

# Using Grounded Theory for Studying Meaningful Happiness among People with Physical Disabilities in Malaysia

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**Abstract.** The main objective of this research is to explore the meaningful happiness among physically disabled persons in Sabah by utilizing the Grounded Theory Methodology. A total of 24 physically disabled persons in Malaysia participated in this study. Data was collected by in-depth interviews with 7 respondents and by focus group interviews for 17 respondents. As a result of the in-depth interview, observation and memos, categories and properties were discovered for each aspects of meaningful happiness includes satisfaction, self (sense of appreciated, sense of acceptance), life purpose (short and long term) and positive heart, mind and emotion. This study also found four categories of meaningful happiness (a) social interaction, (b) support, (c) social justice and (d) self-qualities. The credibility of this research finding was tested by using the peer check, member check and triangulation method. This research can be a benefit to the field of positive psychology, the physically disabled community, institution, government and communities in general.

**Keywords:** Meaningful Happiness, People with Physical Disabilities and Grounded Theory

## 1. Introduction

Some researchers reported that a normal individual is found to be relatively happy (Diener & Diener, 1996) including people with disabilities (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999). The findings of this study were found to be in contrast with Titley (1969) which reported that the handicapped are less happy than normals; persons with spinal cord injury generally reported lower levels of happiness compared to the general population (Dunn & Brody, 2008); have a higher risk to get psychological problem (Lipowski, 1975), feelings of giving up, sadness and worried (Thurer & Rogers, 1984) and also have experience depression (Elliot & Frank, 1996) as compared to normal people. However, are those findings valid in the context of current situation among Malaysians? What is the People with Physical Disabilities (PwPD) understanding about happiness? What are the sources and factors which contribute to happiness among PwPD? Lyubormirsky (2001) suggested that there should be a framework for further research or theoretical model that can enhance our understanding of the causes of happiness, in which it is a vital and critical matter for a comprehensive scientific study of the optimal human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Dunn and Brody (2008) stated that income, education level, and social class have a low correlation with the happiness of person with disabilities. However, Dunn and Brody studies are in contrast with studies by Smith, Langa, Kabeto and Ubel (2005), Dunn (1996), Fisher and Hanspal (1998), Argyle (1999) and Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith (1999). Although Dunn and Brody have suggested that there are three foci (connections to other people, positive personal qualities and life qualities regulation) to the happiness of PwPD, however they also admit only few empirical studies on the theoretical formulation in the context of the disability in general, and they do not focus on the category of disabled people themselves. Marini and Chacon (2007:561) has suggested further studies were carried out on the happiness and welfare of person with disabilities and also whether traits and environmental factors contribute to the happiness and welfare of person with disabilities.

As such, they have equal rights and opportunities to live a life like other members of the community. Rights-based approach and also protection has to be used to ensure proper care of the interest and welfare of the PwD (Sabah Social Welfare Department, 2012). Based on the Malaysia 2005 Disability Statistics, as a whole, a total of 170, 455 persons with disabilities or about 6.5% of Malaysia's population that year was registered to the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia. During recent ten years period, there was an increase in the number of physical disabled people registered with the Social Welfare Department in Sabah, Malaysia which reported a total of 6314 people. Although the percentage of disabled people in Sabah is at

ratio of 0.48% of Sabah's population in 2010, but the number of disabled persons found to have increased over the years.

There are more than 40 studies related to social, economic, and vocational education among PwPD (Trieschmann, 1988). However, not many studies either in the form of quantitative or qualitative try to investigate happiness of PwPD; most studies focused on therapy and treatment issues (Khalifa, 1993; Payne, 1993) and other issues such as shelter, community reintegration and adaptation (Carpenter, 1994; Dewis, 1989; Heinemann & Shontz, 1984). Thus, the aim of the research is to understand the main concern (meaningful happiness) and how that concern is processed, in order to inform practice. The method Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser & Holton, 2004) was used to develop a substantive theory of the main concern.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Overall Approach and Rationale**

Grounded Theory (GT) is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses systematically to generate a theory about substantive part (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Glaser and Strauss (1967: 3) stated "To generate theory that fills this large order, we suggest as the best approach an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research. GT from the start means to systematically collect data and develop a substantive theory directly from data (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 4). GT objective is to generate concepts and categories that cause patterns of behavioral that are relevant (Glaser 1978: 78).

According to Glaser (1998: 115), a grounded theory "tries to understand the action in a substantive area from the point of view of the actors involved. This understanding revolves around the main concern of the participants whose behaviour continually resolves their main concern. Their continual resolving is the core variable." I chose the grounded theory approach because it allows "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 2). The grounded theory also "(1) enables prediction and explanation of behavior; (2) useful in theoretical advance; (3) usable in practical applications; (4) provide a perspective on behavior and (5) guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 3).

