

Ott J.C.: "Level and inequality of happiness in nations; does greater happiness of a greater number imply greater inequality in happiness?", *Journal of Happiness Studies* (in press).

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DOI 10.1007/s10902-005-0935-1

*Situational Happiness*

Review of Rotraut Walden's "Glück and Unglück; Glücks- and Unglückserlebnisse aus interaktionistischer Sicht" (Happiness and Unhappiness: An Interactional View on Experiences of Happiness and Unhappiness). Ansanger Verlag: Heidelberg, 2003, ISBN 3-89334-408-X.

This book, a dissertation, consists of two parts. The first part reviews much of the research on happiness and emotions and the second part is empirical in nature.

The first part is thorough. Walden offers short and adequate summaries on work that has been done on positive affect and happiness, but it is not altogether clear who will profit from all this work, Walden does not offer enough guidance to readers who are new to the field. The descriptions of existing viewpoints and data are scant, which makes these texts difficult to follow. The book also lacks a meta-view that could put the building blocks firmly into place. The different elements exist next to each other, but it is largely up to the reader to see cohesion. Readers who are familiar with the field are less vulnerable to this problem, but such readers have less reason to read this part. The summaries do not offer new viewpoints, so experts can only refresh their memory and check whether their knowledge is complete.

Such readers can start reading from page 95, the beginning of the empirical part. Walden rightly considers this second part

as the heart of the book. This part offers additional value because it studies happiness as an emotion in great detail. Walden's work is interactional in nature. She studies the events which make people feel good or bad, how people react to the situation and how important individual preferences for social or technical work are in these circumstances. This is accomplished with questionnaires, so the validity of the results depends on the self-knowledge of the participants. This is a potential drawback. To give just one example: in the review of Baumeister (2003) self-confidence was almost unrelated to performance in different aspects of life, like school grades, giving-up smoking, preventing unwanted pregnancies and having good social relations. Taking initiative is the exception because self-confidence is really helpful in this respect.

Examples of positive events studied by Walden are: getting to know a new partner, finding recognition in a group, feeling one with nature, the birth of a child and solving a difficult task. Negative situations are the loss of some one close, losing face in a group, falling ill, being disappointed by a person you love and being the cause of an accident.

According to the participants happy situations lead to a range of affective reactions like feeling that life is worthwhile, feeling strong, free and aware. Other strong tendencies are the urge to do things, to laugh and to feel relaxed. Less strong reactions in happy situations are making plans for the future, searching for contact with others, being more sensitive to other people and feeling safe and well taken care of. Not typical and not atypical of happy situations are helping, listening to music, dancing, singing, to stop thinking, thinking things over and buying things. Eating, drinking, watching television and withdrawing are very uncommon in happy situations.

In unhappy situations the most common behaviour is thinking things over, feeling down, lonely and withdrawing. Neither typical nor atypical are crying, feeling tired, listening to music, searching for contact with others, missing the meaning in life and talking to oneself. Atypical reactions are helping, buying, eating, drinking, watching television and doing handwork. If we add the individual differences to these situations it is clear that young people tend to show a stronger reaction to unhappy or

happy situations than older people, women react more strongly than men, and people in social occupations react more strongly than people who work in the natural sciences. But the individual differences within these groups can be quite pronounced.

Walden's work on happiness is based on a broad interactional viewpoint and her findings are intriguing. For example, why didn't the participants want to eat when they experienced an unhappy event? Food can often offer consolation, but perhaps the events described are too severe for such an easy way out. Or maybe the participants only answered the question with the strict time limits of the event described in mind and, of course, you do not eat while losing face in a group. The eating is done when you are alone at home with a well-filled refrigerator. But Walden pays little attention to a discussion of the dynamics of the emotional reactions to the event and she does not refer to the research about the long term consequences of life events on happiness, like that of Headey and Wearing (1992). The theoretical and practical implications of her findings are not very clear. Walden describes the different trees in the neighbourhood, but does not get into the helicopter to describe the forest. She leaves the reader with the 'so what' question.

#### REFERENCES

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