

Implicit notions of a happy person in elementary school students

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the substantiation and results of a study of implicit notions of a happy person in elementary school students. The methodological foundation is constructed by D.A. Leontiev's two-level model of happiness, K. Riff's concept of happiness as the basis of psychological well-being, and V.L. Sitnikov's concept of the image of a person. The deployed research method is "SPI(H) — the Structure of a Person's Image (Hierarchical)" (V.Sitnikov) including the verbal and non-verbal associative experiment with the subsequent content analysis. The novelty of the study lies in the comparison of the image of a happy person and self-image through the psychosemantic method including a comparative analysis of the notions of a happy person in children from complete and incomplete families. A happy person is associated by elementary school children with an emotionally positive attitude towards life, a responsible and caring attitude towards people, the presence of a family and active interaction with it, less often with success in educational and intellectual activity and material well-being, as well as the presence of friends. A happy person is idealized by younger students, however, their image is more abstract compared to children's self-images. Elementary school students from complete families are characterized by greater conformity of the self-image with the image of a happy person whereas only half of the children from incomplete families show such correspondence. The predominant modality of both images is positive in all children. Social, bodily, and metaphorical characteristics are more common in the image of a happy person among children from incomplete families while the conventional social role characteristics dominate among children from complete families. The prospects for further study of the image of a happy person in elementary school children within the framework of family psychology are outlined.

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1 Introduction

Under the conditions of the economic crisis and the pandemic, there emerges particular interest in the understanding of existential categories such as “happiness”. The ambiguity of this concept in the scientific field has led to the difficulty of studying it in specific scientific studies. The categories of subjective and psychological well-being including a set of personality characteristics predicting happiness (E. Diener, D.A. Leontiev, D. Myers, K. Keyes, C. Ryff, M. Seligman) began to be used since the 1970s. In C. Ryff’s opinion, happiness is a complex of affective experiences associated with the emotional component of psychological well-being [1, 2]. M. Joshanloo found a connection between perceptions of happiness and subjective well-being [3].

Happiness currently presents the subject of research in positive psychology [4]. One of the objectives of positive psychology is to develop the concept of happiness through scientific rigor and empirical research [5]. Foreign studies explore the differences between pleasure and happiness in game addiction [6] and examine emotional intelligence as a mediator between perfectionism and happiness [7].

The image of a happy person forms based on a variety of components. One of the models of understanding happiness is D.A. Leontiev’s two-level model based on A. Maslow’s idea of deficiency and growth motivation [1].

Happiness as an existential category starts to develop in childhood. As C. Milosz describes his experiences: “Happiness experienced in childhood does not pass away. Individual events of childhood did not overshadow the entire length and meaningfulness” [8].

Younger school age has specific characteristics that determine the relevance of the study of the image of a happy person particularly in this period. A child remembers the emotionally important events which serves as a foundation of worldview and belief. This age is a significant stage of the formation of the image of subjective psychological well-being and happiness. At the same time, this period is critical for the development of self-attitude and the formation of the foundations of learning activity and intrinsic motivation. Learning activity becomes more successful if the emotions of happiness prevail revealing social contacts and forming cognitive functions and effective problem-solving at the behavioral level. V. Panev indicates that “Being happy in the learning activity, completing tasks, children learn better and become more involved in the educational activity” [9]. Research of O.A. Donskikh and L.Iu. Logunova is devoted to the study of whether a person can find happiness in the process of learning [10]. According to several scientists, the well-being and happiness of a 7-10-year-old child are associated not with success in educational activity [11] but with other components among which relationships are essential.

The degree of experience of happiness and subjective well-being depends not only on individual and personality characteristics but also on the system of human relations. Personality characteristics start to acquire stability in elementary school children and the notions of happiness and a happy person depend on the immediate environment to the greatest possible extent. A child’s positive self-perception throughout their school life is linked to relationships with peers. T.N. Kanonir’s study reveals differences between the groups of elementary school students with academic achievement below the formal level and students with a higher level in the number of friends, the frequency of cooperation with classmates, and hostility in communication with them [12].

A child’s understanding of various abstract social and moral phenomena including the understanding of “what it means to be happy” often reflects evaluative judgments of other

people, particularly teachers who play an essential role in creating conditions for students' psychological well-being [11]. Happy teachers can work effectively and establish favorable relationships with students [13]. Foreign researchers believe that happiness and life satisfaction increase with socially engaged activities [14].

Parents continue to have a significant influence on children's stereotypes about happiness. Modern research shows that happy mothers raise happier and less anxious children [15]. O.A. Karabanova's study proves that "the components of psychological well-being of an elementary school child are connected with parents' psychological readiness to reconstruct their relations with the child and establish adequate forms of cooperation. Disharmonious types of family upbringing interfere with a child's psychological adaptation to school education" [16].

Implicit theories of happiness begin to emerge actively at the age of elementary school and are flexible enough to develop and change which is important for the development of positive self-concept and the formation of a harmonious personality. Even though representations of happiness in elementary school students predict their further views on happiness in adult life, there is relatively little research in this age group largely due to the lack of appropriate research methods.

2 Methods

The present study conducted in 2018-2020 implements the subjective, projective approach to the phenomenon of happiness. The goal of the study is to research the implicit notions of happiness in elementary school students. The study objectives include identifying the structure and content of the image of a happy person based on elementary school students' implicit notions, comparing their self-images with the images of a happy person, and analyzing the contingency of the structure and content of the images on the type of family. The sample comprises 141 children at the age of 8 to 11 years old from the city of Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad and Rostov regions (105 children from complete families and 36 children from incomplete families). The methodological basis is formed by the conception proposed by V.L. Sitnikov [17]. The deployed methods include V.L. Sitnikov's SPI(H) method, content analysis, and Fisher angular transformation.

