

UNDERSTANDING CONTENTMENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Jitendra K. Singh and Girishwar Misra***

The present study has tried to delineate the notion of 'santosh' (contentment) in the everyday discourse taking gender variations and developmental stages into consideration. The study was conducted on sub-groups of young adults, older people and saints (N = 100). The data were obtained through an open ended measure pertaining to different experiences related to contentment. The findings indicated that the dynamics of contentment had somewhat different connotation for common people particularly young adults in comparison to the group of saints. Saints emerged as an exclusive category of people who shared a rational worldview while viewing contentment in different facets of life. Younger as well as older adults construed the understanding of contentment in their collective life style dominated largely by emotional bonding. It was also observed that materialistic desires still prevail while pursuing the goals of pleasure, enjoyment, happiness and contentment. It seems that in the years to come the centrality of contentment will play a leading role in safeguarding human existence and social equilibrium.

Contemporary world is undergoing a rapid change in socio-economic arena brought about by the forces of modernization, industrialization and urbanization. Human being's perpetual craving for materialistic life style in such a changing world scenario has reduced him into a purely mechanical being. Today pleasure, enjoyment, happiness etc. are being attained entirely in materialistic fashion. Against this background locating the experience of contentment in the daily life of people is quite a challenging task. This study was undertaken against the backdrop of prevailing conceptualization of personhood in the mainstream psychology. Within this tradition a person is viewed as an autonomous and independent entity with strong boundaries who strives for pleasure, enjoyment and happiness etc. through his own self-defined criteria and standards (Sampson, 1988, 1989). Due to rapid progress in the scientific and technological arena and changes brought about by the forces of industrialization, urbanization and modernization, these societies present a materialistic interpretation of happiness and other attributes of well-being. This view is further supported by e personality theories which emphasize on how much an individual adheres to his personalized attributes while attaining the goals of self-induced aspirations and success in life. In this context, we also come across needs theories propounded and popularized in the Western socio-cultural set-up, which place much importance on

* V. B. S. Purvanchal University, Jaunpur(U.P)

** University of Delhi, Delhi.

gratification of needs for happiness, well-being and satisfaction in life. Conceptualizing person with such a materialistic flavour has created a paradox. On the one hand there has been a linear progress on account of exploitation of environmental and natural resources, on the other hand human beings are facing the problems of alienation and conflict, threats to existence and a defeating attitude towards peaceful coexistence.

The Western conceptualization of person, propagated by the mainstream psychology, however, is being questioned from several quarters. The debate encompassing cross-cultural psychologists, cultural psychologists and indigenous psychologists largely centers around universal acceptability vs cultural peculiarities regarding the notions of self and person. The review of cross-cultural investigations of self suggests that there are relatively consistent cultural differences between Western culture and Eastern culture (Marasella *et.al.*, 1985; Shweder & Bourne., 1984; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai and Luca, 1988). The Indian society supplies a variety of evidence in support of interdependent construal as against independent construal of self of Western cultures. The conceptualization of person in Indian context generally centers around the dynamics of shared life style, relationship maintenance, dependence proneness and need for approval (Sinha, 1988). Here the control is oftentimes distributed and self is constituted and realized only in relationship to others (Misra, 1994). The identity of self is viewed in a collectivistic and relational network where individual needs, aspirations and motives are guided more by the norms and standards of the group than individual's own preferences (Misra and Gergen, 1993; Misra and Giri, 1994; Tripathi, 1988). Hence adherence to group norms is often perceived as the real path of progress in comparison to that of personalized norms propagated in Western cultures.

