988) states that "*His Majesty the King [of Bhutan] has dreamt for us a Bhutan where our success will not necessarily be measured by economics or statistics, but by the level of happiness and contentment that the Bhutanese are able to enjoy*" (ibid: 60; own emphasis). I believe that if this statement lies at the heart of GNH, the purely quantitative measurement of happiness and its statistical representation appears to be almost contradictory to GNH's vision and aim. Bhutan's unique project rejects common denominators such as GDP and GNP - which are numerical facts about quantifiable means (e.g. cash-flow, import and export numbers, etc.). At the same time, attempts are made to measure the citizens' happiness through the quantification

rejected in the first place. It is here where Bhutanese policy-makers concerned with operationalising GNH can benefit from qualitative, anthropological research. Rather than reducing happiness to statistics, much can be gained from incorporating qualitative research methods (such as Dorji and Kinga's (2005) narrative approach - see below) in assessing GNH in Bhutan.

Ethnographic research in a nutshell

Social sciences are commonly concerned with the study of human beings, their behaviours, actions and sentiments. Of course, these sciences can never be as 'objective' as empirical, natural sciences, such as physics, medicine or chemistry. However, the difference between social and natural sciences arises due to the *foci* of studies: universal physical laws or chemical compositions do not change (as quickly), while society, culture and human beings are in constant flux and transformation. Natural sciences base on *Positivism*, which assumes that the world is external and independent of human actions. Gravity, for example, is a natural law autonomous of human beings, which can be empirically and accurately calculated and measured⁴. Social sciences, on the other hand, deal with human beings, which are in constant movement and change (Baker, 2006; Brewer, 2000). Ethnography and many branches of social sciences are based on *Naturalism*, which is the assumption that "*the social world is not reducible to what can be externally observed, but is something created and recreated, perceived and interpreted by people themselves*" (Brewer, 2000: 34, own emphasis).

The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences defines ethnography as the "*study of people and their culture in their natural habitat*"

⁴ Although, postmodern critique (since the 1950s) of empirical research and natural sciences argues that there is no knowledge that is objective and truthful. In particular, philosophers such as Kuhn, Feyerabend, Boudrillard or Foucault deny the existence of all universal truth statements, even if they are based on mathematical and empirical evidence (Brewer, 2000: 24).

(cited in Robben et al, 2007: 7), including their behaviour, rituals, symbols, beliefs, values and emotions, in order to understand the people and their culture from an *inside* point of view. Ethnography is mainly based on the research method called *participant observation*: the researcher immerses him-/herself in the field for a long-term study (mostly 12-24 months), learns the native language and manners, and participates in everyday-life activities, while at the same time observing people, behaviour, events and everyday activities. The methods used to gather data are flexible, unstructured and open-ended (Burgess (1982) cited in Brewer, 2000: 18). Often, ethnographic research is described as *bricolage*, using different strategies and research methods to gather data (Alasuutari, 1995: 2). For example, besides participant observation, anthropologists make use of interviews, document analysis and focus groups, as well as questionnaires⁵ and essays.

The four imperatives of ethnographic research are: (a) what should be studied are the meanings people *themselves* give to the social world; (b) research-respondents should be allowed to give answers in their *own* terms, that is, their own native language and in their own words; (c) research has to go in *depth*, because native meanings are often taken for granted and thus, remain subconscious even to natives themselves; and (d) research and data has to be analysed and interpreted in the social *context* in which these meanings emerge (Brewer, 2000: 163-4). What distinguishes this form of research from e.g. quantitative surveys and questionnaires, is that

⁵ While other social sciences use questionnaires based on 'closed' questions, allowing the respondent only to choose from pre-determined answers (e.g. Dorji's (2005) '*Questionnaire for the study of youth in Bhutan*' (part of the *National Youth Survey*)), anthropologists often use questionnaires with 'open' or 'free' responses. This qualitative approach offers a unique insight into the respondents' sentiments and experiences that cannot be obtained by using limited choices of answers only (Brewer, 2000: 63; Mathews et al, 2010: 7)

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anthropologists take into account both verbal *and* non-verbal behaviour (Alasuutari, 1995: 16), and present data from an *emic* - that is, and insider's or native's - perspective, which acknowledges that often each individual of a group has different perceptions and experiences of the same action or event (Fetterman, 2010: 20-1). Culture is, as Rabinow (1977) suggests a "*heterogeneous web of meaning spun by the people themselves*" (cited in Robben et al, 2007: 443). In this regards, anthropology has the advantage of recording these multiple perspectives of realities, which are all crucial to understand why people think, feel and act the way they do (Fetterman, 2010: 21).

