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Abstract

Limited research exists on young people's own views on their happiness, with research dominated by adult-led, quantitative well-being studies. This article discusses a qualitative study on young people's happiness which draws on both Psychology and Childhood and Youth Studies. 42 young people completed writings and a new method of 'happiness maps', together with discussion groups and interviews, which were analysed within a constructivist grounded theory approach. Happiness is revealed as wide-ranging, complex, and individually variable. Family and friends were important, but these relationships were qualified and contingent in how they contributed to happiness. Importantly, discussions of happiness also incorporated unhappiness.

Keywords: Young people, happiness, subjective well-being

Introduction

Children and young people's sense of well-being is associated with many personal and social outcomes including mental health (Lindberg & Swanberg, 2006), developing resilience (Di Fabio & Palazzechi, 2015), having strong and caring relationships with others (Graham, Powell & Truscott, 2016) educational attainment (Ng, Huebner & Hills, 2015), and holding positive expectations for the future (Eryilmaz, 2011). Improving subjective well-being is an international policy goal of social progress for hundreds of countries across the world (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017), with comparative reports on how countries are progressing with children's well-being.

The United Kingdom is an industrialized, wealthy nation, and was one of twenty-one such countries to be compared on six dimensions of child-wellbeing in UNICEF's *Report Card 7* (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007). The UK was found to be bottom of the 21

OECD countries on child well-being overall. A follow up comparative report on the well-being of children in 29 of the world's most advanced economies showed that the UK's position had climbed from 21/21 countries in the 2007 report to 16/29 in 2013 (UNICEF Office of Research, 2013). These reports indicate that the UK is failing its children in terms of well-being. The reports themselves are not exempt from criticism, for example, Morrow and Mayall (2009) point out that although the UNICEF (2007) report makes a useful contribution to research on aspects affecting children's lives, there were problems with the conceptualisation and quantitative measures of child well-being used. They highlight that the report only used data that was already available, some of which was old, some data was absent for some countries on some dimensions, and limited data came from children themselves. Combining quantitative with qualitative data would have enabled more systematic and accurate interpretation of the findings (Morrow & Mayall, 2009).

Nonetheless, research into children's well-being is welcome as it is only very recently that it has been acknowledged that more needs to be done to improve life by focusing on children as well as adults (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs, 2017). The UK's Office of National Statistics (ONS) *National Wellbeing Project* was established in 2010, leading to the development of the *Measures of National Wellbeing* (MNW), and annual population surveys of life satisfaction and happiness. From 2014, the ONS included assessments of children's well-being, using measurements developed in conjunction with the Children's Society, as used in their own *Good Childhood Reports*. According to the latest dataset, children's happiness (when asked to rank how happy they were yesterday) has declined: 73.2% rated their happiness as high or very high in 2017, compared with 75.1% in 2015 (Office for National Statistics, 2018). It is within this context of children's well-being research and findings within the UK that the present study on young people's happiness is set.

Despite the increase in well-being research, there remains a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the terminology, with ‘life satisfaction’, ‘flourishing’ ‘happiness’ and ‘subjective well-being’ often used interchangeably (McLellan & Steward, 2015). Most of the research on children’s happiness is concerned with determinants of “well-being” rather than with what young people understand by the term “happiness”, as noted by the Spanish researchers Lopez-Perez, Sanchez & Gummerum (2016). Happiness research is dominated by adult-led, quantitative measurements that emphasise measuring well-being for social comparison and indicators of progress. Such approaches assume that happiness is the same for everyone, and do not allow for children’s own perspectives of happiness. There is now a growing criticism of such approaches in conceptualising children’s well-being (Matthews, Kilgour, Christian, Mori & Hill, 2015).

This paper reports the findings from a qualitative study on what counts as happiness for a group of young people in the UK. It aims to add to a small, but growing body of literature that investigates the *meanings* of happiness for young people. As an early career researcher with a background in Psychology who undertook a doctorate in Childhood Studies, I am mindful of how children and young people are positioned in research, and also of epistemological assumptions in how happiness is typically investigated in Psychology. This paper contributes to a dialogue between Psychology and Childhood Studies for this special issue of *Children and Society*, showing how research on young peoples’ happiness can speak to both disciplines and some of the ways in which they may inform each other.