In Indian thought limiting the needs is frequently considered as the most valued manageable affair to make sustainable progress in life. Liberation (*Moksha*) as the ultimate goal of life is attained in this life (*Jivanmukta*) by following the ways of *Karma* and *Dharma* in everyday life. The notion of *Karma* in this regard stands for dedication towards work without excessive concern with rewards. The concept of *Dharma* emphasizes limited assets (*aparigrah*) sufficient enough to sustain one's life. Within this perspective the notion of *Santosh* (translated as contentment) can be approached from an attitude of restraint as well as the experience of need satisfaction. It is also a subjective experiential state of lack of dissatisfaction where the person does not expect much from others but feels contented and happy with his present conditions. The experience of subjective wholesomeness (*Santosh*) leads to real pleasure, happiness and satisfaction and endows the person with inner strength and power to strive for progress and development. Contentment, as one can immediately think, is intimately related to the *motivational dynamics* of human behaviour. The wants, needs, desires refer to deficiency condition representing lack of something. Such a condition is treated as a motivational force which is roughly positively related to the potency of behaviour. Roughly speaking the literature

is full of behavioural differences corresponding to differences in the intensity of needs. The contrast between high need and low need conditions respond to high intensity and low intensity of relevant behaviour. This kind of approach to motivation and behaviour is promoted by an *individualist ideology and belief in modernity and development*. It assumes that resources are unlimited and growth also is unlimited.

Thus one perspective - the Western one - stresses on increasing need satisfaction. A person moves from lower (physiological) to higher order (self-actualization) needs. Self-realization is obviously representative of condition of very high level of need satisfaction. Need satisfaction defines self and self-realization. There is a clear contingency between the two. Maslow's notion of prepotency of needs is very relevant in this context. The other perspective - the Indian-maintains that self construal will determine need satisfaction. It tells that need structure depend on the person. The strong versions of these views may be summarized in the following two statements:

1. I am what I need. (Western)
2. I decide what I need. (Eastern)

Against these two conflicting perspectives (Eastern and Western) it was thought desirable to make an effort into understanding the notion of *Santosh* Contentment) in day-to-day life of the people. This study was exploratory and aimed at mapping the notion of *Santosh* viewed by people. The idea of *Santosh* is complex and has many shades of meaning. In order to deal with this complexity it was decided to explore the meaning and correlates of contentment as experienced and perceived by people in their personal lives. So, instead of imposing categories from outside the participants were encouraged to reflect and report their own views about their experience and perception of life and satisfaction in different contexts. The study was planned to examine the following propositions and expectations.

It was expected that people in different stages of life would display varied patterns of contentment experience. In the Indian society roles are considered to be crucial in directing people's behaviour. So it is reasonable to expect that quality of contentment experience is bound to take different shape during late adulthood when a person assumes greater degree of responsibility.

With respect to the experience of contentment it was also expected that there will be gender-difference. The women folk in Indian families have been treated differentially. Traditionally they are socialized in the roles of sister, wife, and mother to take care of others and limit their needs. A gender bias in Indian society is still prevalent. The gender stereotypes distinguish role configurations which make women more likely to control over their needs and feel contented with limited resources.

Finally, it was *also* felt that Householders and Saints would also differ significantly in their notion of contentment experience and other related variables. Saints are those who have deliberately opted for a pattern of life which control on wants and resources is the prescribed way of conducting oneself. Such persons are required to be cooperative, compassionate and have self-control. They are also expected to have a disengaged and detach relationship with the people and a minimal concern with items of mater comfort. In this way, the group of Saints is expected to stand separate from t group of Householders as far as their needs and demands are concerned.

METHOD

Sample

A sample of 100 adults (40 younger adults, 40 older adults and 20 saints residing in old Delhi near the campus of Delhi University participated in this! study. There were 40 unmarried young adults (20 males and 20 females). They' were from the age range of 20-25 years. The average age of male young adults was 23.8 years (SD = 1.15) and of females 22.55 years (SD =1.35). They had completed at *least* undergraduate level of education and were either enrolled in higher studies or were preparing for competitive examinations. Majority 'of them hailed from upper middle class socio-economic background. Their parents were either in the government service or had owned business enterprises. The older adults (20 males and 20 females) came from upper middle social class background. They were from the age range of 45-55 years. The average age of older males was 50.35 years (SD=2.9) and of old females 47.85 years (SD = 2.05). Most of the males (80%) were government servants. Whereas majority (60%) of the females were house-wives. They were living with their children either in their own house or in rented accommodation.