Very good examples of the various voices of people under study and how qualitative data can complement quantitative surveys are Dorji's (2005) monograph '*Voices of Bhutanese Youth*', as well as Dorji and Kinga's (2005) '*Youth in Bhutan: Education, Employment and Development*'. Dorji's (2005) narrative and case-study approach (ibid: 1-142) vis-à-vis a quantitative survey (National Youth Survey, ibid: 143-171) provide a detailed insight into the individual lives and struggles of Bhutanese youth. As Dorji (cited in Dorji and Kinga, 2005) states in an introductory note:

Youth development should entail the views of young people who can offer a perspective that is unique to them. What they express about their experiences, challenges, expectations and outcomes can bear so much on the policies and programs pertaining to them (ibid: 4).

For example, Bhutanese policy makers asked themselves why universal enrolment has not been achieved yet, and why so many students drop-out of education, albeit provision of free education and schooling infrastructure. Dorji and Kinga (2005) identified that besides state subvention, many rural parents, who depend on agriculture for basic income, cannot afford the costs of school uniforms, travel to schools or boarding fees (ibid: 8). Moreover, children are needed at home, to provide farm- or other labour, in order to contribute to a family's financial stability (ibid: 11).

Yet, Dorji's (2005) narratives also provide an unexpected clue to understanding non-enrolment and drop-out rates: the

analysis of case studies demonstrated that although 33 percent of students dropped out of school for financial reasons, 31 percent of respondents stated that they had to give up school because they come from a 'broken family' - that is, parents are divorced or dead, or children suffered from parental alcoholism or abuse (ibid: 146-8). Whilst reading the accounts of Bhutanese teenagers as presented in Dorji's work, Bhutanese policy makers are allowed a glimpse into the psychological strains and emotional hardship of some youngsters, which otherwise may have remained hidden. Although the quantitative survey may provide us with numbers and 'hard' data of drop-out rates, these narratives provide a unique insight into what really concerns the Bhutanese youth. Dorji argues that

Organisations and programs can be more cost-effective and responsive by ensuring that the problems of young people are heard, recognized and acknowledged with the appropriate actions," and more importantly: "the purpose of this [survey] is not to portray youth as helpless victims of circumstances, [...] but to identify problems based on their views and stories (Dorji and Kinga, 2005: 4; own emphasis).

It is exactly this emic perspective of life, that anthropological research tries to reveal. By using case-studies and narratives, rather than numbers or arbitrary interpretations, anthropological data often simply presents 'how things are from an insider's perspective'. Similar to Dorji and Kinga's work, anthropological data often comes in form of narrative extracts of natural language (Brewer, 2000: 163), whilst at the same time considering socio-cultural life as all-encompassing and multi-layered. This principle is similar to Buddhist philosophies, which I will demonstrate below.

Ethnography and Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism is deeply embedded in all aspects of Bhutanese society and thus, in GNH. The basic doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism is *sunyata* – the interdependence of all things in the cosmos. According to this principle, nothing exists independently from each other, but everything influences and depends on each other: as Alan Watts states, all elements (matter & mind) of life are interconnected to

make “*a universal symphony of harmonious totality*” (cited in Suzuki, 1963: xx).

The Buddhist principle of interdependency also forms a major part of ethnography. Through immersing him-/herself into a community, the fieldworker aims to gain a holistic perspective of human beings and their interrelationships with all aspects of human life (Robben et al, 2007: 4). Holism and contextualisation are guiding principles in ethnographic research, making qualitative data immensely complex, rich and multi-dimensional - just “*like life itself*” (Alasuutari, 1995: 43). Analysis of data includes consideration of all “*multilayered and interrelated contexts*” (Fetterman, 2010: 11), such as a community’s religion, history, environment and economy. As in Buddhism, anthropologists assume that all elements of society and culture are interrelated and interdependent, and cannot be analysed in the absence of relevant elements. In contrast to quantitative surveys, which use mere samples of a population in isolation of socio-cultural contexts, and which can be conducted in a very short period of time, quantitative research is characterised by a vast complexity, which requires from the anthropologist to remain in the field for a prolonged period of time (12-24 months) in order to “*gather many kinds of data that create a picture of the social whole*” (Fetterman, 2010: 19).

