

# How Should We Go About Researching Happiness & Wellbeing?

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Last month, I had the immense fortune to attend the 14<sup>th</sup> *International Congress of Ethnobiology*, this time held in the wondrous country of Bhutan. Bhutan is perhaps best known to the world for being the only country that has officially endorsed Gross National Happiness (GNH) over Gross National Product (GNP), the latter being the standard – and increasingly criticized – global measure of national development. It was also wonderful to see that this beautiful country and culture – one of the only in the world- has managed to resist so many ugly facets of globalization. And that's not all: Bhutan has officially designated 42% of its surface area as National Parks, many of which are connected by ecological corridors. Conservation seems to go beautifully hand-in-hand with the still widely practiced Buddhist philosophy, as the people still hold great reverence to countless numbers of sacred sites, many of them protected natural phenomena. In addition, it is unheard of to evict people from Protected Areas; it is possibly still the norm to live in relative harmony with nature, still winning over many of the less sustainable and outdated e.g. Forest Policy Laws (which, incidentally, were adopted from India in the 1950s, remnants of British colonialist-style conservation and forest management).

*One of Bhutan's many Natl Parks*

The Congress The congress I attended – along with 300 or so other participants – is the main gathering of the International Society of Ethnobiology

to bring together researchers, academics, students, policy-makers, lawyers and community leaders from all around the world, including from the hosting country. This year, to my pleasant surprise, an exceptionally large number of indigenous peoples and their representatives also attended the conference. It was the largest ever international conference organized in Bhutan to date, explaining perhaps why her Royal Highness Ashi Chimi, the Princess of Bhutan, was present herself at the opening ceremony, enlightening us all with her beauty and her well-spoken words on the importance of traditional knowledge in guiding us into the future.

Lamai Compa site of Congress

The congress was very well organized and generously hosted by UWICE, the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment, a government research and training institute under the Department of Forests and Park Services (Ministry of Agriculture and Forests). The week-long congress (1<sup>st</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> of June) took place in the stunning Lamai Gompa Dzong in Bumthang, a valley in central Bhutan, a 12-hour bumpy and dusty yet spectacular bus ride from Paro, where we had all flown into. The conference format consisted of a healthy and stimulating mix of conventional academic presentations and more open discussions, talking circles, workshops, cultural presentations, field trips, and even a Biocultural Film Festival! The over-arching conference theme was “Regenerating Biocultural Ecosystem Resilience”, under which sub-themes included topics related to conservation and governance, but also much less rarely touched upon ones such as “Living Well: Environment, Sacred Heritage and Livelihood” and “Mindfulness, Ethics and Mental Ecology”. For a more general account of the conference, see here for another blog I co-wrote with my colleague Álvaro. [Highlights on wellbeing](#) Already on the very first day of the conference, there was a scientific stream on “Health and Wellbeing”, (in which I also presented some of my own recent research results). In this session, I was enlightened particularly by the speaker before me, [Evelyn Roe](#), who posed the question: “[How does the way of knowing affect what we come to know?](#)” Drawing from insights she had gained while observing water lilies in Zambia, Evelyn gave an excellent presentation on phenomenological botany, with a strong and clear message of how much we miss out on when we only use intellectual, analytical, scientific approaches to try to understand things, while disregarding the more holistic, intuitive, experiential ways of knowing. Her talk illustrated how a holistic paradigm of science starting at the observational level could help to build more meaningful and better grounded research studies. Now what does this have to do with happiness and wellbeing, you may ask? Quite a lot, I would say. While not meaning to discredit mainstream scientific approaches, so much of wellbeing research has to date been carried out in precisely this “intellectual, analytical, scientific way of knowing” that Evelyn referred to, almost in an obsessive manner of attempting to find the perfect measurement scales, analytical frameworks, and then see who are, for instance, “the happiest people on Earth”. One might stop and question whether we are being contradictory in our approach and to the very nature of happiness and wellbeing, concepts far more on the holistic, intuitive and experiential scale than what measures of them indicate. A couple of days after Evelyn's talk, our plenary audience was gently led into a few minutes of peaceful silent meditation by Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi, Director of the National Museum of Bhutan and enlightened monk. Hundreds of people sitting in perfect silence in the large auditorium, having just been taken through an exquisite visual journey of Bhutan's Sacred Sites... quite something for a conference! This was the session called “Sacred Mandala: Protecting Bhutan's Sacred Natural Sites”. In his talk, Khenpo spoke about how there is another sort of “sacred site”, namely the inner sacred site, and that we conservationists and ecologists often forget and overlook this. He spoke to us of the new global disease – nature deprivation – and I was once again reminded of how intricately inter-linked the inner and outer worlds are. How many have stopped to realize how strongly connected our natural environment is with our mental and physical states of wellbeing?

