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**Representing Happiness: A comparative study of media
coverage of the World Happiness Report**

Rodrigo Porto Carreiro Neves

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Abstract

Alongside the rise of positive psychology in late 20th century, happiness has become a topical and heavily debated part of public and academic discourse. Although the concept has been discussed in philosophical terms since antiquity, it is now linked to modern attempts to quantify ‘happiness’ on both national and global scales. Among other studies focusing on life satisfaction, the *World Happiness Report* (WHR) was launched in 2012 under the aegis of the United Nations. The report portrays itself as a systematic attempt to collect and analyse data about people’s subjective well-being (SWB) all over the world. Since the emergence of ‘happiness science’ and so-called ‘happiness industry’ – as a shift from social well-being to happiness as a social norm – happiness indexes have been a site of controversy within social and cultural theory. Even though the WHR claims to rely on respondents’ perceptions of well-being, provided by interviews and self-reports, the act of ranking the ‘happiness’ of nations has a biopolitical role in encouraging governments to redesign policy in order to make people happier according to specific parameters. In this context, I analyse in the thesis how the happiness report is actually engaged with by news media in specific national contexts, namely the US, India, and the UK. My analysis focuses on how the WHR is interpreted by journalists, and whether mainstream media discourse privileges culturally-specific conceptions of happiness as universal norms, or creates space to contest these norms. Using a methodology that combines critical discourse analysis and frame analysis, I explore relevant patterns which emerged from the sample in order to examine to what extent journalistic narratives contribute to the discursive construction of happiness.

Key words: critical happiness studies, World Happiness Report, national happiness, critical discourse analysis, media representation, journalism, happiness industry.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Happiness is currently very topical and frequently a part of public and academic discourse. Even though happiness as a philosophical concept has been discussed since antiquity, the modern attempt to ‘measure’ *Gross Domestic Happiness* (now *Gross National Happiness*) appeared in the 1970s in Bhutan (Ahmed 2010: 3). Alongside the rise of positive psychology towards the end of the 20th century (especially in the US) (Ehrenreich 2010ab), happiness studies has become a specific discipline, and scholars such as Richard Layard (2011) consider it a “new science”. Many other studies and policies have also focused on people’s ‘happiness’ worldwide, e.g. Prime Minister David Cameron decided to start measuring ‘happiness’ in the UK in 2010, and departments of happiness were created in India since 2016. Following this relatively recent movement, the *World Happiness Report* (WHR) started being published under the aegis of the United Nations in 2012.

The report appeared as a systematic attempt to collect and analyse data about people’s subjective well-being (SWB), a measure related to how people experience their lives in positive (or negative) ways (Diener 1984), on a global scale. In particular, data collected predominantly through the Gallup World Poll – using interviews, psychometric questionnaires and self-reports based on a Cantril ladder survey – are used to rank world countries by SWB levels. But the self-described aims of the WHR are also to indicate that there is “growing policy interest in knowing how government institutions and actions influence happiness, and in whatever changes in policies might enable citizens to lead happier lives” (Helliwell, Huang & Wang 2019). Indeed, as well as asking individual subjects to quantify their happiness, the results of the report are then used to encourage state

intervention – and media coverage of the WHR may show an inclination to support or contest the happiness agenda as well as reflect its wide-ranging socio-political implications.

The WHR focuses on elements of society that it defines as prerequisites for a better quality of life, including human values, civil economy and public happiness (see Becchetti *et al.* 2015). Great significance is also attributed to social capital, as freedom, generosity and social support are variables considered in the study – in addition to economic data such as *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP). Although it is not the only index of its kind – other (both global and national) studies do a similar thing, e.g. *OECD Better Life Index*, *Gallup-Sharecare Wellbeing Index*, and the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) *Personal Well-Being in the UK* – I focus on the WHR in this thesis because of its current popularity, visibility, and biopolitical significance.

The results of the WHR have increasingly drawn the attention, not only of international organisations and national governments, but also of the media and, as a consequence, the wider public (see Helliwell *et al.* 2014). As a study which includes all UN member countries, and labels its own findings as a *global* ranking of happiness, each edition of the report had significant impact as ordinary people usually come to know about the performance of the nations in the ranking precisely through the media. Since its launch, the WHR has been published every year (except 2014) at the beginning of Spring, and the UN has also determined that the 20th March is 'World Happiness Day'.

Given that the WHR is designed to encourage policy change on a national level, in this thesis I analyse how the news media engaged with the happiness report in specific national contexts. My analysis focuses on how the WHR is interpreted by journalists and

commentators, and how mainstream media discourse can privilege culturally-specific conceptions of happiness as universal norms. In this way, my doctoral research intends to provide a thorough analysis of national print media in different contexts in order to examine how they contribute to particular discursive constructions of happiness. In doing so I want to contribute to a growing set of debates about the tensions associated with quantifying happiness, by examining how news media in different global contexts use these indexes to promote particular notions of national happiness.