These research principles would be suitable for the Bhutanese researchers' own Buddhist views, with particular consideration to *sunyata*. More importantly, as GNH is based on an all-encompassing principle of interconnectedness, anthropological research, with its emphasis on holism, would prove itself as the most fitting research method to operationalise and measure its policies and effects.

Another principle of Buddhism is *impermanence*, which emphasises that reality is transient and in constant flux

(Tideman, 2009: 1). Similarities can be found in the *Heraclitean*⁶ view of anthropology. As Fernandez (1994) states:

We anthropologists have long had the Heraclitean understanding that we cannot step into the same stream twice. (cited in Wolcott, 1995: 167).

Ethnographic research acknowledges that some aspects of socio-cultural life are in constant flux and change over time. Although the core of a culture remains consistent, people may accommodate it differently over generations, time and space. Thus, we assume that the ethnographies we produce are not ever-valid accounts of reality, but that any social science research (including quantitative surveys) only captures a community and their perceptions in a particular moment in time (and, of course, in a particular context). Thus, critique emerged that ethnographic research (or other social sciences for that matter) is limited, because it cannot be repeated (in the same society, at a different time). Again, the difference between empirical, natural sciences and social sciences are evident: natural sciences can achieve validity and reliability of data by repeating an e.g. experiment over and over again, and obtain the same results. On the other hand, social sciences deal with a different subject: human beings and their perceptions and experiences in life. Both humans and their life are in flux and people's perception and experiences of reality are ever-changing and fluid.

The acknowledgment that anthropological research provides a snapshot of a particular community over a specific period of time is, however, not a short-coming but an advantage in the Bhutanese context. Rather than claiming that qualitative approaches are fixed and last over time, the self-reflexive anthropologist clearly states that impermanence and change is a basic inevitability of human life - particularly for a nation

⁶ From Classic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who states that there exists no permanence or permanent reality, but that change and fluidity is the natural law of the universe; nothing exists apart from another, everything is interconnected and part of whole (Russell, 2005)

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in progress of modernisation. Bhutan has experienced a vast shift since the early 1950s, and will continue to change over the next decades - maybe in even more radical ways than before.

A good example would be Bhutan's efforts for democratisation, whereby the first ever elections were held in 2008. Political parties and rallies are a new phenomenon for the Bhutanese, and only the next election will show, how satisfied the public is with its elected National Assembly. Democratisation is a long process, which implies changes and conflict, and thus, is impermanent in its outcome and reception by the public. I am strongly convinced that a survey on the public's view on democratisation and elections held before 2008 may have had different results than before the next upcoming elections - even more so, in 20 years time, when elections and the modern democratic landscape are naturalised and embodied by a new generation of Bhutanese citizens. This does not, however, render present public surveys or ethnographic research meaningless, but rather provides important clues of changes over time and space, and more importantly over several generations. The important element of analysing and presenting data is reflexivity as well as the acknowledgment that every form of social research is - as society itself - impermanent and ever-changing.

More important than the similarities between Buddhist principles and ethnographic research, is the consideration of Buddhism for data analysis. From an anthropological perspective, GNH and related policies are closely entwined with the socio-cultural framework from which these ideas emerged. In the Bhutanese context, it is particularly relevant to understand Bhutan's 'spiritual' make-up, which is a strong driving force of socio-cultural, medical, educational and economic activities (Nestroy, 2004). More than that, Buddhist values and meanings influence the Bhutanese' personal values and "*provide meaning to life*" (Donnelly, 2005: 368). This unique Bhutanese characteristic has to be included in data analysis, and has to form part of a holistic interpretation of data. Donnelly (2005) goes so far as to argue that pilot

studies have to be conducted, in order to gain understanding of the "*nature of happiness as experienced by the Bhutanese*" (ibid: 368). It is exactly in these contexts, where qualitative, ethnographic research would be a valuable addition to quantitative data (also see below: Ethnographic research of GNH).