A sign for visitors on the path to the Tiger's Nest

Policy-makers and mass media speak to us of growth, and progress and development, measuring these with predominantly materialistic and economic indicators. Meanwhile, the more a society “develops”, the more it seems to stray from nature. Makes me wonder whether perhaps [access – or - connection – to nature](#) should be included in the next version of the GNH index? As for happiness, I smiled to myself when our speaker, who is regarded a national expert on happiness and GNH, did not want to give us a definition of happiness. According to Khenpo, each person has their own specific and unique definition of happiness and what it means to them, and that is how it should be. I couldn't agree more! So why are we so fussed about studying, measuring, comparing, and categorizing happiness and wellbeing, if happiness and wellbeing are such uniquely individual experiences? Wellbeing at the community level Another great section in the ISE Congress was the double session dedicated entirely to presentations and discussion around “*Community-led initiatives for wellbeing in a changing world*”. Co-chaired by [Gary Martin](#) (Global Diversity Foundation) and

*Octaviana V. Trujillo* (Northern Arizona University), the session was one of the most deeply awakening ones that I attended all week, and excellent in its balance of presentations and open-floor discussion. Gary Martin opened the session nicely underlying that whatever term we want to use, be it “wellbeing” or “buen vivir” or “happiness” or “living the beautiful life”, it is clear that this broad concept is becoming increasingly discussed, studied, used, marketed, and even institutionalized and constitutionalized (take Bolivia, Bhutan and Ecuador as examples). But how do we, as individuals and communities, understand or live these concepts. The point of the session, as Gary clarified, was to focus not so much on the institutions or academics behind wellbeing, but on what *communities* had to say about it. What followed were a highly diverse set of rich and informative talks by several community leaders and representatives, as well as individuals working closely with communities and their wellbeing. *Wellbeing for the Bribri of Costa Rica* Alí García Segura (Univ. of Costa Rica), a Bribri indigenous representative from Costa Rica, gave a moving talk about the mismatches between Western and indigenous culture and concepts in Costa Rica. He told us that in his native language, there is no word for “love” or “nature” or “life”; all these words are one and the same concept. In his culture, there is no need to utter words for this concept; one simply “lives it”. For Alí and his people, these are all internal terms, not external concepts to be verbalized. He went on to explain how confusing it can be for his community when outsider researchers come and want to talk to them about “wellbeing”. Similarly, he shared with us an interesting characteristic of his culture: people don’t ask questions: if one has a question, then the answers to it are believed to arise naturally and by themselves through dialogue. So again, when foreign researchers come to their villages and go directly from one household to another with their ‘survey’, asking lots of questions on concepts they don’t have words for, not surprisingly, the local community are left feeling awkward. What a great example of the challenges in communication between cultures, and between local and “scientific” ways of knowing and expressing. According to Alí García Segura, wellbeing for the Bribri is rooted in everything, in the seed of life itself. “*If I am well, then everyone else is well. If everyone else is well, then I am well*”. In the Bribri culture, others come first: by ensuring that everyone else is well, one also ensures that one self is well. Hence, not surprisingly, according to Alí, they also find it hard to grasp the foreign notion of ‘development’. The impression they have been given is one of having a big car and a big house. But they themselves know that, this is not development. Development is being in good health, and knowing that the entire family and community are also well. Alí also replicated the usual story of external development agencies that arrive in his village with pre-determined “development projects”. I would almost say development “packages”, seeing they do not even bother to ask the Bribri about what development might mean to them,

A placard seen at the entrance to a Dzong (temple)

The case of Buganda Kingdom Another inspiring account was that given by

**Mahmoud Ssekimpi Ssemambo**

, the Prime Minister of the Buganda Kingdom (Uganda), who gave a lengthy and comprehensive talk about “Nurturing wellbeing in the Buganda Kingdom”. He started off by pointing out that in Buganda, anyone can be well, no matter what their social class, status, or rank in society. According to Mahmoud, his peoples recognize three underlying forms of wellbeing: the physical, spiritual and environmental. All these are seen as integrated by basic knowledge and wisdom and governance systems. Wellbeing for the villagers of Buganda is ultimately about good health, being at peace with one another, knowing one’s responsibilities and obligations, and looking after each other. Community wellbeing requires a conducive environment, fundamentals of which are land for growing sufficient food and working health systems. Community work also plays an important part of life, as does sharing (e.g. of seeds) and participation in communal events. In order to maintain their traditional knowledge system and wisdom, the principles that Buganda Kingdom adhere to include: generosity, even to strangers; children’s upbringing by the entire community (no orphans, thanks to extended family set-up); and a strong belief system guiding their norms and practices, including taboos to delineate clear responsibilities (e.g. on natural resource management and hygiene).