Conceptualising happiness

Ahmed (2007) documented the “happiness turn”: the rise of international surveys and reports measuring happiness, and its inclusion in policy and governance frameworks. This reflects one of the two main trends in academic happiness studies identified by Ahmed: that of generating a “science” of happiness, encompassing economics, social policy and psychology,

which has gathered pace, and is different from “classical happiness”, encompassing philosophy and literature. The subjective experience of happiness, how it is understood and forms part of young peoples’ lives can easily become lost in (predominantly quantitative) measurement based research and reports.

Psychology primarily investigates well-being from two distinct conceptualisations: subjective well-being, focusing on positive emotions and life satisfaction, following Diener’s (1984) conceptualisation of two core components of cognition and affect, and psychological *well-being*, following Ryff (1989). Ryff turned to theories of optimal positive functioning and life-span development, which encompass self-acceptance; positive, strong, warm relations with others; autonomy; environmental mastery; feeling that one has a sense of purpose in life, that one’s life has meaning; and lastly, personal growth, the ability to continually develop towards reaching one’s potential. The emphasis on effective functioning reflects the *eudaimonic* approach to psychological well-being, distinguishing it from a *hedonic* approach to feeling good (Vujčić, Brajša-Žganec, & Franc, 2019).

Ravens-Sieberer *et al.* (2014) reviewed existing measures of child subjective well-being, including life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, meaning and purpose and self-report. This search yielded 92 individual measures, indicating the lack of agreement amongst researchers as to what child subjective well-being is, and secondly, how best to measure it. Becchetti, Corrado and Sama (2013) argued that life satisfaction questions are often problematic as indicators of well-being and happiness: numerical scale responses to questions of life satisfaction prevent intuitive responses that reflect how people think; the weighting of potential sub-components of measures are implicit but not calculated (for example people’s perspectives on life); and linguistic nuances of the term life satisfaction vary, particularly cross-culturally. This corresponds to a related argument voiced by Thin (2016), who suggests that there may be some interesting and useful measures of aspects of well-being, but to

believe that they can be a reliable and valid measure of something that is inherently changeable and debatable in its nature is unrealistic.

Measuring young people's well-being in this way does not allow young people's own points of view on their subjective well-being to be heard or considered (Backman, 2016; Garcia & Sikström, 2013; Vujčić et al., 2019). Within psychology, the tendency to adopt adult constructed measurements to investigate the *meanings* children attribute to thinking about themselves (for example, their self-concept) has also received criticism (e.g. Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2017). The role of emotions, particularly negative emotions, in subjective well-being research is an illustration of this problem. Ahmed (2007) questioned the value-laden, privileged notions of what happiness should be that are found in the literature, and critiqued how social norms and expectations of happiness shape how happiness is 'known' and understood. She writes from a cultural studies perspective that what constitutes happiness may not be set in stone, and that "good" (happy) and "bad" (sad) feelings may not be so isolated from each other. Huta (2012) also maintains that both positive and negative emotions are important for well-being, and similarly Vittersø (2013) argues that both positive and negative emotions are needed for happiness as a good life. However, although Diener recognised that emotions are an integral part of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984), happiness and subjective well-being research has tended to ignore emotions, partly because they are viewed as too ephemeral to measure (Gilman, 2001). Other research has recognised that children may indeed have different conceptualisations of well-being than is captured by adult models (e.g. Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2014) but nonetheless chose to omit children's discussions of negative affect (emotional experiences) in their model, wanting to solely focus on positive aspects. Vujčić, Brajša-Žganec and Franc (2019) found that children and young people often spoke about negative experiences as well as positive experiences when discussing how they defined and understood well-being. If, as researchers, we commit to

understanding and valuing young people's own conceptualisations and experiences of happiness (or well-being), we need to ensure that we reflect and represent what children and young people themselves say.

The failure to locate (psychological) research with children and young people within social and cultural contexts has also received criticism from Childhood Studies researchers (see for example, Prout and James, 2015). The importance of context in researching well-being is exemplified in the work of The Children's Understandings of Well-being – Global and Local Contexts research project (<http://www.cuwb.org>), which brings together qualitative research on children's experiences and conceptualisations of well-being, recognising the need for well-being research to extend beyond children reporting on adult-led indices. Cooke et al.'s 2019 study of children's experiences of well-being in childcare highlight how gathering contextual information on children's childcare arrangements enabled greater understanding of children's well-being. Spencer's (2013) study of young people's understandings of "feeling well" and "feeling good", found that young people's feelings of self-belief were closely bound to contexts that allowed for individual empowerment, and that meanings are shaped by the contexts of young people's lives. Adopting a sensitive approach to understanding children's well-being aligns with the perspective that well-being is subjectively experienced, relational and embedded within the context of people's lives (Watson, Emery & Bayliss, 2012).