As a matter of consistency in terms of language, interpretation and contextualisation, my sample is made up of media texts collected through the Nexis database from representative mainstream, English-language newspapers with wide circulations in the US, India and the UK. The press in these countries offer significant material related to national happiness and the coverage of the WHR in the global media – in total, I gathered, thematised and analysed nearly 500 articles across these three national contexts. When it comes to the profile of these specific nations, even though they have similarities due to historical relationships and being economic superpowers, they have routinely had different performances in the WHR. While India has consistently ranked very low, the UK and US are in the top-20 happiest nations in the world, and this contrast is useful in order to examine whether journalists relate happiness to material factors, and to what extent.

Following Entman's (1993) instructions on frame analysis, I will illustrate and discuss how newspapers interpret the data provided by the WHR, as well as whether journalists endorse specific understandings of happiness which may be influenced by particular cultural values and norms. For example, since 'happiness' is often interchanged with 'well-being' and 'life satisfaction' in happiness studies (for a critique see Almeder

2000, Haybron 2013, Wright 2013), it is conceptually informative to observe if journalists tend to frame happiness as something ‘concrete’ and mostly associated, if not interchanged, with quality of life – as mainstream happiness studies advocates (e.g., Eid & Larsen 2008) – or if newspapers create space to complicate these more reductive understandings of happiness.

The thesis will identify patterns and tendencies within and across newspapers and countries in the sample, including debates on other parallel themes related to happiness as a central topic. One of the main aims of my analysis, however, is to identify whether discursive constructions of happiness in the media uncritically adopt the idea that happiness is something that can be measured objectively across national contexts and is presented as something that states should intervene in, or if news discourse maintains space for more complex reflections of happiness as a subjective and culturally-specific experience, for example.

In order to evaluate media coverage and communicative practices with regards the WHR and the controversial attempt to quantify national happiness more broadly, I will seek to answer the following questions:

- a) What understandings of happiness are suggested (directly or indirectly) by media texts? Is there a dominant, individualistic conception of happiness that can be observed within particular narratives, for example?
- b) Using reports and responses to the WHR, do news stories published in the mainstream media – either more left-leaning, conservative, or economic newspapers – reveal their authors’ views on the happiness ranking in some way? For instance, is it evident whether they agree or disagree with such a ‘measure’, as well as the findings provided by the happiness report, and why?

- c) Is there a tendency among journalists and commentators to assume that some nations offer more ‘adequate’ conditions for happiness? If so, to what extent can this kind of narrative be related to specific sets of power relations, hegemony, and national identity?

I hypothesise that at least some newspapers will critically engage in debates related to rising individualism and the state’s tendency to hold people accountable for their own happiness, as argued by scholarship that has connected the rise of happiness science to neoliberal economic policy (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Davies 2016). Considering the formation of “neoliberal subjectivities” (see Bowsher 2018a, Foucault 2008) in contemporary societies, it seems inevitable, though, that other journalists and commercial newspapers will represent happiness as something that depends on individual access to material wealth. However, in addition to the fact that journalists perhaps link happiness to material conditions in order to find an ‘objective’ vocabulary to discuss an emotion commonly thought of as subjective, even more ‘rational’ narratives of happiness may be endowed with more or less explicit messages shaped by a specific set of power relations and the influence of dominant ideologies within media discourse.

In line with Foucault’s (1980) knowledge/power nexus, dominant discourses of happiness may exert some degree of control over people by acting as a form of biopolitics that, as Wright (2013: 26) has argued, “aims to shape and manage life for economically productive ends”. For instance, as mentioned previously, the WHR aims to encourage policy change to make citizens happier. In this context, mainstream media discourse might contribute to this biopolitical agenda by universalising a particular understanding of happiness, or reinforcing the sense that happiness is something that has objective, preestablished factors and rules. In addition, constructions of happiness reinforced by the

media may also be related to cultural homogenisation, nationalist discourses (which privilege certain countries over others due to the extent to which they conform to certain norms) and frames that normalise neoliberal conceptions of happiness.

Neoliberalism plays a crucial role in the process of measuring and hierarchising ‘happiness’. As Davies (2016: 144) has argued, neoliberalism is associated with “a renewed reverence for *both* competitiveness *and* the management of happiness” in the ‘West’ today. This relates to the fact that, since the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism from the 1980s, the system “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” and uses “massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace” (Harvey 2007: 3). Following Hall’s (2011: 706-9) insights into ‘neoliberalism’ – even though the author points out that the term is “reductive”, and the system has actually “many variants” in different societies – I refer to neoliberalism as an ideology which constitutes a “hegemonic project” (*ibid.*, 728). In socio-economic terms, the system is based on the “rights of free men” (*ibid.*, 709) who tend to think individualistically and are particularly interested in making a profit and accumulating wealth for their own pleasure and material security.