*One of many encountered sacred spots in Bhutan*

Despite these good intentions, not all has been smooth and easy in Buganda Kingdom. Influences from outside (i.e. new settlers who do not understand or appreciate local structures), coupled with increased Westernization and commercialization (local villagers aspiring to the Western culture as if it were better) have also resulted in an increase in selfishness, the selling of land for quick money (especially by the younger generation) and inefficient health systems. But rather than let mainstream development run its often damaging course, the Buganda Kingdom have taken a number of initiatives towards enhancing community resilience and wellbeing, including: a revival of territorial sovereignty and integrity (they were just recently given land titles after previously having been on state-owned land!); a move towards preserving traditional customs and traditions; embarking upon self-help projects (e.g. food sovereignty), and; revitalizing traditional medicine knowledge and practice. All in all, quite an exemplary account.

**Other African initiatives**

Unfortunately (due to parallel sessions elsewhere) I missed the presentations by Rimuy Pagung (Sarep Southern Africa Environment Program) and Friedrich (Fidi) Alpers

(Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation, Namibia). I heard later on in the coffee break, however, that Fidi’s talk was excellent and very much in line with my own work, so I approached him and found out that he is working to help to facilitate inter-generational transmission of Traditional Ecological Knowledge between elders and youth to improve wellbeing in Bwabwata National Park, Namibia,. Wonderful! And it gets even better: the indicators of wellbeing they use include dignity and self-determination.

**Stories from North America**

Octaviana Trujillo, a Yaqui Native American and Professor, gave us a positive insight into what it is like to walk the line between academia and community work, as an indigenous representative herself. She managed to reassure me at least that it can be done. Octaviana took a few minutes to share with us some good news from the USA, where the national government has finally started providing some “mini-grants” (funded by some National Institutes for Health and Science Foundations) for more meaningful research on health and wellbeing – “meaningful” in that the research is also geared to benefit the community. According to Octaviana, the funding bodies have realized that if they really want to solve long-term problems of health and wellbeing in Native American settlements, they have to get to the root of it, by working directly with the communities themselves.

“You can tell much about a country by the way they treat their animals” In Bhutan even the dogs seems happy

So, Octaviana has been visiting Native American reservations to interview the elders about what health, wellbeing and happiness mean to them, and about their visions and wishes for future generations. I am already curious to hear more, both about the research findings and about the hopefully

positive implications these research-collaboration projects at multiple levels. The most deeply touching presentation was that given by Linda McDonald (Liard First Nation) who shared with us a short film, "Educating Our Youth", produced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. It spoke to us in an open and raw manner about the effects this reconciliation effort has had on healing historic trauma from the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada as a result of forced residential schools and all the implications these have had across generations. Many of us in the audience were moved to tears by this powerful video clip (available freely online here). The session ended with Gary Martin leaving us to ponder on how we – humanity – can be well, if and when we are inflicting injustices and suffering upon others, whether due to race, class, sexual orientation, gender, or whatever absurd reason. Some final reflections At the end of the session on "*Community-led initiatives for wellbeing*", I found myself questioning some seeming contradictions that had risen in the presentations. For instance, while we learned that for the Bribri of Costa Rica that it is culturally inappropriate and insensitive to ask them questions about wellbeing (for two predominant reasons: a) they don't use words to describe such concepts, and; b) it is not in their culture to ask questions) we learned in contrast from the USA that this kind of investigative approach seems to be precisely the way forward for any kind of meaningful research and effective collaboration with the Native American communities. Another puzzling discrepancy was that while in some societies (like Buganda Kingdom), equality in terms of social class/status does not seem to be a prerequisite of wellbeing, other speakers were stressing the importance of it (as also established in other research and brilliantly argued by, for instance, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009) in their highly recommendable book *The Spirit Level*).

My last day in Bhutan. The magnificent Tiger's Nest

As a researcher of cross-cultural notions of wellbeing, I am left to wonder where this leaves me, and us... What do differences and contradictions like these mean for global and cross-cultural research on – and initiatives for – wellbeing and happiness? How do we move forward when we find ourselves stumbling upon such surprisingly different cultural inconsistencies like the ones mentioned above? Why should we even attempt to draw any universal definitions or measures of wellbeing when there apparently exist such fundamental differences in what are considered determinants of wellbeing? There are moments like these when I feel stuck, in internal dilemma, about whether I should just drop my happiness and wellbeing research, and leave it to float in the unarticulated space of the intuitive, with no need to dig deeper or analyze further. Why not leave it for each individual and community to live their own concept of wellbeing, and express it as they wish? I also wonder how we as researchers impact upon cultural notions of happiness and wellbeing when we try to categorize and define, measure and weigh, analyze and compare these intangible concepts? How does the constitutionalization of happiness and wellbeing relate to individual and community-held views and perceptions? All this I was left to reflect upon while sitting on the 12-hour post-congress bus ride to Thimphu, and while gazing out of the window over the endless blankets of green, I again found my naturally inquisitive mind ticking. The next day, while having breakfast with a Finnish friend working in Thimphu, Riikka Suhonen, I was given Bhutan's official report on "*Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm*". Along the rest of my trip, I read it cover to cover, captivated, frantically scribbling notes along the margins. First published on Radical Ecological Democracy blog