Ethnography for Bhutan

Francoise Pommaret - herself a specialist in ethno-history and research about Bhutan - argues in her paper 'Recent Bhutanese Scholarship in History and Anthropology' (2000) that "Bhutanese anthropologists are much needed to research and write on their cultural heritage, oral traditions and material culture" (ibid: 136). She states that Bhutanese writers often "unknowingly" produce ethnographies (ibid: 132) - that is, rich descriptions and illustrations of their socio-cultural reality. These often autobiographic compositions provide important insights and understanding of Bhutanese culture. More importantly, these works record what has "previously remained oral" (ibid: 133), and thus, preserve traditional knowledge for future generations.

Notably, I want to highlight the former queen of Bhutan A.D.W. Wangchuck's book 'Treasures of the Thunder Dragon' (2006), which is a rich and vivid account of not only Bhutan and its demography, but also of the common sentiment and socio-cultural life of Bhutanese people. It is indeed full of treasures and provides the reader (Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese alike) with stunning accounts of Bhutan and its people. Similarly, Kunzang Choden's compilation of Bhutanese folktales (2002), does not only comprise of beautiful traditional tales (which have previously remained oral), but also includes an insight into how these tales are told⁷ and the role these tales play in Bhutanese society (ibid: v-vi). In the same way, Rennie and Mason's anthology of

⁷ Foreword by Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Choden Wangchuck, pp. v-vi

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(what Pommaret and myself would consider ethnographic) texts 'Bhutan: Ways of Knowing' (2008) is full of rich descriptions of Bhutanese life, stretching from folklore over landscape to culture and education. These works are, in my view, what Pommaret would describe as "invaluable ethnographical testimonies" (ibid: 133), which form part of a novel, written record on Bhutanese society. These historical, autobiographic texts are of uttermost importance for Bhutan, and ultimately the project of GNH.

What distinguishes ethnographic research from autobiographical records, is that the anthropologists are social scientists, who find themselves in a constant dualism between 'becoming native' and professional distance. The famous anthropologist H. Powdermaker (1966) stated:

To understand society, the anthropologist has traditionally immersed himself in it, learning, as far as possible, to think, feel and sometimes act as a member of its culture and at the same time as a trained anthropologist from another culture. This is the heart of participant observation method - involvement and detachment (cited in Brewer, 2000: 62).

Ethnographic research is a difficult task: not only must the anthropologist immerse him- / herself into an unknown community, but as a researcher, the anthropologist must also keep a certain *distance* to the society, in order to obtain an objective overview of the elements he / she intends to study. Autobiographical material may be ethnographic, but the 'native anthropologist - that is, a researcher that studies his/her own culture or community in a familiar setting - may lack detachment and objectivity. Pommaret (2000) emphasises this problem by stating that it may be difficult for Bhutanese anthropologists to resolve possible issues between their own religious and socio-cultural beliefs and critical, objective norms of research (ibid: 137). She calls on the Bhutanese to embrace anthropology, ethnography and participant observation methods in order to gain an insight into Bhutanese culture. This should be done "*alongside other researchers from around the world*" (ibid: 136), who, in my opinion, can provide the necessary detachment to enhance

autobiographical material towards objective ethnographic accounts.

I note here, that Pommaret's view of ethnography is characterised by what we in anthropology call the *Boasian* tradition - originating with German-born anthropologist Franz Boas⁸ (1858-1942) - whereby anthropologists set out and collect illustrations of socio-cultural idiosyncrasies, including records of traditional languages. These texts are a testimony of human multi-culturalism⁹, highlighting the splendour of diverse cultures. Examples are McKay and Wangchuck's (2006) piece on traditional Bhutanese medicine, Sharma's (2007) essay about Bhutanese folktales, or Pommaret's (2006) work about Bhutanese dances. Again, I emphasise the importance of such ethnographies - in particular consideration to Bhutan, which has begun to collect written records of oral traditions only fifty years ago.