### **2.2. Participants**

A total of 24 participants (men = 18, women = 6) completed this study. The average age was 31.95 (range = 20 to 48). Of this group, 70.8% (n = 17) was identified as Bumiputera Sabah, 20.8% as Malay (n = 5), and 8.3% as Chinese (n = 2). The majority of these participants were Christians (54.2%), Muslims (41.7%) and Buddhists (4.2%). The participants in this study represented a number of types of physical disabilities: spinal cord injury (37.5%), polio (12.5%), leg amputation (12.5%), Guillain-Barré syndrome, GBS (4.16%) and 8 (33.3%) had congenital disabilities. According to Creswell (2007), number of samples in grounded theory is in the range of 20 to 30. Selection criteria of samples are based on the list of people with physical disabilities that are registered with the Social Welfare Department in Sabah, Malaysia. The procedure to select participants was purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007). After the open coding, further data collection was based on theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) according to the core category that was derived from the data. Selection of samples and data analysis is ongoing until reaching a level where there is no additional data, categories and properties that are found. This is called the saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Guba and Lincoln (1985) states that through purposive selection, expand and sequential, saturation point is achieved when sample reaches 12 people, and does not exceed 20 people and Douglas (1985) estimated at 25 samples.

### **2.3. Data Collection**

The Grounded Theory maxim 'All is data' (Glaser, 1998: 8). Data were collected and analyzed simultaneously. However, interviews and observations are popular sources of material (Scott, 2007). The main question posed to the participant was: Can you describe yourself? Other questions followed based on concepts and categories derived from the initial interviews. I conducted In-Depth interviews in my substantive area with 7 people with physical disabilities and Focus Group Interview with 17 people with

physical disabilities in various background as guided by theoretical and purposeful sampling. The interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hours in length. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, using digital audio recordings. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded the transcriptions.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

The interview and observational data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. This method was chosen to minimize the influence of preconceptions. The researchers began coding line-by-line and writing memos after the first interview. Researchers then compare the codes with each other during the coding process and seeks for more data through theoretical sampling. This process continues until there are no more new category and properties, which signifies the point of theoretical saturation. The cyclical constant comparing and writing of analytical and descriptive memos eventually leads to the emergence of a theory that explains the core category. While coding I continually asked myself, “*What is this data a study of?*” “*What category does this incident indicate?*” and “*What is actually happening in the data?*” (Glaser, 1978: 57). Constantly comparing and memoing eventually leads to a core category. The core category in my research is **meaningful happiness**. Once the core category has been identified, the researcher then selectively codes for the core category and related categories. The core category/variable becomes a guide to further data collection and theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1978: 61). Theoretical sampling means that further data collection is focussed on obtaining data relevant to the core category and related categories. At this stage, interview questions, which initially have to be neutral, can now be more directed since they are grounded in the concepts discovered in the data. Coding continues until the core category is, and related categories are, ‘saturated’. Saturation is achieved when no further properties are identified from the data, where incidents coded merely provide more indicators of existing properties. Theoretical sampling and saturation delimit the study such that the data need not be overwhelming. The next step was theoretical coding, sorting the memos and write up the theory. A literature was integrated of each extracted categories and properties from other research. Thus, GT requires following its rigorous procedures to generate a theory that fits, works, is relevant and readily modifiable (Glaser & Holton, 2004: 9). According to Glaser (2004: 2), “GT is inducted from systematically collected facts, which in the process for generating GT from data, constantly verifies its fit, relevance and workability, and adjusts (modifies the concepts and their relationships) the theory to the facts to achieve fit, relevance and workability. New facts are not “walled off.” They are compared into the GT to generate concepts”.

## 3. Results

***The phenomenon of meaningful happiness.*** In grounded theory, the core category or main concern narrates the main story of the study and encompasses all other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The core category or main concern in this study is the meaningful happiness, and it is created by the interaction of the four categories (Social interaction, support, social justice and self-qualities). The meaning within meaningful happiness includes satisfaction, self (sense of appreciated, sense of acceptance), life purpose (short & long term) and positive heart, mind, and emotion.

***Antecedents of meaningful happiness.*** According to the people with physical disabilities, there are four types of antecedents of meaningful happiness. These four factors can be categorized as social interaction, support, social justice and self-qualities.

## 4. Social Interactions

There are three sub-categories that describe the social interaction which are relationship, interaction and acceptance. Most of the people with physical disabilities are happy because of the acceptance from the society, especially among non-disabled people, when they interact. They are also happier when they have relationships with disabled and non disabled people. These relationships and interactions give them satisfaction and joy despite of their less than perfect physical condition than non-disabled people.

