

“Poor but Happy”: Life Struggle and the Meaning of Happiness among the Poor in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

Results from the 2019 Indonesian National Socioeconomic Survey showed that the poverty rate in the Special Region of Yogyakarta was 11.44 %, higher by 2.22% than the 9.22% national average. However, the National Human Happiness Index in 2014 and 2017 showed that the residents of Yogyakarta were among the top ranks. This study aims to describe the poor empirically and the meaning of happiness for them. Applying the qualitative method using a narrative approach, the results revealed that the informants were not happy living in poverty but were content with their lives for reasons attributable to the belief system and local culture. In the Javanese language, this attitude is called '*nerimo*', which translates into 'accepting the situation'. They practice this to improve their psychological well-being.

Survey Sosial-Ekonomi Nasional (Susenas) 2019 menunjukkan bahwa angka kemiskinan di Yogyakarta adalah 11,44%, lebih tinggi dari angka nasional 9,22%. Sementara itu, Index Kebahagiaan Manusia Nasional pada 2014 dan 2017 menunjukkan bahwa warga Yogyakarta berada pada ranking atas pada survey tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi situasi empiris orang-orang miskin and makna kebahagiaan bagi mereka. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang dan pendekatan naratif, hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa orang-orang miskin sebenarnya tidak bahagia dalam kemiskinan mereka. Namun demikian, mereka mungkin menyatakan bahwa mereka bahagia dengan hidup mereka karena berbagai alasan merujuk pada sistem kepercayaan dan budaya hidup lokal mereka. Pernyataan tersebut merefleksikan sikap mereka yang "*nerimo*", dimana mereka berharap -dengan sikap itu- untuk dapat memperbaiki kondisi psikologis mereka.

Keywords: happiness; narratives; poverty; the poor; Yogyakarta

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Introduction

The Special Region of Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta henceforth), a province on Java Island, Indonesia, is populated mostly by the Javanese and the only region with traditional Javanese kingdom governance. The poverty rate is high and difficult to eradicate. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2019 shows that poverty in Yogyakarta remained higher than the national average, 11.44% and 9.22%, respectively (BPS 2020). The rate was absolute assessed using the basic needs approach by summing up food-based and non-food-based poverty lines. Although the rate was calculated by considering local inflation, the percentage of poor people in Yogyakarta remained the highest among other provinces on Java Island from 2007 to 2018. The province has been among Indonesia's top five most impoverished regions (BPS 2019).

However, surveys in 2014 and 2017 by BPS showed that Yogyakarta scored high on Human Happiness Index, 70.77 and 72.93 points, respectively. The 2014 survey measured life satisfaction with ten aspects: environmental conditions, safety, job, income, housing, and assets. Meanwhile, the 2017 survey measured three dimensions of subjective well-being: life satisfaction, positive affect, and life meaning. Life satisfaction comprises personal aspects, such as education and skills, job, household income, health, housing, and facilities, and social aspects such as relationships, leisure time availability, social network, and safety factors. Positive affect refers to undepressed feelings such as being happy, not anxious, and not depressed. Life meaning refers to autonomy, environmental concerns, self-improvement, positive connection with others, life purposes, and life acceptance. Among these three dimensions, in

Yogyakarta province, social life satisfaction scored the highest at 76.02, followed by life meaning at 73.49, positive affect at 73.38, and personal life satisfaction at 67.95, (BPS 2020). This contradiction between the poverty rate and happiness index raises a question for this study as to why poor people in Yogyakarta feel happy despite their poverty.

Happiness or subjective well-being refers to people's positive emotional experience (Diener, Sandvik, and Pavot 2009) and a positive evaluation of their current life conditions (Diener, Diener, and Diener 1995; Veenhoven 1991). Studies show that happiness requires the fulfilment of multi-dimensional factors, i.e., material, physical, social, psychological, and freedom (Narayan et al. 1999, 2000). Other factors, such as life meaning, social networks, and trust, also contribute to well-being across different economic levels (Churchill and Mishra 2017; Oishi and Diener 2014). Research has also shown that the government's social benefits can improve the happiness level among the poor (Kilburn et al. 2018).