Most of the group of 20 male Saints had adopted this life of sainthood at younger age (M = 19.15, SO = 5.02). Most of them reported that they had become saints with the goal of prayer and worship leading towards God.' They are motivated by self (35%) or by the curiosity to know more about the reality of life and existence (35%). Most of them were enjoying their life in the service of people (55%) and devotion to God (45%). They were much satisfied with their present state of affairs. They were living either in monastery (30%) or in temples (20%). Some of them had no permanent place to live (50%). They were spending their lives wandering and traveling from one place to the other. Their source of livelihood was either begging (60%) or charity (40%). Before joining sainthood, they had cordial relationship with their families. On the whole, the saints represented a group of people who have partly detached themselves from the normal family life and were leading the life of an ascetic. They had deliberately opted for this kind of

life style in which they are deprived of various material pleasure and enjoyment.

Tool

Life Experiences Questionnaire

This questionnaire was the main instrument in the present study. It had 27 open-ended questions in Hindi language dealing with different aspects of contentment and related issues. They included Global Perception of Life, Satisfaction in Life, Life Expectations, Concept of Happy Life, Dominant concerns in Life, Meaning of Contentment, Perception of a Contented Person, Antecedents of Contentment, Determinants of Contentment, Contentment and Desire, Contentment and Need Control, Requirements for Contentment, Contentment and Greed, Contentment and Health, Contentment and Action, and Emotional Experiences.

Procedure

For the purpose of present study relevant questions in the form of an interview schedule were organized. During the initial stage of instrument reparation effort was made to frame each and every item as simple as possible. Some of the items were modified and some were omitted in the process of reparation. Finally, after considerable deliberations the schedule was prepared a booklet form. Initially the schedule was tried out on a small sample of participants (N = 10) with a colleague separately. In this initial test inter-coder reliability in responses was determined. There was 90 percent agreement between two researchers.

After the finalization of interview schedule the participants were contacted personally. They were told about the purpose of the study and assured about the confidentiality/of their responses. Once they were convinced a time was fixed to conduct the interview. Majority of the participants took two hours in responding to the questions. At times it was difficult to approach them owing to their personal problems and busy life schedule. A lot of time was spent in convincing the participants, particularly the saints and the older females. The data could not be collected from many participants due to personal problems and reluctance to cooperate. The accounts given by the participants were analyzed in terms of frequency or proportion so that they could be meaningfully and systematically presented and interpreted.

RESULTS

The experience of contentment, as a basic human concern, can be understood in terms of the dynamic interplay of various desires, needs, motives, cognitions, and emotions. In fact the sense of happy and contented life can be made only in the context of these constructs. In the present study efforts have been made in this direction by probing into the ways people construe

and locate contentment in different facets of life. A brief account of the entire finding can be presented under the following headings.

(1) Global Perception of Life and Satisfaction from It: In general life was viewed as a positive event and was characterized as lovely, interesting and enjoying by all the groups. However, this perception was more frequent in the case of older people. On fewer occasions younger adults perceived their lives as challenging and struggling. It was also noticed that while responding to this question the perceptions of the participants were mainly guided by four factors, namely, quality of emotional relationship, understanding the purpose of life processes, experiencing the activity of life and viewing the goal of life. In this regard it was noted that the group of saints exhibited a rational and cosmic understanding. In other words, understanding the purposes of life was the key concern for them, whereas for the group of younger as well as older adults emotional engagement emerged as the most dominant category of response. Such pattern indicated that the group of saints viewed life objectively from a distance, whereas common people were preoccupied with their engagements and involvements. With reference to different degrees of satisfaction in life it was observed that the group of older adults and saints were more satisfied with their present state of affairs in comparison to the group of younger adults.

(2) Expectations from Life: The categories of responses emerged from the content analysis of responses dealt primarily with three levels of needs namely, material, social and spiritual. It was observed that personal needs were highly preferred by younger females and older males. Whereas for the group of younger males and older females both personal needs and social needs were viewed equally important. However, attainment of spiritual needs emerged as exclusive category for the group of saints.