Anthropology in *Malinowskian* tradition¹⁰, on the other hand, is more concerned with practical and functional approaches to ethnographic data, which is often analysed in light of theories concerned with human beings and socio-cultural life in general. As an example, I mention Rieki Crins' (2008) work "*Meeting the Other: Living in the Present, Gender and Sustainability in Bhutan*", which goes beyond description, and attempts to provide analyses and clues for scholars and policy makers alike.

⁸ Boas is also called the 'founding father' of American anthropology'

⁹ Multi-culturalism in this case does not mean multiple cultures in one physical area, but the multiple cultures that exist throughout the world in different parts of the globe

¹⁰ Based on theories by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 - 1942) - a Polish-born anthropologist, who founded the British school of Social Anthropology, as well as Functionalism. He is considered (together with Boas) as one of the first Western scholars to conduct ethnographic research, and his work, most notably '*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*' (1922), remain important references for contemporary social scientists.

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Besides slight differences in *Boasian* and *Malinowskian* anthropology, the paper at hand aims to describe the advantages of using '*applied anthropology*' in order to enhance measurements and operationalisation of GNH. Applied or practical anthropology is concerned with practical applications, whereby data not only serves to enrich written records of traditional, native life, but more importantly, data should enhance policy-makers understanding of the impact of policies and governance (Brewer, 2000: 147, 158). This form of ethnographic research aims to emancipate and empower the people or communities studied, with particular emphasis on the perspective of those people, who are directly under the influence of said policies (ibid: 162). By recording the voices, views, opinions and concerns of the people on the ground level - that is, the general population and body of citizens whom policies address - much can be revealed about the impact of policies. That is to say, that qualitative research could be of great importance to assess how e.g. GNH is perceived by the wider Bhutanese population, how they themselves assess its successes and failures, and how and why populations react to GNH-led policies. It is here, that qualitative, ethnographic research can enhance statistical evaluations of GNH. To quote the anthropologist A. Walker (1988):

Qualitative research copes with the flexibility and complexity of the social world better than quantitative methods, allowing it to respect and cope with diversity and recognize multiple ways in which people understand and react to interventions and policies (cited in Brewer, 2000: 162).

Ethnographic research of Gross National Happiness

Gross National Happiness implies the complexity of human happiness and well-being. But can happiness be defined and measured easily? Is 'happiness' a 'Western concept' or a universal mode of life-satisfaction, with innate qualities? Can the term 'happiness' be easily translated cross-culturally? What factors are influencing happiness in what context and for what kinds of respondents?

At first glance, the above mentioned surveys by Donnelly and Veenhoven rely strongly on specific definitions of happiness. Both Donnelly (2005: 348-9) and Veenhoven (2005: 287) assume that happiness is a functional, biological component that shares universal similarities throughout the globe, and that a person remains within a specific 'level' of innate happiness throughout time.

Anthropologists assume that human well-being is subjective and significantly varies cross-culturally. Human happiness does not exist by itself, but is intimately entwined with internal and external factors such as health, relationships, family, religion and everyday activities. As Mathews et al (2010) state: "*There is no unambiguously single pursuit of happiness - rather, there are multiple 'pursuits of happiness'*" (ibid: 1, original emphasis). Thus, anthropologists assume that people's definition of happiness vary significantly, depending on socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic conditions, as well as age, gender or ethnicity (Thin, 2009: 713).

Mathews and Izquierdo (2010) provide a very detailed definition of happiness from an anthropological perspective:

Well-being is an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole. It is conceived of, expressed, and experienced in different ways by different individuals and within the cultural contexts of different societies: different societies may have distinctly different culturally shaped visions of well-being. Nonetheless, well-being bears a degree of commonality due to our common humanity and interrelatedness over space and time. Well-being is experienced by individuals - its essential locus lies within individual subjectivity - but it may be considered and compared interpersonally and interculturally, since all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large (ibid: 5).

This definition lead to a very significant issue in the attempt to measure happiness in Bhutan: it is, what social scientists call the 'language bias'. For example, can words such as 'happiness' be translated or used simultaneously for 'well-being'?