As the considerations above have shown, neoliberalism does relate to the power and influence exerted by privileged classes (and nations) – and this is particularly evident in the context of Dean’s (2010) “control society” which tends to guide people according to dominant ideologies. In this scenario, everything seems to be turned into numbers and algorithms (Harari 2014), and the quantification of ‘happiness’ is perhaps the apex of these developments. What becomes even more problematic, though, is that, from a neoliberal perspective, higher levels of SWB can be framed as something achieved through merit, and therefore the WHR can be eventually compared to a list of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ – even

though privileged countries enter the ‘race’ with some advantages, at least regarding material conditions and resources.

But these contemporary tendencies do not mean that there is no resistance to such controversial practices – quite the contrary. I created this PhD project, for example, inspired especially by Foucauldian thought: I thought it was necessary to ‘deconstruct’ happiness in order to understand what sort of measurement scholars were proposing with the WHR. The rationale behind this project, therefore, is related to what Davies (2016: 145) refers to as the tendency to contest the partiality of traditional sources of authority that emerged in the 1960s, as the representation of society and the world came to be seen as a “biased and political act” and “[t]he right to declare some behaviours as ‘normal’, certain claims as ‘true’, particular outcomes as ‘just’, or one culture as ‘superior’ was thrown into question” (*ibidem*).

In a similar way, critical happiness studies as well as counter-discourses within the happiness debate in the media focus on questioning quantifying practices and the status quo that is reinforced by these processes of quantification. Since the emergence of so-called “happiness industry” (Davies 2016) – as a shift from social well-being to positive psychology and happiness emerging as a social norm – happiness indexes have been a site of controversy within social and cultural theory. Indeed, a number of theorists in critical happiness studies (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Brown 2015, Davies 2016, Hill *et al.* 2020) have problematised the new field of study by questioning its methodological weaknesses and actual reliability as well as highlighting ethical issues regarding the growing happiness industry and the motivational practice of positive thinking. Even though happiness is commonly thought of as something subjective and culturally contingent, a sort of ‘duty to be happy’ might contribute to cultural homogenisation – due to the subtle imposition of a

standard of happiness based on individualistic values – and also to more problematic and reductive definitions of happiness becoming hegemonic, as opposed, for example, to Lynne Segal’s (2017) call for a more radical notion of happiness.

In the book titled *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*, Segal shares a liberating view on the subject by suggesting that happiness can be more complete and transformative in social terms if it has no boundaries and is something for everyone. Given the elusiveness of happiness, she points out that moments of joy can “break down the distances between people,” and this “collective sentiment” relates to “things that are larger, better and more exciting than we are individually” (Segal 2017: 59-60). In this context, one of the key concerns of my thesis is whether news discourses maintain space for radical, heterodox understandings of happiness or perpetuate more reductive, individualistic, materialistic, and nationalistic conceptions of what it means to be happy.

Segal’s egalitarian, inclusive discourse of happiness leads me to another fundamental point to be discussed at this preliminary stage: the question of ‘culture’. Even though defining ‘culture’ is notoriously complex, articulating key authors’ definitions and insights into the topic is necessary to situate my own understanding of ‘culture’ in this thesis. In order to illustrate that ‘culture’ is something fluid and co-created, it is worth citing Marvin Harris’ (1999: 19) reference to ‘culture’ as “the socially learned ways of living found in human societies”, and Stuart Hall’s (2009: 2) link between ‘culture’ and the production and exchange of meanings within a society or group.

Accordingly, Raymond Williams (2011: 53) claims that “[e]very human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings”. Williams points out that the word

‘culture’ can be used in two different senses: as “a whole way of life”, or “the common meanings” of every society; and as “the special processes of discovery and creative effort” (*ibid.*, 54). These “ordinary” processes mentioned by Williams involve and are produced through various practices such as the “active debate” in which communication, comparisons and meanings are tested in experience (*ibidem*), also through the engagement with media texts as proposed in my cross-cultural analysis – although shared meanings and values can vary dramatically even within specific contexts. With regards to his definition of ‘culture’ as “a whole way of life”, though, globalisation, as Barker and Jane (2016: 31) have argued, made such a notion quite problematic. Indeed, the authors point out that “[c]ulture is not best understood in terms of locations and roots but more as hybrid and creolized cultural routes in global space” (*ibidem*).