In Indonesia, factors that contribute to happiness include education, health, age, asset ownership, marital status, income, and consumption (Landiyanto et al. 2011; Rahayu 2016), as well as self-acceptance, gratitude, and spirituality (Maulana, Obst, and Khawaja 2018; Rahayu 2016). For people in Yogyakarta, happiness refers to having a good relationship with others and building a meaningful life (BPS 2020), so living in consciousness and harmony is key (Endraswara 2016; Muhni 2002). These perceptions are more apparent among older Javanese (Karmiyati and Amalia 2018; Setyo 2018). However, human adaptive capability tends to prompt people to suppress their aspirations (Clark 2009, 2012; Graham 2011;

Sen 1988). Here, poor people tend to adapt to poverty (Narayan et al. 2000).

Data in this article were collected through interviews and observations with 12 informants in Yogyakarta—five from Kampung Giwangan, Kota Yogyakarta, representing the urban community and seven from Dusun Bedukan, Kabupaten Bantul, representing the rural community. Two informants were male labourers, and ten were housewives. The inclusion of women's statements could represent the poverty impacts on women's lives, which is often considered more severe than men's. The interview uses open-ended questions: 'how is your life currently?' and 'how do you deal with poverty?'. These questions prompt more responses than other questions, such as 'what is the meaning of happiness for you?'. Data were collected in April 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Yogyakarta.

In the study applied Narayan et al.'s well-being dimensions (1999, 2000), the dimensions explore perceived happiness and its contributing factors among Yogyakarta people who lived in poverty. This study contributes to the literature by extending the body of knowledge on happiness in an eastern-developing country setting.

In contrast to previous studies on happiness. Research conducted by Narayan (1999, 2020) uses the dimensions of happiness as a measure of happiness. This research assumes that the more dimensions of happiness obtained, the higher human happiness. Research with happiness parameters also assumes that happiness is the same everywhere. This study is different from the research that has been done by previous researchers. This research reveals

happiness from the perspective of the perpetrator, not an outsider. Likewise, the strategies carried out are also with the consideration and perspective of the community under study. This research provides enrichment regarding concepts based on eastern communities, which have not been widely revealed.

The remaining of this paper is structured as follows: the first section introduces the study's central theme, the second section presents the happiness conceptual framework in the context of poverty, the third section presents the interview results in light of relevant literature, and the fourth section concludes the study.

Happiness and Well-being: A Conceptual Framework

The definitions of subjective well-being and happiness vary, but they generally imply people's positive outlooks toward their conditions. Subjective well-being is a positive evaluation of one's current life (Diener et al. 1995; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 2012), while "happiness is the degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his present life-as-a-whole positively" (Veenhoven 1997:5). Nussbaum and Sen (1993:36) consider well-being "an evaluation of the wellness of the person's state of being". Due to the similarity between well-being and happiness definitions, this study uses the two terms interchangeably.

Achieving well-being also implies that one has to achieve what one wants and needs (Sen 2005). These include basic needs fulfilment, i.e., physical and mental health, income, employment, social relationship, and freedom in choosing to contribute to other people's well-being (Maslow 1943); Narayan et al., (2000).

Nevertheless, people tend to be adaptive in the face of adversities, which compels people with low socioeconomic backgrounds to adjust their well-being expectations (Clark 2012; Graham 2011; Sen 1988).

Narayan et al. (1999) claim that inadequate financial well-being is only part of ill-being because, similar to well-being, ill-being or low life quality is also multi-dimensional. Narayan et al. (2000) also demonstrated that well-being includes material, physical, and social well-being, as well as security, freedom, and choices. Narayan et al. (2000:21) further state that “well-being and ill-being are states of mind and being”, comprising spiritual and psychological elements. While well-being reflects happiness, harmony, and a peaceful mind, ill-being shows negative emotions such as distress, anger, and mental breakdown.

Studies on Javanese people have shown that social relationships help them address financial issues (Casmini and Sandiah 2019; Geertz 1956; Kutanegara 2017). People living in poverty tend to perceive life as temporary. This perception helps them maintain psychological well-being amid poor physical and material conditions (Casmini and Sandiah 2019; Muhni 2002).