3 Results

The analyzed material consists of 1416 words describing a happy person and 1629 characteristics of self-image. As predicted, the image of a happy person among elementary school students is positive (1022 – 72%). Most often, children attribute emotional characteristics to them (702 words, 49.6%), for example: cheerful, joyful, smiling, does not like sadness, etc. Next come the characteristics determining the specifics of interaction with people (527, 37% of all words) –(kind, affectionate). This group is followed by intellectual characteristics (261, 18.5%) – (discerning, does well at school), activity characteristics (204, 14.4%) – (plays a lot, arranges holidays), bodily and physical characteristics (189, 13.3%) – (is not sick, beautiful), motivational and volitional characteristics (84 words, 5.9%) – (confident, brave), and acquisition characteristics (75, 5.3%) – (rich, nice house).

Besides the differentiation of the characteristics of a happy person by personality traits, the words listed by the students were combined in meaning groups. We obtained a generalized portrait of a happy person involving a positive attitude towards life ("cheerful", "joyful", "smiling", "laughs" – rank 1), a caring attitude towards people ("do good things", "kind", "helper", "independent" – rank 2), the presence of family and active interaction with it ("have a good family", "mom takes them for walks", "go on walks with their dad", "big

family” – rank 3), success in intellectual activity (“study well”, “read”, “have excellent marks” – rank 4), financial well-being – rank 5, having friends (“friend”, “not lonely”, “have a dog” – rank 6), and health and beauty – rank 7.

The comparison of the self-image and the image of a happy person reveals the following differences: elementary school students more often describe themselves with active ($\varphi=3.00$, $p<0.01$), emotional ($\varphi=3.36$, $p<0.01$), bodily ($\varphi=5.67$, $p<0.01$) and conventional characteristics ($\varphi=7.29$, $p<0.01$). The image of a happy person contains social ($\varphi=6.16$, $p<0.01$), behavioral ($\varphi=2.65$, $p<0.01$) and acquisition ($\varphi=2.62$, $p<0.01$) characteristics. The predominant modality of both groups of images is positive, however, the image of a happy person contains significantly more positive characteristics ($\varphi=2.03$, $p<0.05$) and less neutral ($\varphi=3.74$, $p<0.01$) and negative ones ($\varphi=7.16$, $p<0.01$).

Differences are found in children’s images of a happy person depending on the type of their family. The images provided by children from incomplete families are dominated by the social ($\varphi=2.12$, $p<0.05$), bodily ($\varphi=1.92$, $p<0.05$), and metaphorical characteristics ($\varphi=2.12$, $p<0.05$) while the images of children from complete families predominantly contain the conventional characteristics ($\varphi=1.77$, $p<0.05$). The analysis of the correlation between the non-verbal components of the images of a happy person and the self-image of younger schoolchildren shows that 75.78% of children from complete families identify themselves with a happy person, 14.28% contrast the studied images, and the rest show no correlation between these images. In incomplete families, 53.8% of children compare the image of a happy person and the self-image and 46.2% contrast them.

4 Discussion

The obtained results on children’s image of a happy person are consistent with M. Seligman’s formula of lasting happiness [18]. The first place in elementary school students’ notions of a happy person is occupied by optimistically colored characteristics, the second place is occupied by relations with family, the main factor in children’s socialization and the third and subsequent places are occupied by relations with other significant subjects of socialization (peers, teachers). The group of personal factors ensuring the experience of happiness and reflected in the image of a happy person is represented poorly which corresponds to the age norm. In adults, personality is one of the strongest predictors of happiness (subjective well-being) [19].

The revealed differences between elementary school students’ images of a happy person and self-images indicate their idealization of a happy person both from the spiritual and social side and from the material side thus representing both levels of the happiness model according to D.A. Leontiev. The image of a happy person is abstract in comparison with the self-image which indicates the predominance of external factors in the formation of images over internal ones.

Elementary school students’ notions of a happy person point not only to their ideal goals and values which agrees with the conclusions of M.A. Abramova [20] but also to the ways allowing a child to become happy.

The specifics of notions of a happy person among elementary school students from incomplete families indicate the importance of social and bodily contacts for achieving happiness corresponding to the “deficiency-motivated happiness” in D.A. Leontiev’s classification [1].

The results of the study of the notions of elementary school students from complete and incomplete families are consistent with the conclusions of T.O.Gordeeva et al. [11] on the role of the family in the formation of children’s happiness.

5 Conclusion

The image of a happy person in the mind of children comprises optimistically colored characteristics associated with relationships with family and other significant socialization subjects (peers, teachers). Personal characteristics are rarely present in their images of a happy person.

Children associate a happy person with a positive attitude toward life, a caring attitude toward people, the presence of family and active interaction with it, less often with success in intellectual activities and material well-being, and the presence of friends.

The comparison of the self-image and the image of a happy person shows that self-image is more often characterized by activity, emotional, and bodily features and the neutral and negative modalities are more specific. The image of a happy person is dominated by social, behavioral, and acquisition characteristics and the positive modality.

The image of a happy person in children from incomplete families corresponds to the level of “deficiency-motivated happiness” whereas children from complete families demonstrate the “being-motivated” level. The prospects for further research are found in the study of different categories and characteristics of the family allowing to examine the specifics of the images.

The study of the image of a happy person in elementary school children also appears important from the point of its process: in answering questions about happiness, children ponder it and begin to recognize its subjective meaning which agrees with the ideas of Ad Bergsma [5].

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