In tracing how children and young people's happiness has been researched within Psychology using models of well-being, it is noteworthy that the importance of 'happiness' has been minimalised. This downplaying of 'happiness' in favour of 'flourishing' is illustrated in the foreword to the 2015 *Good Childhood Report*, (The Children's Society, 2015, p. 3), "Though it is easy to slip into a short-hand of happiness, well-being is about so much more than this. It is about how young people feel about their lives as a whole, how they feel about their

relationships, the amount of choice that they have in their lives, and their future". This assumes that happiness for children and young people does not encompass these aspects, that it is separate from their feelings about themselves, their relationships and their future. However, research that has begun to ask young people about their conceptions of happiness have illustrated that this is not the case. For example, O'Higgins, Sixsmith, & Nic Gabhainn (2010) explored young adolescents' interpretations of the words "healthy" and "happy," drawing on a grounded theory approach utilising semi-structured interviews. Emerging themes revealed that happiness was broadly associated with doing things and being with people. Strong social relations with family and friends were integral to the young people's happiness; making their friends happy was also important to them. Backman's (2016) study of Swedish adolescents' happiness in school illustrated that young people perceived that there were relationships between happiness and pro-social behaviour, between their own happiness and others' happiness, and between happiness and school learning and engagement. These studies indicate that young people's conceptualisation of happiness may be much richer than a single emotion of feeling good. The present research aimed to explore this further using a qualitative methodology to address the question: *What counts as happiness for young people?*

Methodology

As argued by Silva Dias and Menezes (2014), children and adolescents are social actors who participate in society, and as such their voices should be heard, and children themselves should be actively involved in discussions about their life context. Fraser, Flewitt & Hammersley (2014) outline that research *with* children covers a broad spectrum of approaches: from those in which children carry out the research themselves to research where children are interviewed and/or provide information in ways that allow them to speak for themselves.

Psychology has received considerable criticism for the ways in which it has regarded children in research. Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) critiqued the subject/object approach often taken in Psychology, and argued instead for 'participants'. Significant knowledge gains result when children's active participation in the research process is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence.

Woodhead and Faulkner argue that Psychology needs to embrace and legitimise more qualitative methods, render assumptions explicit, acknowledge power relationships, and engage in reflexivity, moving towards the approaches adopted by Childhood Studies. Whilst not all Childhood Studies researchers employ qualitative methods, the use of qualitative methods is recognised as being appropriate for giving children and young people a voice, so as to facilitate understanding of their experiences and lives (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley, & Robb, 2014). This extends to ethical views that recognise that children and young people's lives are of intrinsic interest in themselves rather than being "studied in relation to adult concerns" (Clark et al., 2014, p. 2). This study aimed to select research methods that were appropriate for the age of the young people participating. These methods needed to be

comprehensive enough to uncover meaning, and sensitive and broad enough for young people to explore the things that were important to how they viewed happiness. All aspects of this project were guided by the ethical principles outlined in the *Code of Human Research Ethics* (British Psychological Society, 2014).

Participants

Forty-two young people aged 13-16 participated in the study. Participants were recruited via negotiated access with a larger than average secondary school in south central England. There were twelve Year-9 students (3 boys, 9 girls) and 28 Year-10 students (12 boys, 15 girls, 1 self-identified as both) who participated in the first phase of the study: writing associations of happiness, and completing and reflecting on their happiness maps. Participants for subsequent discussion groups and interviews were drawn from this group, together with two additional female students who had not completed the previous writing and happiness maps. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Data Collection Methods and Procedure

Psychology and Sociology students in school years 9 and 10 who wished to participate obtained written consent from their parents. Students themselves also gave consent at each phase of data collection. The first phase was completed in their usual lesson time. As learners of these subjects, students would be particularly aware of their own social experiences and development, which could well have impacted how they explored their happiness through the writing and discussions.

Writings about Happiness and Happiness Maps

Participants were asked to complete a short writing task, following the instructions:

You are asked to write down anything that you associate with YOU being happy. You can include anything you want, and as much or as little as you like. When you think about what counts towards your happiness, what would it be?

You might like to think about people you know, your pets, things you like doing, things you have or would like to have, achievements, places you associate with being happy, or anything else.