The Javanese tackle financial issues using the ‘shared poverty’ strategy, as captured by Geertz (1956). During the colonial era, the Javanese labourers with low capability negotiated their expectations by lowering their living standards to be equal with other peasants. However, this ‘shared poverty’ framework was a part of the Dutch exploitative tactics to establish and normalise poverty among the Javanese (Isaac 2018).

People living in poverty build social relationships to address their problems, but the

network is small-scale. In Sriharjo, a village in Bantul, Yogyakarta, social relationships and solidarity might have helped people overcome the economic crisis in 1998 and the disaster impacts in 2005. Nevertheless, they could not broaden social networks further as they only had limited financial and cultural capital (Kutanegara 2016, 2017).

Poor people in Yogyakarta believe that living in this world is temporary (Casmini and Sandiah 2019), as reflected in the idiom ‘*urip iku mung mampir ngombe*’, which roughly translates into ‘life is just a stopover for a drink’. This ingrained belief makes people see life as an opportunity to prepare for the afterlife. The consequence is that people avoid wrongdoings and attempt to do good deeds as much as possible. Casmini and Sandiah (2019) also found that people living in poverty obtain a sense of security by doing good for others because they believe others will also do good for them in the future. At the same time, they restrain their worldly desires to achieve happiness by practising ‘*nerimo*’ or acceptance as part of the ‘*eling lan waspada*’ principle, which means being aware and vigilant. Here, people admit that material well-being is important for them, but they try to stay aware and vigilant not to let material desires overtake them and lead them to misery.

However, Muhni (2002) pointed out that Javanese people may not easily identify a crisis due to this perspective. For Javanese, there is nothing out of God’s will and control, so they only need to accept the conditions. Accepting life as it is, rather than complaining about it, will allow them a peaceful life. Likewise, being unable to control worldly desires will lead to greed for material achievement and feeling constantly anxious.

The Narratives of the Poor in Yogyakarta: Financial ill-being, Restrained Desires, and Insecure Life

This study found that people living in poverty in Yogyakarta face hardships in sustaining livelihoods. They reported having applied both downward and upward adaptation, both resignation and optimism, to overcome the hardships. On the one hand, the poor have no freedom or many choices in life, have to restrict their aspirations and desires, and are insecure about the future. On the other hand, they are still optimistic and show gratitude, patience, and acceptance. They also build good relationships with their family and neighbours. In sum, they know they have not yet gained well-being as a whole, but their adaptive ability helps them face poverty and improve their psychological well-being.

Living in poverty in Yogyakarta means a struggle to earn money for a good living and being unable to choose a place of work or negotiate earnings. In rural areas, available work for underprivileged people often depends on the seasons. They often suffer physical illness or injuries during their work too. They seek both medical and alternative treatments to cure the illness and injuries. Although the government has issued national health insurance, the bureaucratic system to receive free medical treatments is cumbersome, so people pay the cost of alternative medicine instead.

“... (I) ride my bike alone to Madukismo (a place for alternative therapy). I only stopped for a quick rest when I went home. It is about an hour to get there and an hour to get home. My husband was worried about what to do if we had no money for another therapy. I told him to borrow money from neighbours because we had no other resources. I feel

sorry about this. I know our neighbours who lent us money also have children, but I do not know what else to do. I do not want to retire as long as my body is strong enough for work” (Sambiyati, 55 years old).

In rural areas, available work is often in the agricultural sector, which depends on natural seasons. For instance, one of the informants, Wakijan (55 years old), produces *welid*, a temporary roof made from dried sugar-cane leaves for non-permanent shelters such as brick maker stalls. In the rainy season, sugar cane leaves are scarce, and the demand for brick stalls also declines. Consequently, Wakijan cannot earn enough money during the rainy season.

Meanwhile, in the urban area, people living in poverty try to earn money by, for example, selling food and beverage below the market price. One of the informants, Fitri (32 years old) from Giwangan, explained how she sold food and beverage below the market price to make a living. Whether or not she gained profits was not the main focus. As long as customers came, she considered her business running and profitable. The hardship faced by the poor is reflected in Fitri’s statement below.