Despite their limitations, what I highlight from these definitions of ‘culture’ is, however, that Williams (2011: 54) suggests culture is not static given that it is “made and remade in every individual mind” – in line with Anderson’s (2006) notion of “imagined communities”, in the sense that communities (such as a nation) are not limited to existing in material world but they are also continuously created as people engage in wider social relations. Indeed, the aim of my thesis is not to suggest static, homogenised cultural contexts or cultural essentialism, but to show how newspapers construct national cultures through their representations, and thus contribute to this making and remaking of ‘culture’. I recognise that these constructions reflect specific cultural contexts, but I do not imply that they are fixed, stable, or essential cultures. Instead, when using the term ‘culture’ I understand it as referring to specific forms of social organisation based on evolving but particular socio-political historical contexts.

These authors' insights contribute to a particular understanding of culture (and also of the discursive construction of happiness) given the fact that they are interested in the way shared meanings and ways of seeing the world are *constructed*, which implicitly acknowledges what 'culture' is – never homogenous or essentialist. Interestingly, though, these understandings of 'culture' clash with some of the assumptions of happiness science due to the tendency that mainstream happiness studies presumes a degree of homogeneity in how people think and experience the world, in order to measure something as complex as 'happiness' across radically different contexts. I am aware that this sort of simplification is also reflected in media discourse as journalists draw on imaginary cultures and project ideas about cultural norms in their writing which then has a role in constructing cultures and meaning.

That said, my study will contribute to scholarship on happiness as well as journalism studies since it approaches the discursive construction of happiness from a perspective which considers how happiness (or even unhappiness) is constructed as part of national identity through media discourse in different cultural contexts. I recognise that doing this type of comparative research can result in the cultural homogenisation I critique above. However, the aim of the research is to show how journalists draw on their ideas of culture and contribute to the construction of national and other 'cultures' through their representations of happiness.

The aim of the thesis is to address a gap in existing research: that, despite ongoing debates in social and cultural theory about happiness science and quantification, there have been few empirical studies that examine how happiness indexes actually inform wider media discourse. My project will offer a systematic analysis of how notions of national happiness

and happiness rankings are engaged with in print media and whether they are taken at face value or contested. In addition, where research about national happiness has been conducted it has tended to focus on singular national contexts, but by examining its mediation in three distinct countries I will be able to draw out differences that complicate notions that happiness can be straight-forwardly measured across radically different national settings.

My thesis is structured in seven chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, three discursive chapters in which I analyse the media texts collected from each national context (each of which includes a separate conclusion), and the final conclusion. Following this introduction, in the literature review (Chapter 2) I discuss theoretical frameworks which support my arguments and the findings of this doctoral research. The literature review is divided in six main sections in which I present both historical and emergent discourses of happiness related to: a) different interpretations of happiness over time; b) the basis of so-called ‘happiness science’; c) discourses within the happiness report; d) criticisms of the happiness industry and the emergence of critical happiness studies; e) the complexity of analysing and the risk of essentialising happiness across cultures; and f) the ways in which hegemony and national identities can influence the construction of happiness within national groups. The combination of these literatures is key to the contextualisation of such a broad topic and the analysis of how the work of journalists can relate to the dissemination of particular understandings of happiness through media discourse.

In the methodology section (Chapter 3), I turn to media studies in order to explain the way I conduct my research, e.g. how I select and interpret media texts. In terms of methods and procedure, I justify why my work has adopted a methodology which is based

on frame analysis and critical discourse analysis – observing, for example, Entman’s (1993) considerations on ideologically driven strategies of highlighting and omitting information in order to produce meaning within media discourse, as well as Foucault’s (1980) power/knowledge nexus. In addition to the presentation of my sample, I also touch on the complexities related to a study involving a subjective topic such as happiness, and the importance of deconstructing and unpacking *a priori* ideas about happiness and its ‘myths’ (Barthes 2009). Then, I finally turn to the representation of happiness in news stories and narratives, as observed in the coverage of the WHR and national happiness more broadly.

After discussing the theoretical and methodological bases of my thesis, I engage with the data analysis in the three discursive chapters dedicated, respectively, to the US, Indian and the UK press (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Each analytic chapter begins with an introduction in which I briefly contextualise the country’s moment and history, linking some of its key cultural elements to the modern practice of measuring (and discussing) national happiness. With regards to the sample, I justify the choice of particular newspapers and provide tables that set out quantitative data from which qualitative sub-themes derived. The individuation of special, qualitative patterns provides distinctive elements of the different coverages and contributes to more nuanced representations of happiness in each national context throughout the sample period.