(3) Meaning of Happy Life: Gratification of various material needs emerged as the most dominant category for viewing happiness in life in the responses of younger adults as well as older males. For older females social concerns were more valued for experiencing happiness. Spiritual concerns were reported as more dominant category for the group of saints.

(4) Dominant Concerns in Life: The analysis of life concerns expressed by the participants yielded temporality of existence as one of the core dimensions. It was noted that present and future aspects of life dominated the concerns and past was least frequently mentioned. This aspect was absent amongst the saints. Status and role relationship were also prominently reported by younger adults. Concern for societal life (*e.g.*, problems of society and people, nation and helping others) was shared more frequently by the aide males and saints. This indicates how the concerns for the arena of social life broaden with increasing age. For the group of saints spiritual life appeared as the most prominent and exclusive category.

(5) Meaning and Extent of Contentment in Life: The analysis of the meaning of contentment revealed that fulfillment of various desires was repartee more frequently by all the

groups but this category dominated more in the responses of older adults. Also, contentment as control over desires was the view reported almost equally by all the groups. Whereas balanced life style and prayer or worship to God appeared as the exclusive category used by the group of saints. On the whole it appeared that participants' perception varied regard in the attainment of contentment. For some participants contentment was a condition which can be attained by satisfying the needs, while for others it was viewed in terms of reducing or controlling the needs.

(6) Characteristics of Contented Person: Logical and rational understanding of real life situations appeared as the most important attribute of a contented person. This was true for almost all the groups but more frequently in the case of older males. However, will-power was more emphasized by the younger adults as the most important attribute of a contented person.

(7) Determinants of Contentment: With reference to determinants of contentment experience it was observed that all the groups of participants came up with a consensus that the experience of contentment is person-specific. This pattern indicated that various dispositional aspects are responsible for the experience of contentment.

(8) Antecedents of Contentment: With reference to various antecedents of mental state of contentment situational demands (*e.g.*, no control over real life situations, endless desires to make progress etc.) were more frequently reported by the older females and saints. Maintenance of a balanced life style (*e.g.*, mental peace, to be selfless, fatalistic attitude etc.) was also reported on almost equal number of occasions but was assigned secondary importance in this regard. For other categories a mixed pattern was noticed.

(9) Factors Necessary for Contentment Experience: In the case of essential requirements for the experience of contentment internal personal factors (*e.g.*, self-control, desire control etc.) were more frequently emphasized by both younger and older adults. However, the group of saints emphasized more on spiritual factors. For other categories a mixed trend was reported.

(10) Contentment and Control over Needs or Desires: The group of older adults and saints viewed contentment as control over needs or desires on almost equal number of occasions. However, the view of younger adults was divided in support of or against this statement.

(11) Relationship of Contentment with Other Related Constructs: There was a consensus among all the groups of participants that contentment had a positive relationship with health and human action and a negative relationship with greed. However, in the case of relationship between contentment and desire a mixed pattern was observed. Most, of the younger males reported a positive relationship between the two. For younger females both had either negative relationship or no relationship. The responses of older adults showed a mixed pattern in

this regard. But the group of saints more frequently reported that contentment and desire had negative relationship.

(12) Degree of Self-Involvement with Different Emotions: In the case of different degrees of self-involvement with the five categories of emotions it was observed that the group of saints shared quite a different pattern in comparison to common people in this regard.

It was also noticed that males and females of both the age group shared different degree of self-involvement on the category of self-regulating emotions. But more interestingly both gender and developmental variations were reported on the category of self-threatening emotions.

DISCUSSION

Contemporary Indian society is witnessing changes in socio-economic arena. In addition the scientific and technological advances are greatly influencing human needs, desires, aspirations, attitudes and values of the people. The materialistic and hedonistic values have made the attainment of pleasure, joy, comfort and happiness an externally, controlled easy going affair. Locating these experiences in the external physical objects in place of intrinsic self-experiences puts a question mark on the practice of humanistic values. In this context, understanding the meaning of *Santosh* in day-to-day life is apparently quite a challenging task. The present study has made an effort in this direction.