The Happiness Map

Participants were then invited to complete a happiness map, using the words or phrases associated with happiness they had written as an aide. Maps and collages have been used successfully to identify aspects that are important to young people (e.g. Chaplin & John, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007). The happiness map is a series of concentric circles. Items placed closest to the person are those which the participant thinks are the most important to their happiness, and as items are placed further away, they indicate the relative decline in personal happiness salience, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Example of a Completed Happiness Map

Participants were then asked to write a few lines describing their happiness map, how it represented what happiness meant to them, why things have been positioned closer or further away from them, and whether there was anything they wanted to say about any of the items that they had included.

These writings and maps were followed up six months later with two *discussion groups* with young people, drawn from those who had completed the writing and who had volunteered to take part in the next phase of the study. The first group consisted of six girls, now in Year 10 (age 14-15) and the second group consisted of six girls and two boys who were now in Year 11 (aged 15-16). The aim of the discussion groups was to explore themes and questions that had emerged from the happiness writings, following an iterative process of data collection and analysis. I obtained the groups' permission to audio record the discussions.

The last phase of the study was *individual semi-structured interviews* with four young people (two Year 10 girls and two Year 11 boys) on their experiences of happiness. McLeod and Thomson (2009) and Kehily (2002) have discussed the usefulness of life history and biographical interviews with young people in understanding their subjectivities – their lived experiences and the ways in which they make sense of the world (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). The interviews were flexible, and in-depth, using starting points that framed the participants' experiences of happiness into a three-part time sequence: their previous (childhood) experiences of happiness; their present experiences of happiness; their future plans, and if and how happiness features in these.

However, there were some practical study limitations that need to be considered. The school insisted that the discussion groups and interviews were conducted in a room (a classroom or

the staffroom) with a teacher or senior member of staff present. This staff member was not part of the data collection but was rather engaged in their own work within eyesight and earshot of the discussion. Inherent in conducting research within the school environment were the power relationships that exist within the school. Talking in a space that was definitely not “for them” and within earshot of adult/teacher others, to an outside researcher was not ideal, and could well have inhibited the young people in having the freedom to be able to express things as they would have liked. These reflect some of the challenges in researching with children and young people in tightly controlled spaces.

Data analysis

I followed broad principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), which is informed by symbolic interactionism. This “assumes that people can and do think about their lives and actions rather than respond mechanically to stimuli” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9).

Understanding meaning-making and acknowledging how people construct, interact with and interpret their world reflected the approach adopted in this study to understand young people’s perspectives on their happiness. Constructivist grounded theory methods include the simultaneous, iterative process of data collection and analysis; analysis that concentrates on actions and processes, rather than attitudes and structures; a comparative approach; the use of data to inform the development of conceptual categories; and systematic analysis aimed at producing analytic categories.

My data analysis firstly involved two readings of the participants’ happiness writing and maps, and noting my thoughts, decisions and questions; this was followed by further coding

and analysis using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012.

I coded the data line-by-line, focussing on actions, processes, what was said, unsaid and what was implied. As I noted patterns and potential codes of happiness properties and meanings, I re-interrogated the data. This was done for each of the preliminary codes. I followed this with focussed coding: a process of conceptual analysis of the data, of understanding meanings, engaging in constant comparison across the data, synthesising concepts in an iterative process (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138-140; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 35). I focussed on *what was it about them* that meant happiness for young people; what Glaser & Strauss (1967, p. 35) term the “conceptual properties” of each category. As I noted each potential in a section of the data, I went back through the entire data set coding for instances of it. In this way, I address Bucknall’s (2014) criticism that data analysis is sometimes not representative of the wider pool of data gathered.

I used NVivo to generate a “query matrix,” whereby I cross-referenced the most frequently mentioned things from the happiness maps (and included those in the discussion groups that were felt to be missing) with each of the conceptual properties that had been identified and coded within the data. I could then interrogate every instance of a coded category across and within the data, in this way determining representative, dominant themes. Where some codes/categories might only have one or two segments of data, some had many. For example, the code “happiness associated with unhappiness” was coded to 64 segments of data, 20 of which related to “family” and 22 related to “friends”.

Memo Writing, Field Notes and Reflexivity

I also made use of memo writing in the process of data analysis as a way of gathering and clarifying my thoughts. Some memos were more analytical, some documented processes, and some were personal reflections. I wrote field diaries in the evening after each visit to the school for data collection. I described what had happened and how the data collection had gone, any difficulties encountered, and my emotions and feelings about the day. This enabled me to engage in reflexivity: being aware of my role in shaping the data and needs to be made explicit in the research process (Fraser et al., 2014).

Findings

Three main themes are discussed, all of which reveal the complex nature of happiness for the young people in this study.