*"I am a disabled person (Spinal Cord Injury), and when I go out and interact with non-disabled people, they accept me, which is also one of the factors of my happiness" (R1)*

*"My girlfriend accepts me even though I am a disabled person (Spinal Cord Injury)" (R3)*

*"A happy moment is when there is acceptance from people; especially from normal people.. and when a person has desire and willingness to marry me; she (who is not disabled) is willing to become the wife of a disabled person" (R1)*

## **5. Support**

There are four sub-categories that describe the support which are caretaker/family support, friends, institutions (school, university, Cheshire home resident) and equipment. These supports are very important to enable disabled people to lead a good and better quality life. For example, people with physical disabilities are satisfied and happy when their caretaker is their parents and siblings that work together to give them emotional, physical and moral support since their assistance and continued commitment will help them achieve their life goals. Similarly, to the assistance and support from their friends in school and university. Moreover, people with physical disabilities are also happy when they are able to use appropriate and good quality equipment depending on the function and the use. The right and high quality equipment will enable disabled people to move freely and perform daily activities as how non-disabled people would do.

*"... they (his family) treated me well, that makes me happy" (R3)*

*"... I as a disabled person is equally treated the same as other siblings ... loved and not be excluded" (R4)*

*"I'm happy when I am here (Sabah Cheshire Home), because here I have many friends, and I can meet with some disabled persons" (R8)*

## **6. Social Justice**

There are two sub-categories that describe the social justice which are access and equality. Accessibility here refers to access to education, health, transport, environment, buildings and so on. Physically disabled people are happy when there is access and equality. As enshrined in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia, 2012), accessibility is one of the most important provisions for the disabled, including the physically disabled which is stated in Chapter 1, Part IV (Persons with Disabilities Act 2008). In Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, accessibility includes (1) access to facilities, amenities, services and public buildings; (2) public transport facilities, (3) education, (4) employment; (5) information, communications & technology; (6) cultural life, and (7) access to recreation, leisure and sports. A person with Disabilities Act 2008 gives the right to physically disabled people to be able to live equally same as non-disabled community.

*"Generally, disabled people are happy when there is accessibility. There are many types of accessibility... access to the environment, education, transport, health and access to the community, all of this is access " (R1)*

*"If there is equality, such as when we go to a place, we are not prevented from going there, or as examples, if a non-disabled person can go to school, then I can go to school, if a non-disabled person can take the bus, then I can take the bus, if a non-disabled person can go into a hospital, then I can go into a hospital. In general, a disabled person will be happy if there was equality in the society." (R9)*

## **7. Self-Qualities**

There are six sub-categories that describe the qualities of self which are emotion, cognition, behavior, religiosity, independent and achievement. Most people with physical disabilities rose from the stress and depressed conditions, and strive to achieve positive emotions such as joy, love, and fun. In addition, they also apply positive thinking, act and respond proactively, gratefulness, self-evaluation, and make effort to live independently to achieve the desired goals. These personal qualities give strength and enthusiasm to them to try to achieve meaningful happiness, which means not only to achieve happiness in the world but also in the Hereafter.

*"When I try to obtain something with much difficulty, I gain satisfaction from the results that I obtain" (R2)*

"As a disabled person, being able to carry out the same activity as a normal person makes me happy, for example, when I can socialize and spend time with friends (non disabled) without feeling the lack of something" (R5 & R9)

"One reason for me to be happy is I can live independently without fully being supported by the family" (R6)

"I want to be successful in life, I do not want to be despised by others. That's a long-term goal that I want to accomplish. When I achieve my goals in life, I feel happy (R14)

"Happiness in this world is only to the satisfaction of our bodies which are temporary ... after death of all who enter in heaven do not have to suffer as we have experienced in the world .... because we have a new body that will not perish and will not be chewed by age like body in the world and will live forever, so that is real happiness"(R18)

"I find happiness in myself, when I prioritize spiritual principles in myself" (R24)

## 8. Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the meaning and factors of meaningful happiness among people with physical disabilities. The researcher used grounded theory approach to understand the phenomenon of meaningful happiness for people with physical disabilities. The findings showed that meaningful happiness is referred to feelings of satisfaction and joy of achievement to be earned in this life and in the hope of achieving happiness after death. Meaningful happiness is influenced by four important factors, namely social interaction, support, social justice and self-qualities. The findings of this study would provide benefit to the people with physical disabilities, caretakers and families, communities, institutions, governments and scholars in the field of happiness, grounded theory and the field of community for people with physical disabilities.

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