“The price (I set) is not enough (to make a glass of fruit ice), but I do not have any choice under these circumstances (poverty and pandemic). My husband is unemployed, and I have two children” (Fitri, 32 years old).

Another interview in Giwangan shows that the poor mostly live in inherited houses and land. If they have a big family, they divide the house and the land into smaller housing units. Retno (28 years) explained that she lives in her father-in-law’s inherited house with her in-laws. His husband’s family divided the house into smaller units with temporary walls. Now, this

house shelters three families of more than a dozen people.

Statements such as “*nggih jane mboten cekap, dicekap-cekapke*” are often heard among the people, which translates into “it is actually not enough, but we try to make the best out of it”. This statement suggests that people face hardships from limited financial resources, lower their expectations, and try to be happy with basic needs. Lia (35 years old) captured this situation in her statement below.

“It is okay to have little money as long as I still have something to cook. I accept it and try to spend the money carefully. Of course, that little money cannot meet our needs, but I know we cannot earn money every day, so I only buy things within the budget. If it is only enough to buy vegetables, then I will buy vegetables” (Lia, 35 years old).

People admitted that they were worried about their future as they only have limited resources on a day-to-day basis. They said, “*duko benjing pripun*” means “I do not know about tomorrow”, which reflects their inability to plan for the future. The government’s social benefits have helped people overcome financial issues, but the amount of money may not be enough to fulfil their needs. Also, some people may not be included in the program. As a result, people are trapped in debt or, in some cases, desperately run a ‘business’ to survive.

Prapti (45 years old) from Bedukan stated that she could not afford a uniform bundle for her daughter, so the enrolment process to junior high school was put on hold. Prapti received the government’s conditional cash transfer, but the money was not enough. The school did not give her a waiver or solution. She wished she could pay for the uniform in full when she got money, but that was not the case. After asking her mother and borrowing money from a money

lender, Prapti could finally pay for the uniform. Initially, Prapti did not admit that she borrowed money from a money lender, but a debt collector came to her house during the research interview.

Poor people in urban areas also feel insecure about their future, especially whether they will continue to earn money. Those who have received the government’s social benefits feel more optimistic than those who have never received it. Fitri (32 years old), from Giwangan, claimed to have never received social benefits from the local or central government. She said that her daughter received *Kartu Menuju Sejahtera* (KMS) or a welfare card—a government financial support for students from a low socioeconomic background. Fitri felt happy to receive the card, but she was disappointed when realising that she could not use it. After complaining to the local government, she discovered that she could not use the card because her daughter’s name was not in the KMS data. Fitri then opened a beverage stall with prices far below the market in her tiny house. Her husband was unemployed at the time of the interview, and they have two children to feed. She expressed her disappointment, “*sek do wes duwe kok do oleh (bantuan), sek ra duwe koyo aku kok ra tau oleh (bantuan)*”, which translates into “those better-off received the aid, but someone poor like me never received it”.

Young females with low socioeconomic status may experience both financial difficulties and emotional distress. They worry about their family and want to help their husband fulfil their basic needs but cannot afford a babysitter or send the baby to daycare. Tutik (28 years old), whose husband worked as a bricklayer without a stable income, expressed that she wanted to

return to work in Javanese, “*pengen nyambut damel malih*”. Two years prior, she quit her job because she had given birth and must take care of her baby.

The Meaning of Happiness among the Poor in Yogyakarta: Material well-being, Harmonious Life with Family and Neighbours, and Practicing Gratitude

This study found that people living in poverty in Yogyakarta define happiness as a feeling that comes after fulfilling basic needs. Both the rural and urban people believed they would be happy if they could earn more money and enjoy food. Others argued that living harmoniously with family and neighbours, or having a peaceful mind and practising gratitude, could also create happiness. They also believed they would feel happy when they could work, earn money, and provide nutritious food. Even if they had to work at night to earn extra money, they believed they would enjoy it. Wakijan (55 years old) from Bedukan, said:

“Wong nek payu nggih seneng arepo le nandangi awan bengi. Nek ra payu nggih susah, semplah”, which translates into “Even though I have to work days and nights, I will feel happy if I can sell my crafts. If no one wants to buy it, I will feel sad and tired” (Wakijan, 55 years old)