Firstly, happiness was shown to be **wide-ranging and individually variable**, with many different associations and meanings. The 40 happiness maps completed by the young people contained 672 things they associated with happiness. Of these, over a third were mentioned by only one person, with a further 37 items were mentioned by only two people, for example “Anime” and “Talking”. Together, items only mentioned once or twice totalled 334 items (49.7%) of the happiness maps. The most frequently mentioned things from the happiness questionnaires were family and friends, music, food, sport and pets.

I wanted to explore meanings of happiness for young people further in this study. I put the question “what does happiness mean?” to the two discussion groups. In the Year 10 group, the young people found the question difficult to answer, with only two responses:

Daisy: I think it’s the feeling like, of being content...and like, not expecting more.

Like... just...it’s like a glow, isn’t it? Like, you just feel...happy

Ella: For me, it's just being relaxed like, nothing, like everything's making you kind of happy cause there's nothing behind you going you know...there's nothing for you to be *unhappy* about

For the Year 11 group, the question was still challenging, but the responses were fuller and more complex:

Holly: It doesn't really mean anything. It's just like a *feeling* that you get....in my opinion.

Jordan: It's a joyous state of mind. I mean, it's different for everybody. You can't define what happiness is. Happiness comes under so many different...just definitions, that you can't just stick them to *one* thing. There's many things that make different people happy and, um, there's a lot of things that make people happy that make other people sad. And I don't think you can really *define* something that means...something that...big.

Emily: I think happiness means memories. Like I, you do...people say I do everything to make them happy, but then...the one thing which keeps us happy is the memory of it. So...when you...play a sport, you'll do it because you say it's gonna make you happy, but really the memory of *winning* is gonna make you happy.

Daniel: I think happiness is very, very unique...It's just one...it depends on where you grew up, how you grew up, who taught you, who socialised you when you were younger- your friends- and...I dunno...It's hard, because you...as a person, you probably have a completely different view of what makes you happy than everybody else around you...

Lori: Mmm. I think it's recognising not everything's...not...all bad, and it's not the end, and when it's like, you're happy...it's just, I dunno, just, I think like being *content* with life...like, you're just happy with what you've got...at that time

There was a clear recognition that happiness is different for everyone: definitions of happiness embraced feelings, memories, contentment, and pragmatism. The young people posited that the same thing that made one person happy can make another sad. The methodology employed in studies, including the content and framing of questions can influence the content and the ways in which responses are made. Lopez-Perez et al. (2016) found that over 90% of children and adolescents in their study defined happiness only in one way. They argue that more complex definitions of happiness may emerge if the question relates to specific aspects or domains. The findings above have shown that young people do define happiness in complex ways, and although definitions were particular to that individual, there was awareness that the meanings of happiness were different for others.

The second main theme that emerged was the **qualified and contingent nature of happiness**, particularly regarding important relationships. "Family" and different family members appeared more often on the happiness maps than anything else. For 33 of the 40 respondents, family in some form was in the innermost circle on their happiness maps, indicating that they were amongst the most important things that contributed to that person's happiness. A further four young people placed family/family members in the second circle, and one person placed family on their happiness maps in the third circle. Feelings of love, attachment and family bonds were important, and young people expressed that shared interests and activities with family members could facilitate these close relationships. The importance of feeling supported by family was emphasised. Similarly, "friends" in some

form featured very highly across the happiness maps, the second most frequently mentioned category after family. Friends were placed in the innermost circle by 25 of the 40 young people, in the second by ten more, and in the third circle by another one.

Young people wrote and spoke of the different ways that their friends made them happy. Sometimes these positive attributes of friends were contrasted with how family did not provide them with the same thing. Although family and friends were both people who knew the young people well, in the Year 11 Discussion group, it was *how* family or friends used the knowledge about them that affected their happiness. Implicit in the impact of friends on their happiness is the comfort of similarity of outlook, an easy familiarity, and of wanting to make each other happy, as illustrated in this excerpt:

Emily: Friends know how to *make* you happy

Isabelle: Yeah. Whereas family sometimes don't understand where you're coming from...someone the same age as you, like going through the same stuff.