The sample is heterogeneous both as a whole and in terms of each set of national newspapers. For example, even though many journalists dedicated significant space to criticising the happiness industry and attempts at quantification in the US newspapers, material understandings of happiness, as well as the legitimisation of the pursuit of individual happiness, were identified throughout the American sample (Chapter 4). This

reinforces the ideas of individualism in American society and illustrates how “false” or “repressive needs” associated with consumer capitalism (Marcuse 2002) can become a form of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) under neoliberalism.

In India, even though new lifestyles emerged since the economic liberalisation in the 1990s, the country’s traditions still seem to influence the way some journalists tend to conceptualise happiness as something more ‘transcendent’ than ‘mundane’, as discussed in Chapter 5. At the same time the data collected from the Indian newspapers provided significant examples of counter-hegemonic constructions of happiness – e.g., by criticising the WHR as a “Western concept” – they also revealed clear signs of self-orientalism (see Said 2003) by trying to, for example, represent India as a spiritual nation which can create its own path to achieve happiness in an alternative, anti-materialistic but also nationalistic way.

The UK press, overall, reveals a particular concern with rationality, a legacy of the Enlightenment, and proposes some further steps in order to demystify happiness in Chapter 6. However, despite many British journalists’ sharp criticisms towards the controversial attempt to measure ‘happiness’ – and contradicting the idea that other countries such as the US are stereotyped as more ‘emotional’ (cf. Ehrenreich 2010ab) – some articles published in the UK press revealed a tendency to engage in motivational discourse as commonly seen in practices related to positive psychology.

Following the sort of collage of discourses provided in the analytic chapters, I share the final conclusions of my thesis in Chapter 7, where I also do a comparative study of the coverages of the WHR and national happiness within and across the contexts analysed. As

expected from a sample made up of texts collected from mainstream global media, journalistic narratives in these countries show certain commonalities. Still, each national context provided relevant material for my metalinguistic analysis, and deeper reflections shared by more critical writers reinforced some particularly intricate parts of the discursive construction of happiness in the media.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1. Contextualising happiness

Happiness isn't a fixed concept: there are many possible ways in which happiness can be experienced, conceptualised, and represented. These practices are interconnected and imply the use of language and communication to be accomplished; they depend on collective interpretations which suggest that 'happiness' can be seen as subjective, context-specific and co-created. Indeed, following the work of a number of critical theorists (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Berlant 2011, Davies 2016), in this thesis I understand happiness as a discursive construction in a Foucauldian sense. A broad range of representations reflect and help construct the diversity of understandings of happiness in everyday life. In the national/cultural contexts that are the focus for this project, images and narratives of happiness can be found everywhere, from newspaper stories to films, advertising and social media, for example. In this scenario, discourse, understood as ways of constituting knowledge and constructing the world through a particular set of power relations (see Foucault 2002), is a central element to the interpretation of what understandings of happiness the news spreads, as well as the norms and values that become naturalised through particular constructions of happiness.

In this study, I will consider the ways in which journalists interpret and represent scientific information provided by the WHR which is based on people's reported 'happiness'. For this reason, before turning to media representations in particular, this literature review starts with the aim of gaining a clearer sense of how happiness has been understood in relation to everyday experiences within disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Then, I will discuss happiness as a science; narratives and

counter-narratives of happiness in the public sphere; and also a cross-cultural conceptualisation of happiness in the following sections, before focusing on aspects of media representation which are central to the thesis, both in the methodology and throughout the analysis.

There are many different approaches to happiness in academic literature: some authors eventually associate being happy with material, economic factors (e.g., Diener 1984, Veenhoven 1999); others focus on the social and political aspects of happiness, notably critical theorists such as Segal (2017), Davies (2015), and Brown (2015). In more popular texts about happiness writers often instead explore positive psychology and self-help practices (e.g., Seligman 2004, Achor 2010); while spiritualists are more interested in a transcendent way of leading a happy life (e.g., Dalai Lama & Cutler 1998, Tolle 2009). In order to trace the emergence of conceptual discourses that have formed recent academic debates about the politics of happiness, I will give some key examples which illustrate different approaches to engaging with this apparently never-ending discussion, and begin by tracing influential philosophical understandings of the concept.

2.1.1. Philosophical understandings of happiness

This section aims to make sense of the complex and sometimes contradictory ways that happiness has been understood, by tracing influential understandings of the term. It would be quite ambitious to summarise here what has been said about happiness in history, but, before turning to counterculture and critical theory, I need to mention certain views that play a key role in informing contemporary debates about the measurement of happiness. Haybron (2013: 10) encapsulates what I mean in describing happiness as a complex discursive

construction: instead of saying that happiness “is” something, in different situations happiness can be “thought of” as something. Indeed, people have attempted to think of happiness in a range of different ways from antiquity to the present day – and, apparently, there is still no consensus.

