Review Article

Happiness of the Family: Ethnographic Studies in Germany and Japan
Das Glück der Familie: Ethnographische Studien in Deutschland und Japan

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This volume focuses on understanding the family roles in pursuit of happiness. The study captures how the six families (i.e. three of Germany and three of Japan) express collective meanings of happiness given their own context. Varied expressions and meanings of happiness in the contexts of Christmas in Germany and New Year festival in Japan are cross-culturally examined by noting the common features and differences through ethnographic research methods.

The book consists of three parts, namely: the context of Germany, the context of Japan, and the transcultural elements revealed in two countries. In the first part, the context of happiness through Christmas festival among the three middle class families from Germany is described and analyzed. In the first family, gift giving has been the core theme among the family members. They express their happiness pertinent to the occasion by giving gifts which is based on a tradition of Christmas. The gifts represent love and importance of the family members. Over and above material things is the primacy of the family that brings true happiness. Material things are means of expressing the message of the season and a typical way of bringing happiness.

Integration through the season is revealed in the case of the second family. Given the context of separation, creation of a new family, and integration of the offspring from previous relationships are integral for the couple. They provide a venue for belongingness and oneness among family members, which is very evident during Christmas. Christmas serves as a venue for reconstructing and constructing of memories in order to convey happiness. The couple's mutual commitment, efforts to unite all the children, and ritual practices pertinent to Christmas pave the way for a picture of happiness and lasting memories.

In the third case, observation was done for a short period of time in consideration of the seriously ill member of the family. However, there were salient practices that caught the attention

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of the researcher. The third family is also faithful with the traditional way of celebrating Christmas. Songs, gift giving, and decorations are part of the festivities. Dimensions of sensibility and contemplativeness were evident during Christmas Eve as the family attends mass, exchanges gifts, and feels the season through the flamboyant decorations. They believe that the physical and material symbolism are not in vain but have religious basis.

The second part of the book shows how the three Japanese families construct happiness through the New Year festivities. The first family in a village near Kyoto celebrates New Year in a traditional way, as the bonds of the old and the current generations. The celebration is based on Shinto and the Buddhist rituals. The celebration includes the four generations of the clan; the deceased great grandparents, the grandparents, the parents and their children. The graves of the deceased members of the clan are visited by the family members in the afternoon of New Year’s Day. In Japan, there are varied traditional ways of celebrating the New Year. Some Japanese hold ceremonies in the family Buddhist altar, while others go to shrines and temples in the community. Further, special symbolic meals are prepared for the occasion. This day is an opportunity for the grandparents, parents, and children to enjoy their time together. Thus, happiness is constructed as the living family members spend the time for bonding activities along with the memories of oldest in the clan.

Youth as the fountain of hope becomes evident in the construction of happiness in the case of the second family. The New Year symbolizes hope. It is surrounded by practices that will push worries away and facilitate a new beginning – a purified mind. In this context the members of the family play an essential role in constructing happiness. The older generation enables the younger generation to understand and maintain the practices that purify the mind. On the other hand, the sons or daughters, no matter how far away they may live, usually come home to celebrate the transition of year with their parents and other older members of the family. Their homecoming brings hope and happiness.

On both sides is the core of the celebration of the third family. The young family constructs happiness as they celebrate the New Year with the grandparents on both sides, who are in Osaka and Kyoto. The first night of the New Year is spent with the grandparents on the maternal side. The couple brings along their small daughters and two small dogs to celebrate the event. On the second night, the family celebrates with the paternal side. As the family celebrates the New Year, it is believed that happiness thrives in their midst. This research focuses on various situations: playing games and eating together, visiting shrines, and the meaning of the dogs for the family. If happiness has something to do with mediation processes, it is not only expressed in physical actions, but is recognized as well in certain situations. Various mediations are useful for happiness as means of interaction and communication within the family: e.g. the children, the dogs, the foods and drinks, etc. The New Year’s holiday in Japan is seemingly boring because the family just spends time together without doing anything in particular. However, activities extend from various games with the children to some form of relaxation for adults in order to achieve a certain extent of happiness. Nevertheless, this may not be very evident to the casual observer because it is more of a homeostatic balance of powers, energies, attitudes and actions. Happiness of the family in Japan is constructed as natural and is often extended toward the local community.

In the final part of the book, five transcultural elements of happiness are introduced as important issues: eating, exchanging gifts, religious practices, memories and stories of the family, and activities to promote bonding and togetherness. The short descriptions of these five elements show how they produce happiness within the family.
Despite the difficulties in describing cultural practices, this volume succeeds in showing that happiness is produced within the family as evident in the case studies in Germany and Japan. However, the influence of globalization and the increasing complexity of society should not be neglected. While it is still observable that a concrete religious doctrine retains its influence in maintaining traditional Christmas rituals in Germany, Japan’s pantheistic social background serves as a strong foundation for the family’s activities in New Year. It is remarkable that the research teams point out a feature of happiness in Japan: that happiness is produced by simply spending time together with family members. The happiness that is created may not be either apparent or easily observable; nevertheless it is present and ineffable.

Moreover, there is a need to reexamine the current proliferation of social problems in Japan, such as isolation from the family or strong individualism. In fact, the younger generations are having difficulties in finding a partner to marry. Some of the reasons are financial problems and decreasing social pressures towards marriage. Moreover, older generations are becoming more isolated even to the point of dying alone. In Germany, they make efforts toward building a stable family life after a divorce in order to be happy, despite being labeled by society as “patchwork families”. If the younger generation in Japan remains comfortable with being alone and isolated and avoids forming families, how might they achieve happiness in their lives? Can one be happy without a family? This volume can awaken Japanese society of what may constitute a happy life and could also inspire in the young generation the value of maintaining traditional practices.