Lori: Yeah

Emily: Yeah, family like can be like *too* caring and too protective whereas friends are like...sort of on your level, they know how to make you happy...they know *you*

Lori: Yeah, what you're like most days. Like. When you're not seeing your family, like you're normally with your friends

However, data from the open-ended happiness questionnaires also began to illuminate that relationships with family and friends may be qualified in the way in which they contributed

to young people's happiness. For example, Marie, aged 14 wrote, "Things such as my family, friends and dog only make me happy when we are getting on well and they are happy". It was evident in the writings on happiness that young people spoke about both "family" and individual family members. The happiness maps and written allowed young people to depict relationships with different people who all constitute "family", something which is absent from most self-report measures on happiness. This was illustrated by Becky's (aged 15) reflection, which revealed three different aspects of Becky's feelings towards her family and individual family members:

Family – I love them unconditionally

Brother from another mother – love them to pieces but sometimes I really wanna push them in a ditch

Soapbox derby – I have a really good time spending time with my dad

Love for family and friends were often related to both feelings of happiness and unhappiness. Paige, aged 15, revealed:

Family and friends- I love my friends and family but sometimes they cause me sadness.

In both discussion groups, young people also spoke about how their family negatively affected their happiness at times. In the Year 11 discussion groups, the young people directly compared actions of family with those of their friends, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Lori: Sometimes as well though they have like...like an expectation of you that you...probably that they've been holding of you since you were a young child...

Daniel: ...That you can't fulfil

Lori: Yeah...And it always feels like you're trying to fulfil something that you can't. Like with your friends...and things like that... or like with your family you're *close* with sort of know how you actually *are*...

...Lori: (indecipherable) that *aren't* family that they understand more, cos they don't expect it from you

Holly: It's like you get a negative aura around your family sometimes. It's like I talk to my dad about sixth form and college, I just get like *negative* feelings because I feel like something bad'll be brung up, but if I talk about it with friends, it'll be *positive* because they all believe in me

Happiness from friendships was also contingent on getting on well together. Sometimes falling out with friends made young people feel that they did not want to come to school, as described by Norah:

Well...if we get into an argument, then...it affects like *loads* of people, and loads of things like...I don't want to come into school...I don't want to see that person and...stuff like that.

For the most part, the Year 11 discussion group appeared close-knit and respectful of one another, even when differences of opinion were being aired. However, there were still

indications that there were unspoken rules and allegiances of friendships. Jordan mentioned a friend from his previous school whose friendship he still valued, and he made efforts to maintain. As Daniel dismissed this previous friend as “unfortunately a twat” to laughter from others, Jordan shifted his position on the importance of his friendship with Bradley, redefining present and future relationships that make him happy:

Jordan: ...you know, obviously I don’t depend on him to be happy, but I like...he used to and he still *does*, and I, I can’t see me ever *not* being friends with him. Obviously I will- I won’t be friends with him and one point in my life, you know, as opposed to most people that I know *now*, in like, 10 or so years from now. But, for now, I’m glad that I have...a certain group of friends I can rely on to...make me happy, which is...yeah

He stopped short of abandoning Bradley altogether, but it was his current friendships that he chose to emphasise - those were the ones that he had to *rely on now*- carefully worded to show his allegiance.

The third theme reflects **that language of unhappiness** was included in discussion of happiness across the data. The young people in this study frequently mentioned negative aspects of their lives when discussing happiness. These included things that made them sad, uncomfortable, anxious, afraid and lonely. It was not only close relationships with family and friends that were complex, but many other things that young people associated with happiness were also associated with unhappiness. This came to light with young people’s written reflections on their happiness maps. For example, Marcia 15, wrote:

The happiness map shows everything that makes me happy but some of the stuff that makes me happy also makes me unhappy sometimes. An example would be sleeping. I

love sleeping but as I have narcolepsy it means I fall asleep during the day when I don't want to, but I can't help it.

For others, things that were important to their happiness could also be stressful. Marie, aged 14, reflected, "Achievements and a good future can bring a lot of stress as well as happiness. Not having self-confidence is awful but when I do it feels great." For some young people, happiness could be also associated with unhappiness in everyday pleasurable activities. Ryan, aged 15 noted, "Food – if eaten too much of it, especially unhealthy foods, it makes me feel bad." Similar findings emerged in the discussion groups and interviews. Holly discussed how an activity that she enjoyed could sometimes make her unhappy:

I think- sometimes if I'm doing things that usually make me happy, it doesn't make *me* happy because like...I like drawing and most of the time I draw...but sometimes I'll just get sad when I draw and even if I draw like I just won't get happy. It's got worse!