The people also stated that they received financial and psychological support from family and neighbours. Not only in suburban areas, but the community in poor urban areas also showed high social solidarity. However, some people reflected that living in harmony with family and neighbours also meant sharing their limited sources with family and neighbours. Sambiyati (55 years old) said:

“Kulo nek mboten nyrubat nyrubat jenengan nopo Mbak Dewi ajeng pripun,” which means

“How can I continue living without asking for help from Mbak Dewi (her neighbour)” (Sambiyati, 55 years old)

Furthermore, the poor argued that building a harmonious relationship with neighbours and families is more important than gaining financial benefits. For example, Ika (32 years old), from Giwangan, stated that she closed her food stall when her neighbours with a lower income opened a similar food stall in the neighbourhood. She felt uneasy about continuing her business as she said, “*kulo mboten kepenak*”, which translates into “I feel uncomfortable (to open a food stall and compete with my neighbour)”.

Another example, Tukijo (61 years old) from Bedukan, revealed that he used to give some of his harvested rice or other plants to his extended family. He realised that this would reduce his resources, but he could not stop the practice because that was part of the social norms. The community support was not only quantifiable. Sometimes, people gave labour assistance, such as babysitting children.

Another way to deal with poverty is by practising gratitude and acceptance. On the bright side, it reflects people’s ability to cope with the hardships of living in poverty. On the downside, it shows how the poor have no other resources to escape poverty impacts and seek consolations in such mental statements.

Almost all respondents said they were grateful for their current conditions despite not being free from hardships. The Javanese strongly believed that God would relieve their ill-being. Words such as *syukur* (gratitude), *nerimo* (acceptance), and *sabar* (patient) were recurrent in the interviews. The informants asserted they tried their best to deal with

poverty by trusting in God's mercy. They perceived that the current conditions should be accepted rather than resisted. The fact that they still had food to eat and their children were healthy was enough reason to express gratitude.

Practising acceptance also means spending money wisely on basic needs rather than unnecessary things. This attitude is captured in Rofiqoh's (35 years old) statement:

"I rarely go to the market (for shopping) these days. Yesterday, I felt reluctant to go to the market. God's mercy is everywhere, so I accepted this condition at first. I only have to be more economical, and I hope my children grow healthily" (Rofiqoh's, 35 years old)

Additionally, practising religious teaching often makes people think twice about conducting business unfairly. The respondents believed that corrupt ways to get money would cause them to lose more money. For example, Rofiqoh mentioned, "*Kulo niku kroso e, duite nek le golek mayar, le mbuang yo mayar*" implying that easy money can also go easily. Therefore, she always tries to practice fair business. She revealed that once she gained more profits through exploitative methods, but then her children spent more money on unnecessary matters. From this experience, she came to a conclusion about the importance of fair practices and prayed that her children would receive an abundance of health and could practice *nerimo* (acceptance) too.

Are the Poor Happy?

We argue that poor people in Yogyakarta suffer from poverty due to its impact on physical and mental well-being, such as lack of food, limited income, education, leisure time, and other factors that support a comfortable life, such as freedom and choices. Nevertheless,

these people living in poverty develop social relationships and practice gratitude and acceptance to maintain their psychological well-being.

They also adapt to poverty by controlling their desires and focusing on the basic needs' fulfilment only. However, what should be noted here is that even their desires are basic, such as decent employment, income, and shelter. Sen (2005) refers to this situation as unfree conditions the poor cannot afford to escape, rendering them incapable and further away from the state of well-being. Such downward adaptations push them deeper into poverty. Graham (2011), Clark (2012), and Sen (1988) considered this situation as the human adaptive capability to poverty. However, in Yogyakarta, people adapted merely to survive rather than trying to improve their living standards. At this stage, poor people in Yogyakarta could not make positive evaluations of their current lives. Meanwhile, positive evaluations of the current conditions contribute to the happiness (Diener et al. 2012).

Some of the informants' income could only feed them for the day. If they have financial loans, they will not be able to escape from the debt (Banerjee and Duflo 2007; Narayan et al. 1999). Social benefits are expected to help them fulfil their basic needs and reduce the income gaps (Kilburn et al. 2018). In Yogyakarta, the scheme has reached them, but they still cannot fulfil basic needs because they do not have a decent job.