Many contemporary debates about happiness draw upon Ancient Greek philosophy to distinguish between different modes of happiness (see McMahon 2006). Hedonist Epicurus referred to happiness in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (2005 [305 BC]) as pleasure or the absence of pain. In a similar cultural context, though, Plato suggested that happiness or well-being is rather “the highest aim of moral thought and conduct” and “virtues... are the requisite skills and dispositions needed to attain it” (Frede 2017). The very fact that Plato equates happiness with well-being is indicative of his long-term perspective instead of a focus on immediate pleasure. Similarly, Aristotle (1906 [350 BC]) pointed out that happiness is each person’s most absolute desire and final end, and goods such as pleasure, wealth, honour, virtue and wisdom would be means to be happy. In his writings, Aristotle referred to happiness (*eudaimonia*) as an activity of the soul instead of the body, which is not limited to a fleeting moment, but is rather a way of living, a lasting exercise of faculty and contemplation (*ibidem*). Aristotle’s in-depth reflections suggest his concern with happiness as an intense but achievable pursuit based on human virtue and excellence. On the contrary, in the theocentric society of the Middle Ages, in which pleasure had a negative connotation, theologian Augustine of Hippo (1998 [426 AD]) did not even consider the possibility of being happy in this earthly life and imagined happiness as something ideally perfect which could be achieved only after death through the encounter with God.

But classical and medieval philosophers are not the only sources of wisdom on

happiness. As theorists such as William Davies (2016) have shown, a heterogeneous range of Eastern philosophies have been integrated into the burgeoning happiness industry to improve worker productivity. These alternative conceptions of happiness are often derived from simplifications of Confucian ideals of individuals following a path of “moral transformation” through which they would be able to fulfil social roles related to the social spheres of family and community (Kim 2015). In a more introspective way, Buddhism proposes to overcome suffering through meditation and other spiritual practices which are influential in modern interpretations of happiness – evidenced in popular culture as epitomised by Julia Roberts’ scenes while moving from the US to India in the film *Eat Pray Love* (2010) or the international success of Dalai Lama’s bestseller *The Art of Happiness* (1998).

According to Gowans (2015), while the philosophical reflection stimulated by classical Buddhist thought is very much inclined to topics in metaphysics and epistemology (knowledge), Western thinkers such as Kant, Spinoza and Mill paid significant attention to moral values and ethical philosophy. Clearly against the ethical theory of hedonism, Kant (1996 [1788]) suggested that individuals can be happy if they deserve it, and both reason and morality play a crucial role for the achievement of the “highest good”. Influenced by faith, Spinoza differentiated the passionate love for ephemeral goods from the intellectual love for an eternal good which he associated with God (Nadler 2019). While these arguments touch on morality and faith and suggest an anti-materialistic approach to the topic, the contemporary science of happiness draws on further longstanding theoretical debates, emerging out of post-enlightenment and utilitarian thought.

From a post-enlightenment perspective, Mill (1979) and Bentham (1988) developed

the doctrine of utilitarianism according to which societies need to promote the happiness of everyone, or most of the people. This approach has been criticised by those who argued in favour of the question of individuality (Smart & Williams 2008 [1973]), since there is no such a ‘standard’, unique model of happiness that suits every single person. As a critique of utilitarianism, Nietzsche (1968) once wrote: “Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that”, referring to Bentham and Mill; and, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006 [1885]), he even depicted people who seek happiness in the material world as empty, pathetic and miserable. Despite criticism, utilitarian thought is intimately related to the tendency to quantify ‘happiness’ and has influenced both happiness studies and what today is known as the well-being agenda (Wright 2014).

As these examples illustrate, happiness can be seen from distinct perspectives which very much depend on different ways of thinking in particular moments in history. By endorsing either a materialistic, an ethical, or a mystical understanding of happiness, giving emphasis to its more concrete instead of spiritual aspects or vice-versa, and attributing different aims to it, thinkers may agree with each other in a sense and also contradict themselves over time. The fact remains that the problem of conceptualising happiness has been a focus of discussion for many societies in history. Interestingly, society itself has been identified as a potential problem as regards to happiness. According to Freud (2011 [1930]), for example, civilisation does not seem to contribute to people’s well-being since, by living in a community, they need to make renunciations and suffer restrictions which can undermine their own nature and instincts as human beings.

Even though many philosophers have rejected happiness as something simply hedonistic or mainly related to material aspects of life, there is a tendency to identify

happiness with notions of well-being and flourishing (Wright 2013) as well as life satisfaction (Almeder 2000) today, and this reflects on well-being indexes and happiness studies more broadly. As has happened in other moments in history, thinkers recently began to engage with the happiness debate again. In fact, GNH appeared as an alternative to GDP in Bhutan back in 1972 (Wright 2013). SWB (Diener 1984) became an object of study in psychology in the 1980s, and happiness has even been called a “new science” (Layard 2011) with the rise of positive psychology in the 1990s and the development of a series of tools for monitoring happiness. Following this trend, many countries decided to measure national happiness and even the United Nations started to do the same on a global scale by developing the WHR. As a response to this sort of happiness movement, though, a number of critical theorists raised various cultural, political and sociological questions related to the so-called “happiness industry” (Davies 2016), which I will explore in more depth in the following sections.

