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PUBLIC HAPPINESS AND ITS CAUSES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to determine the main causes of public happiness in Malaysia. Happiness scores were obtained using Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. Four factors were selected namely economic status, life expectancy, religiosity and social capital. The study found that all four causes are significant and religiosity is the most dominant factor.

Keywords: public happiness**;** religiosity; economic status; life expectancy; social capital

Introduction

Making people happy is not an easy task and public happiness has become a center of attention to any people-oriented policy. It has been realized and accepted that relying on a single target of economic progress via higher economic growth or higher per capita is not a guarantee for people's well-being or happiness. The main challenge is that happiness is not directly observable and for many, it is hard to be defined.

Happiness is often described as a range of positive emotions, including joy, pride, contentment, and gratitude. Ng (2015) stated that happiness is an absolute, universal and uni-dimensional across different individuals who are capable of enjoyment and suffering. However, Mogilner, Kamvar & Aaker (2011) stipulated that the young people are happy due to their excitement while the older people derive happiness by feeling peaceful. In principle, happiness encompasses both personal and social aspect.

Basically, the state of happiness can be influenced by many factors such as material wellness or economic status, religiosity, life expectancy and social capital. In fact, whatever the factors present in life can be considered as factors that can give significant impact on the level of happiness. Such factors may also include certain policies that was introduced and implemented by the government. Easterlin (2013) stipulated that full employment and a comprehensive social safety net can increase happiness. The main objective of this paper is to estimate the level of public happiness and to determine several factors that have impacted it in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Realising the importance of public happiness as part of social and economic progress, the number of related studies has gone up tremendously for the last three decades. The studies that had investigated happiness at individual level are [Elmslie & Tebaldi, (2014); Dierendonck (2012); Wang & Wong (2011); Flynn & MacLeod (2015); Chyi & Mao, (2012); Cheah & Tang (2013); Blanhflower & Oswald (2004)]. Meanwhile, the studies that focused on national happiness are [Gundlach & Optinger (2013) & Ram (2009)].

Graham, (2009) provided a thorough investigation of happiness around the globe, ranging from poor countries till rich countries. She argued that happiness is now linked to strategic policy and has been taken as an indicator for national well-being. Some used general happiness or marital happiness like Elmslie et.al (2014), parental happiness [Myrskyla & Margolis, (2014)], good life [Dierendonck, (2012)].

Ng (2015) provided a detailed discussion on the need to appropriately measure happiness and emphasized on the need to use a sound methodological choice. Besides that, happiness can be seen different from one person to another and can be multi-dimensional. Hence, a single measure will not produce a reliable estimate.

Research Methodology

A survey was conducted in 2016 to identify the state of public happiness and to investigate whether economic status and religiosity have any roles in affecting public happiness in Malaysia. 601 respondents of various ethnic backgrounds were asked to self-rate their happiness, ranging from extremely unhappy to very happy.

For that purpose, 14 items were developed based on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire developed by Hills & Argyle (2002). Four determinants of happiness are used namely economic status, religiosity, social capital and life expectancy. These variables are also developed by constructing relevant items in each category and all variables are measured using 10 Likert scale. To determine the claimed association between happiness and the four factors, test of independence had been applied besides Person's product moment correlation.

Finding And Discussion

Using Cronbach Alpha, the scale reliability coefficient was 0.8746 which is considered as good enough for the data to be reliable. Pearson's product-moment correlations show the correlations between happiness and the four variables. Religiosity showed the highest correlation with 0.71 followed by economic status correlation (0.66), social capital (0.60) and life expectancy happiness (0.57).

Test of independence was performed to determine the association between happiness and economic status, life expectancy, religiosity and social capital. The chi-squared test results are shown in Table 1.1 below. Since the overall chi-squared test are significant, we reject the null hypothesis that economic status, life expectancy, religiosity and social capital are independent.

Table 1.1
Chi-Squared test results

Variables		Pearson X^2		Decision
		Value	Prob	
Happiness	Economic Status	4452.360	0.0000	Reject H_0
	Life Expectancy	4162.090	0.0000	Reject H_0
	Religiosity	5623.778	0.0000	Reject H_0
	Social Capital	4826.790	0.0000	Reject H_0

Religiosity appears to be the most influential factor, followed by social capital, economic status and life expectancy. Freedom to practice and carry out religious duties should be given paramount attention by the authority as this will enhance people's happiness.

The evidence from this study suggests that people's happiness should be placed as top agenda in running the social and economic program for national development. This requires a more comprehensive and inclusive policy to cater the upgrading of people's well-being. Additionally, enhancing material well-being alone is not sufficient to increase people's happiness. Hence, happiness must be managed in a more holistic approach.

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