In terms of healthcare, the underprivileged in Yogyakarta knew the importance of receiving professional health treatments. In the national health insurance scheme, they can access the lowest-class services. However, they perceive the free health services as too bureaucratic and

below the standard of paid health services. Poverty can cause poor health conditions for poor people (Narayan et al. 1999) because the work available for them is mostly labour intensive. The perceived inequality in health-care services can make it even harder for poor people to achieve well-being (Cummins 2012; Oishi and Diener 2014).

Women living in poverty in Yogyakarta experience a disproportionate impact and face more burdens than men. They have the caretaking responsibility and have less freedom than men to secure employment outside their homes (Narayan et al. 1999; Nussbaum 2000, 2006).

The statements from the interview showed that the underprivileged in Yogyakarta practice acceptance or *nerimo* and put their social relationships as the source of a positive outlook. For them, happiness is not only about material achievement but also about their capabilities to create inner peace. Narayan et al. (Narayan et al. 2000) also state that social relationships and spirituality matter for creating happiness.

Following the Javanese values, surrendering to God and living in harmony with the community and the environment is essential to creating meaning in life (Muhni 2002). One should not exploit anyone for maximising profit because it can decrease peace and happiness levels. Compared to the western perception, Javanese happiness is far less secular. For the *Kejawen* followers, the achievement of ultimate well-being is to feel heaven while still living in the world. Achieving this requires purification from negative emotions such as anger, envy, and greed and the construction of positive spirits such as patience and acceptance. *Nerimo* (acceptance) reflects a harmonious relationship

with God. The perspective on life as a temporary stopover in a long journey to reach the afterlife helps overcome world adversities. It results in *nerimo* mentality, which can protect people from distress during hardships and calm them down when they feel too much joy (Casmini and Sandiah 2019).

Practically speaking, social relationships and *nerimo* mentality cannot reduce suffering per se, but it protects people from a more devastating impact (Grootaert 2013; Narayan et al. 2000; de Oliveira, Eckel, and Croson 2014; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). However, it is important to note that the social network could be static (Portes 1998) and cannot provide reliable support (Banerjee and Duflo 2007). As people living in poverty only have limited resources, they tend to engage only with those from the same socioeconomic level to avoid mental distress. These social exclusions, which mean failure to give and receive support among various society members, could lead to inter-generational poverty (Narayan et al. 1999).

In the past, social relationship development among poor people in Java often resulted from the colonists' control over the Javanese people. The Dutch colonialists purposively made Javanese labourers be Javanese peasants by paying them meagre wages. As the Javanese tended to avoid conflict with others as part of their way to achieving peaceful life, they accepted the wages. The meagre wages shared with family members and the community led to shared poverty (Isaac 2018).

This study has shown how culture and religion have roles in well-being creation, but they cannot predict the actual economic condition (Sen 1985). They can only capture the ideas of happiness. Sen agrees with Karl Marx's

notion of religion as the sole source of the illusion of happiness for the poor. It is a painkiller for the deprived people as they cannot live a good life.

The statement about happiness by the poor in Yogyakarta cannot explain the relationship between their conditions and desires. People restrain their desires because they do not have the capabilities to fulfil them. They also practice *nerimo* as part of cultural identity. Consequently, the evaluation of inequality in society may not be accurate. Clark (2009) considers this situation a noticeable gap “because the poor and disadvantaged learn to be satisfied with less than the more advantaged”.

Conclusion

This study found that the poor in Yogyakarta face hardships in sustaining livelihood, which makes them unhappy. In line with Narayan et al. (1999; 2000), happiness resources are similar across socioeconomic backgrounds. The poor in Yogyakarta admitted that financial wellbeing, food security, government social assistance, good relationships with others, and practising *nerimo* created happiness. Their statements of happiness are aligned with both physical and psychological well-being frameworks.

They build social relationships and practice acceptance to improve their happiness. Social relationships can help them address financial problems even though they are unreliable sources of support. Meanwhile, achieving life's meaning by practising acceptance can control their negative perceptions in bad times and overjoys in good times. With this, their psychological well-being is improved.[]

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