All the participants viewed human life as lovable, enjoyable, and interesting. This indicated people's basic attachment to and concern for life as a precious and positive quality. However, the sub-group of young adults perceived life as "challenging" which is not unusual at this stage because of the growing competition in different walks of life. The emphasis on emotional bonds revealed that shared and collective living are preferred over the personalized view of life. The group of saints however, revealed a rational understanding of different objects relevant to life. Such an orientation indicated that owing to the practice of a relatively detached life style the saints were not much interested in developing an intense emotional relationship.

With regard to overall satisfaction in life it was observed that owing to hardships and competition for scarce resources young adults of today do not experience much satisfaction in life, whereas during late forties or early fifties most of the adults are either able to fulfill their expectations or limit their expectations which may be one of the causes of experiencing higher level of life satisfaction. Interestingly high degree of satisfaction reported by saints indicated that satisfaction from life depends on what kind of choices one goes for.

For both the younger and older participants the major expectations from life revolved

around personal and social goals. This underlines the significance of on-going transactions between what one expects from oneself as well as from others. In contrast, the expectations of saints belong mainly to the spiritual domain. The meaning of happiness was generally perceived as the fulfillment of one's expectations. As expected younger and older adults viewed happiness largely in terms of attaining personal and social goals, whereas for saints it was characterized more by the pursuit of spiritual goals. This pattern shows that the meaning and internalization of happiness is embedded in the way relationships are structured and not in one's personal preferences. With reference to various concerns in life both younger and older adults emphasized more on their personal and social concerns, whereas the group of saints was *more* concerned with the spiritual domain of life. On the whole it seems that human life was viewed by the common man in totality where satisfaction and expectations were constructed in the network of relationships. Happiness in life was viewed not merely in terms of how many expectations are fulfilled but also in terms of how many expectations of others one has been able to fulfill.

The analysis of the meaning of contentment and related experiences has shown certain important trends. For some, contentment was viewed as a subjective state of positive experience emanating from the attaining or fulfilling personal desires. For other, it was conceptualized as control or restraint over desires in order to live or pursue more balanced and meaningful life. Thus the pathways to contentment are apparent.

On the question of possible attributes or qualities of a contented person *understanding* (e.g., rational, optimistic, gentle, peaceful) and *strong will-power* (e.g., truthful to self and duty, balanced etc.) emerged as major categories. The pattern indicates that internal locus of control plays a significant role as far as the experience of contentment is concerned. It was also noted that all the groups of participants had consensus that the experience of contentment depends to a large extent on the various dispositional and behavioural qualities of a person.

The participants recognized several antecedents of contentment experience. It indicated diversity in the pathways towards contentment. The demands of situation, balanced life style and fulfillment of desires were frequently viewed as preconditions to feel contented. In addition to external forces internalized norms also appeared important. It was also found that various episodes of life such as successful career, peace in family, security in social life and welfare of others were significant incidents where one can experience contentment. It seems that contentment is a joint function of several factors.

Controlling or managing various needs in different situations emerged as the most prominent factor to be contented in life. The idea got further support in responses to the probing into the requirements for contentment. It was observed that several personal factors (e.g., self-control, desire-control, hard work etc.), external personal factors (e.g., right knowledge, desire fulfillment), social and spiritual conditions were perceived as possible factors which are warranted in having the experience of contentment.

In order to understand the conceptual map of contentment its relationship with other phenomena was explored. It was observed that contentment is positively related to health and action. This indicates the role of contentment in overall development of one's life. In contrast, there was a negative relationship between contentment and greed. This shows that the experience of contentment is a distant dream if one's life is dominated by unlimited greed. The mixed kind of relationship between contentment and desire indicates that young adults of today try to approach contentment through the attainment of desired objects in the external world, whereas older adults and saints attain contentment largely through limiting the desires and fulfillment of only those desires which appear to be meaningful and justified. This seems very close to the distinction between *preya* and *shreya*. The former refers to-everything one desires, while the later distinguishes between desired and desirable. *Shreyas* are those desires which are desirable or justifiable in the context of socio-cultural norms.