Jordan spoke frequently about the role that football played in his life, and the conflicting feelings that it engendered:

I'm the captain of my football team...outside of school, so that's cool...um, and that-that's great, I get very um, I'd say both emotional and I'm very, very committed to football and stuff...main, mainly because I'm the captain, I kind of have to be, but, Um, sort of it, it makes me happy *and* sad...it's kind of like, you know, a, a good-evil kind of thing because I love going, and I love doing stuff, but we always lose, so I don't like *that* bit, um, but yeah, I like, I love doing it, it's great and everyone there's awesome

Jordan's narrative reveals his complex and emotional relationship with football, facilitating a release of both positive and negative emotions.

For the young people in this study, happiness and unhappiness do not sit at opposite ends of the spectrum; they are intricately interwoven in the feelings that young people have about the most important people and things in their lives.

Discussion

This study revealed that what counts as happiness for young people is individually variable and more wide-ranging than most existing happiness conceptualisations allow for, and that which is typically measured in subjective well-being research. The most frequently mentioned things that were important to young people's happiness were family and family members, friends, music, food, sport and pets, but many other aspects of happiness were discussed. These findings share similarities with the few studies that have also incorporated children's own conceptualisations, for example Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith (2006) revealed that people that were loved, food and drink, animals and pets, and sleep were important to children's happiness, findings which overlap with O'Higgins *et al.*'s., (2010) study of 12-13-year olds that family and friends were integral to their happiness. Chaplin's (2009) investigation into what makes children and adolescents happy revealed five themes: people and pets, achievements, material things, hobbies and sports, and Backman's (2016) study showed that young people associated happiness with relationships, positive behaviours and school learning.

Engaging with the variety of qualitative methods in order to enrich understanding and contextualise what counts as happiness for the young people in my study has revealed some new insights into *why* and *how* things are important for happiness. The relationships that young people had with members of their families and their friends were important to their happiness, but happiness with these relationships was contingent. Although there was often

love for their family, this was often qualified by feeling that their family could also make them sad and (or) angry. Young people see that their relationships with their family change as they grow up, and they talked about this in relation to their happiness. Flynn, Felmlee and Conger (2014) argue that supportive relationships with parents are important for children and adolescents, but these need to be understood within a wider social context. The Year 11 discussion group directly compared attitudes and “positivity” towards them of parents and friends. Some of them saw parents as being more negative, less supportive, and holding on to long-standing views and expectations of their child from an earlier age. Friendships could also cause unhappiness, with arguments and negotiating allegiances. The insights into the nature of young people’s relationships with their family and friends in this study show that their contribution and importance to young people’s happiness is very complex and needs to be understood within the context of their lives.

Language of unhappiness was included in discussion and reflection across the data; illustrating that happiness is conceptualised as wide-ranging across an emotional spectrum. I would argue that if discourses of unhappiness are part of children’s and young people’s discourse on happiness, then happiness research and theoretical models should reflect this. Researchers such as Tatlow-Golden and Guerin (2017) and Spencer (2013) have raised criticisms that adult frameworks and measures dominate research of young people’s self-concept and health knowledge and exclude young people’s understandings. Their research has revealed that young people’s perspectives are indeed different from adults’ perspectives; this is also borne out in how the young people in my study spoke about happiness.

The UNICEF 2007 report card measured six dimensions of child well-being: child material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective well-being. However, existing measures of happiness with domains of life for children and young people, such as the Good Childhood Index (Rees

et al., 2010) used in the annual *Good Childhood Reports*, fail to capture the complexities of these relationships. Measures such as those asking how happy young people are with their relationship with their family also do not allow for an assessment of individual relationships within the family context. The findings from my study have shown that young people understand these individual relationships as both unique and part of a wider network of family and other social relationships.

Using qualitative methods to provide insight and understanding of young people's happiness has been important. This is partly to address methodological deficits in this area of research that have been highlighted (e.g., Matthews, Kilgour, Christian, Mori, & Hill, 2015) and to engage in methodological diversification from logico-deductive approaches to research with children (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Using qualitative methods, including the happiness map developed for this study, has also revealed the contextual and contingent nature of young people's happiness. There is now an emerging body of qualitative research on child well-being, recognising that researchers operate within specific contexts and investigate children's well-being within these contexts (Fattore, Fegter & Hunner-Kriesel, 2019). I hope that my study has provided an insight into what counts as happiness for young people's within the specific context of growing up in England in the 21st century.

Future Directions

This is a small-scale study but nonetheless has contributed some critical new findings into research on young people's happiness. This research was conducted in two stages over a six-month period. Future longitudinal research on young people's happiness may illuminate further changes in individual meanings of happiness over time, and what influences these. As discussed in the Methodology section, there are limitations to conducting research in school environments, and it would be exciting and illuminating to extend happiness research with young people to a wider variety of social contexts.