'Happiness' is characterized as an ambiguous concept that entails different meanings and emotions depending on the individual, the socio-cultural environment and also, language itself (Graham, 2005: 44). The issue of translation arises in the multi-lingual context of Bhutan, which prides itself with its rich and diverse lingual heritage. Although English is the main medium of instruction in formal mass-education in Bhutan, it cannot be assumed that the whole Bhutanese population is able to speak and understand (not the mention, being literate in) English or even Bhutan's majority language Dzongkha. Thus, surveys conducted in English only, are unrepresentative for the whole nation. This has vast implications for GNH-related surveys on happiness. Donnelly (2005) warns of the difficulties to translate surveys from English to a Bhutanese dialect, and then translate it back to English. She states "*the subtleties of emotional concepts may not be directly translatable and could possibly be unfamiliar to Bhutanese people*" (ibid: 368). But the problem does not only emerge for English translations. Is it possible to translate the Dzongkha term for happiness *gha-key* into other Bhutanese dialects? Do all Bhutanese vernaculars carry the same meaning and emotional attachment than the Dzongkha word?

This is a significant critique of surveys even in the Western concept. 'Happiness' cannot be easily translated to other e.g. European languages, and even if 'native' terms can be found, they may not imply the same *emotion* or *attachment* as the English word 'happiness' would imply for English speakers. As an example, I briefly describe my own experience as a German native speaker: the English word 'happiness' cannot be translated to a single word in German language. '*Freude*' or '*Fröhlichkeit*' (two German words that can be found in dictionary translations of 'happiness') do not imply the same 'strong' emotional connotation as 'happiness' would imply in English. These two German terms are more subtle than the English 'happiness', and these 'states-of-mind' are not seen as something to particularly strive for in German-speaking society. Often, 'happiness' is translated to German as '*Glück*', which means 'luck' rather than 'happiness', implying that

'happiness' is something intangible, outside of the individual's control or concerns. This difference in meaning, could have vast implications for quantitative surveys, attempting to measure the government's impact on people's well-being and enjoyment of life.

Ethnographic evidence demonstrates that language differences have significant impacts on surveys (e.g. Hymes, 1971). Indiscriminate and culturally insensitive translation of words result in surveys measuring different meanings and connotations than intended. In order to render surveys valid, the production of surveys must entail careful consideration for native terms, with particular consideration of local socio-lingual peculiarities. The commitment of anthropologists to learn the native language and to dissect linguistic meaning in data analysis is an advantage of ethnographic research, which renders this form of research method all the more important for Bhutan's policy makers concerned with GNH.

Moreover, Donnelly (2005) acknowledges that happiness is "*an emotion [which is] intangible except by direct experience*" (ibid: 348), and it is exactly *this* experience of happiness that differs across the globe. She argues that culture determines the 'value' we ascribe to happiness, and that culture and "*social norms*" influence our perception and feeling of happiness (ibid: 349). In this context, ethnographic research can offer clues to understand these cultural differences and how they influence perception, and thus measurements, of happiness. Moreover, ethnographic research has the advantage of being able to gain a deep insight into the 'experience' of happiness, and how it is played out in daily practices. Through long-term engagement in the field and participant observation, anthropologists are able to experience this 'intangible' emotion first hand.

What distinguishes ethnographic research from quantitative surveys is that the method may impede response bias which may arise in surveys and questionnaires. Veenhoven (2005) himself acknowledges the criticism that responses to surveys only reflect "*normative notions and desires*" rather than

"indicating how much the respondent enjoys life" (ibid: 297). That is, respondents' answers only reflect their perception of e.g. how happy they *should* be, rather than how happy they actually *are*. This response bias is mainly determined by 'social desirability' and 'ego-defence' (ibid: 298): the individual - even if dissatisfied with life - will answer according to social convention, which in the Bhutanese context would bestow vast importance to score high on happiness surveys.