2.1.2. What sort of happiness are people talking about?

Both ancient and contemporary conceptions of happiness relate, at least up to a point, to pleasure, behaviours and attitudes, and how people evaluate their own lives (Kraut 1979). Broadly speaking, happiness is normally thought of as a state of mind from a psychologic perspective (*ibidem*). Turning the discussion to the present-day, though, the mainstream media, in particular, tends to treat happiness as well-being. Similarly, studies such as the WHR tend to consider happiness as more than just ‘mood’, as researchers look at many socio-economic factors which they argue go beyond people’s emotions in a given moment. In this way, sometimes people may be talking about different concepts while calling them all ‘happiness’, and the distinction between happiness and well-being may be useful in order

to clarify this point.

Interestingly, as regards to the fundamental question of whether happiness and well-being are the same thing, Haybron (2013: 45) has argued that most contemporary studies “are talking about life satisfaction, not happiness in the emotional sense.” According to the author, well-being has everything to do with “a life that goes well for you”, and, even when Aristotle used the term *eudaimonia*, he meant ‘well-being’ because it involves social values, not only psychology (happiness) (*ibid.*, 11-12). Indeed, Aristotle believes that people are considered happy if their life meets certain objective or ideal standards, which means “objective happiness” (Kraut 1979). While objectivism (such as that put forward by Plato and Aristotle) correlates happiness to the full development of each individual’s capacities and talents under ideal conditions, subjectivism (as put forward in many contemporary psychological narratives of happiness) argues that the standards required in order to be happy are actually determined by people themselves, which means “subjective happiness” (*ibidem*).

Even though happiness indexes such as the WHR may consider some ‘objective’ factors in the analysis of people’s well-being, the studies are based on reported happiness which provides data that draw on subjectivist models of psychology. Nevertheless, the fact that this relatively recent approach to happiness has been called ‘subjectivist’ doesn’t necessarily mean that it is more open or permissive than the ‘objectivist’ approach. Indeed, most contemporary subjectivist conceptions of happiness tend to follow a mainstream, neoliberal perspective about how people should behave and what they should gain in order to be happy (Davies 2016), e.g. having a successful career and making money. Even though narratives such as those related to the Easterlin paradox have been referred to in many studies

– since Easterlin (1974) found that money can contribute to happiness but only up to a point
– subjectivists are still talking about a material happiness. For example, taking for granted that life satisfaction is about pleasure, success and power may be quite restrictive in itself because it reinforces wider neoliberal discourses that valorise the individual rather than collective happiness.

On the other hand, “objective happiness” has also been criticised in the literature. McMahon (2008: 83) claims that both Plato and Aristotle suggested that people could contribute to their own happiness by living virtuously, since “to the extent that we can learn to be good... we can [also] learn to be happy”. However, as Haybron (2013: 84-85) has argued, Aristotle’s theory of well-being is “deeply controversial” precisely because of its objectivism. Indeed, the notion that everyone should obey external standards in order to be happy opens complex questions about unequal access to attaining these standards. Moreover, the virtuous activity that the Greek philosophers usually referred to has been said to have “aristocratic ends”, as suggested by Brown (2015), since they allege that the practice of happiness is related to “the best realization of the best condition a human being can be in... [that] a powerful, beautiful, wealthy, and in other ways fortunate member of a ruling élite does.” In this way, a dominant ideology may be constantly reminding people, more or less tacitly, that they are responsible for their own happiness – and this has been intensified due to the influence of neoliberal economic policy in contemporary societies.

Despite the fact that the UN decided to call its global study *World Happiness Report*, the ‘happiness’ ranking is very much focused on material aspects of society and people’s quality of life. In contrast, the newspaper articles in my sample refer to happiness as many different concepts, e.g. an emotion, a state of mind, a way of living. The sense of the term

may vary according to the context and the main subject of media texts which can be more inclined to politics, economics, lifestyle or other topics. For this reason, in my analysis I will consider what journalists and opinion leaders mean by ‘happiness’, and discuss the ways in which these meanings come together as a particular discourse that constructs happiness in accordance with specific social norms and values.