Locating the possible role of contentment in everyday life requires a deeper understanding of human nature. The needs, wishes, aspirations and desires drive people to act differently. While acting in those situations people locate contentment in different activities of daily life. It appears that successful completion of assigned duty, restraining oneself in adverse situations and lack of dissatisfaction in life are the possible ways through which one may approach contentment. The notion of selfless duty, maintenance of a satisfying emotional relationship and management of various needs suggest that contentment involves critical appreciation or evaluation of life as a whole. People appraise contentment in a network of relationships. For many contentment is experienced only when the actors in the network perceive each other happy and enjoy mutually satisfying relationship.

With reference to the degree of self-involvement with different kinds of emotions the group of saints exhibited a distinct perspective in comparison to common people. It appears that relatively detached life style of saints played a crucial role in structuring the experience of emotions. The common people, being part of a relational network, did not perceive emotions independent of relationship with others. For them the degree of self-engagement with others in various situations was the most pertinent facet of emotional experience. Hence, the experience of emotion was relation specific and contextually determined. Understanding contentment from this perspective indicates that the feeling of positive emotions may be one of the contributing factors for the experience of contentment.

The males and females differed in the extent of experience of self-regulating emotions. This indicates that both males and females share different patterns of regulative mechanisms of emotions while making adjustment in different situations. Interestingly, it was also noted that there was gender and developmental variation in the category of self-threatening emotions.

On the whole the present results show that the notion of "*Karma*", and "*Dharma*" still prevail in the socio-cultural life of the people in India. They inspire and motivate people of

course in different detached or non-attached manners and perform to work selfless or non-selfish duties. Performing such duties is considered as a possible path of liberation or "*Moksha*", even while living in the material world. In spite of changes in socio-economic spheres of life the younger generation still adheres to the socio-culturally defined and constructed rules and roles. Performing upto the expectations of family members and elders, sharing emotional feelings with well-wishers and renouncing the selfish wishes tend to show that contentment originates from the state of belonging to a collective and shared life. The parents in Indian families are still cognizant of their roles and duties towards their children. Their happiness, pleasure and peace often depend on how far they have been able to perform the duty towards their children. The Indian parents locate their contentment in the welfare of the children. Life is viewed meaningful, truthful and purposeful if parents find their children successful. For them liberation in worldly life does not mean self-knowledge and living an ascetic's life. It is experienced in the context of family.

In conclusion, it may be said that the Western perspective where contentment (*santosh*) is held in a low key and is viewed negatively in the path of progress does not hold true for many Indians. Contentment is not an obstacle to progress. For many, progress is evaluated in terms of how much one is contented. Healthy progress of individual and society is not independent of contentment since it is held that real progress means pleasure, peace and happiness of a person in the society. Hence contentment as a maintaining and regulating mechanism in social life is contributing for the overall progress and development of the society as a whole. In the years to come contentment will become one of the major issues of interest for survival of human beings in the growing materialistic and consumerist culture. It is a stepping stone for the maintenance of harmony and equilibrium in society. In fact the idea of universal brotherhood, global village and peaceful co-existence would remain a distant dream without taking the centrality of contentment into consideration.

However, the task of promoting the above perspective is not an easy one. In today's world of high technology and fast communication the divide between 'haves' and 'have-nots' has widened. This is true at all levels of our existence. The deprived ones experience that they lack the necessary things in life as compared to rich people (or nations). As a result they invest their resources in fulfilling the needs and enlarging the list of material needs. Open market has been instrumental in educating people that the increasing numbers of self-possession only can guarantee high quality of life. The Western ideas or psychological models are taken for granted for their supremacy and considered universal. A sincere reflection on the contemporary situation suggests that increasing the needs is not going to solve the problems of life. Interdependence and sharing is the only *mantra* which can help us to solve our problems. This is possible only through social education and proposing a critical, reflective perspective. Limiting the available resources should not be treated as regression. It is a lesson which needs to be learned if we intend to ensure and promote life on the earth. The sooner the better.

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