Similar forces are observed in surveys used for the UN's Human Development Index. For example, in Diener' and Suh's influential paper "*Why are North Americans happier than Easter Asians*" (2000), it was assumed that Western, developed nations score higher in happiness-ratings because of financial and economic security. Japan, on the other hand, scored lower on these surveys, despite the fact that Japan is one of the wealthiest nations on the globe, with an internationally competitive GDP (cited in Mathews et al, 2010: 7). Critique mainly arose from anthropologists studying and working in these nations. Baumeister (1991) for example, demonstrated that US-Americans used to score higher on happiness-scales, because they "*may inflate their reports of happiness*" (cited in Mathews et al, 2010: 7). In Japan, on the other hand, one of the most important social conventions is personal modesty. Thus, the reason Japanese score lower on happiness-surveys is not because they are 'less' happy than US-Americans, but because the social convention of humility does not 'permit' them to score higher on such scales. On the other hand, US-culture requires from the individual to be happy 'at all costs', which in turn means that even if US-Americans are dissatisfied with life, they deliberately score higher in happiness-surveys (Mathews et al, 2010: 7-8). Thus, it could be argued that survey data only tells us something about the social desirability of happiness, rather than 'real' levels of happiness. The same issues arise when we consider *who* conducts the surveys. Responses to government officials conducting surveys will reflect social conventions much more than responses to their friends, family and community. Social

desirability is a strong force which has to be critically examined in the use and analysis of quantitative surveys.

Considering these issues demonstrates that social science research is a complex matter, dealing with complex human life. All the more important is the acknowledgment of the shortcomings of using only one particular method of research. In this light, measuring, operationalising and monitoring GNH in Bhutan becomes a vastly complex endeavour, requiring immense considerations.

The accurate measurement of happiness in Bhutan is of particular importance, as these surveys provide clues of the successes and failures of the Bhutanese government to provide "*wellbeing enhancing*" policies, projects and infrastructures (Zangmo, 2008: 26). Zangmo, for example, argues that the measurement of happiness tells us something about "*how development projects impact the mind of the Bhutanese population*" (ibid: 26-7; my emphasis). Thus, it is of highest significance to carefully devise surveys including *both* quantitative and qualitative research, in order to obtain a full picture of what is happening on the ground level. The holistic approach of Buddhism may also be a guideline for social research in Bhutan: starting from an all-encompassing view and seeing respondents for what they are - not merely numbers that can be put in a chart, but complex, living beings, with their own mindset and Weltanschauung.

Summary

This paper aimed to demonstrate the advantages of using ethnographic and qualitative research alongside quantitative surveys, in order to measure, operationalise and test GNH in Bhutan. I provided a brief background of anthropology and ethnographic research, and highlighted the fact that while quantitative surveys can tell us much about *how many* people give importance to specific domains of GNH, ethnographic research would allow Bhutanese policy makers to understand how happiness, and in turn, GNH is perceived by the public, and why individuals feel the way they do. I

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outlined how ethnographic research, and its emphasis on holism and a Heracleitean *Weltanschauung*, is closely related to Buddhist principles, allowing Bhutanese scholars to adapt effortlessly to this form of research. I illustrated that anthropological definitions of happiness and principles of research may foreclose linguistic bias in Bhutan's multilingual context, and that qualitative research takes into consideration the multitude of ways in which happiness, well-being and thus, GNH is perceived by a variety of individuals. Ethnographic research can shed light on how happiness is reached and embodied in daily practices and experiences, and how satisfied people on the ground level are with GNH-related policies. Finally, I referred to the rich body of what I consider ethnographic work about Bhutan, and introduced applied anthropology as an important way to measure GNH and its policies.

I want to return to the starting point of this paper, and reiterate the magnitude of GNH for Bhutan, *and* the wider world. In times of economic recession, persistent suffering, hunger and poverty, and of course, the threat of the destruction of our natural environment, Bhutan's unique project will become more and more relevant for all of humanity. In September 2010, Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley took centre stage at the UN, calling upon the world's leaders to adopt happiness as a Millennium Development goal, in order to reduce, and ultimately end "poverty, hunger and disease" (Witcher, 2010). If happiness becomes a global aim however, it is of uttermost importance to extend research of GNH and related policies beyond mere quantification, and introduce qualitative research on the ground level. If this can be achieved and GNH succeeds, it may easily create a new and better future for all of humanity and the future generations. As His Majesty (2008), the 5th king of Bhutan famously declared in his coronation address:

The future is neither unseen nor unknown. It is what we make of it.
What work we do with our two hands today will shape the future of
our nation. Our children's tomorrow has to be created by us today.

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