In critiquing how happiness is known and understood, Ahmed (2007) asked what our expectations of happiness are, and where do these come from? My study has taken up this question, and has shown that understanding young people's happiness needs to go beyond measurements of subjective well-being. Young people experience and understand happiness in complex ways which permeate many aspects of their lives, and which are not captured by existing measures of subjective well-being. By valuing and listening to what young people say about what happiness is for them, our conceptualisation of happiness will be richer and we will begin to understand what happiness does.

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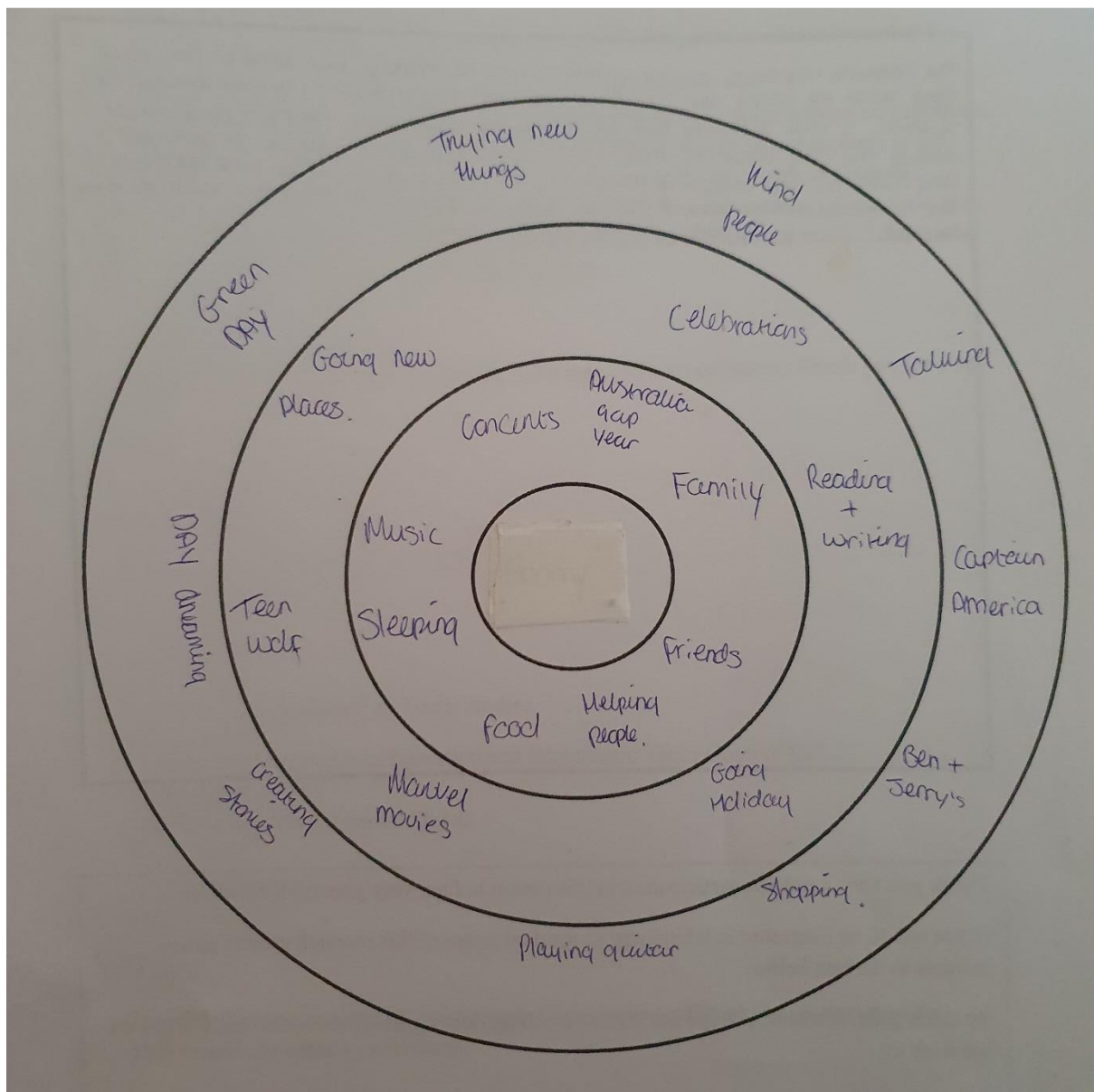


Figure 1: Example of a Completed Happiness Map