2.1.3. Happiness as a social norm

In addition to following the notion that happiness is something discursively constructed, I also find useful mentioning here that happiness has been seen by some critical theorists and journalists as a social norm in recent years (e.g., Ehrenreich 2010ab). Despite the fact that happiness is said to be subjective and a popular take on it claims that happiness is not a destination but rather a journey (Haidt 2006), some opinion leaders suggest that society may be imposing a duty to be happy over people (see Section 2.4 and *passim*). As a result, even though the pressure for leading a ‘perfect’ life may appear innocuous at first glance, it may also cause social trauma through tacit or indirect assumptions which suggest that not being happy is an individual failure (Berlant 2011, Davies 2016).

This sociological phenomenon and its inclination towards neoliberalism and consumerism (McMahon 2008, 2006) can be related to current debates on either how spontaneous or idealised happiness appears to be in different contexts, and this situation is stimulated by the contemporary media environment and rise of social media in particular. It has been argued, for instance, that ‘happiness victims’ dream of what they absorb from the “fast, fun, and ubiquitous” contemporary media practices through which communicative capitalism (Dean 2010) sells and even imposes ‘optimal’, flamboyant lifestyles, even though

the socio-economic conditions in which these individuals live prevent them from attaining these ideals of happiness. In this way, people's emotional discomfort caused by socio-economic reality, in contrast with the ideal of happiness, can stimulate a vicious circle through the necessity of 'transferring' their own pleasures to others (Pfaller 2014) by consuming happiness illusions (Fadina & Hockley 2015) which are usually made public through contemporary media.

Indeed, people attempt to construct an online life through virtual identities that presents their reality as perfect, and this indicates that, as Baylis (2005: 248) has argued, they search for a "temporary symptom relief from... emotional pains or frustrations". As a response of this tendency, counter-narratives highlight that the restless pursuit of happiness "is likely to lead to frustration and, paradoxically, unhappiness" (Nesse 2005: 26), since happiness does not appear to be something which can simply be planned and automatically achieved in practice. As the above considerations have shown, it is necessary to unpack happiness as a social construction in order to understand the meaning that people give to it, and to be able to analyse it through media texts which can influence the creation and shaping of different conceptions of happiness itself.

2.2. The quantification of 'happiness'

Happiness studies is a broad, interdisciplinary field which is strongly influenced by psychology and sociology, in addition to economics and politics. One of the central questions of the science of happiness is precisely what it means to be happy, and scholars consider several disciplinary domains in order to engage with such a complex discussion.

Before understanding how happiness relates to media studies, therefore, I will critically map out how particular debates in psychology and economics have been quantified in order to measure happiness, and hence how they influence discourses about happiness today. I will use critical work from social and cultural theory to analyse the significance of these developments and draw on theoretical frameworks from media and cultural studies in order to identify discourses of happiness which emerge from related disciplines.

In the context of the UN's WHR, happiness is understood as SWB (see next sections). Before focusing on SWB in particular, I will provide an overview of the scientific approach to happiness as a whole. The ways in which happiness is constructed in particular socio-historical contexts can influence the development of related but yet distinct theories on this subject, and, in the contemporary context of happiness indexes, these theories are particularly associated with what are seen to be the key elements of happiness: pleasure, engagement, and meaning (Seligman *et al.* 2005). Pleasure is related to what scholars call experienced well-being, while engagement has to do with social well-being, and meaning is fundamental to evaluated well-being (*ibidem*).

According to McMahon (2004), there are two main paths in the study of happiness: subjective (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB). The former is focused on whether people are happy and satisfied with life, and the latter on being well and giving meaning to life (*ibidem*). Based on these classifications, one can link SWB to hedonic happiness which is based on pleasure, and PWB to eudaimonic happiness which relates to the meaning of life. Therefore, these academic observations suggest that SWB – the self-reported measure which is the core of studies such as the WHR – is more likely to reflect material evaluations (quality

of life) instead of people's most 'inner feelings' (happiness), as with more generic notions of happiness.

2.2.1. Subjective and psychological well-being

I will now explain how notions of SWB and PWB have emerged in literature and relate to one another. In addition to considering its 'goals', these conceptions also attempt to explain happiness as regards to its dynamics. This approach can be linked to the relationship between objective and subjective happiness, determined respectively by ideal and personal standards, which has been discussed in the previous section. Indeed, as Haybron (2008) has argued, happiness relates to both feeling happy in particular moments and leading a happy life. Also, Diener (1984) – a psychologist who has been hugely influential in informing the current psychological field of happiness and in developing the notion of SWB – identified two perspectives through which one can think about happiness: from a bottom-up view, since a happy life can be represented by the sum of happy moments; and from a top-down view, since happiness relies also on people's interpretation and evaluation of experiences throughout time. Diener's notion of happiness can help to distinguish objective from subjective well-being: while the first can be assessed through specific criteria and standards regardless the respondents' opinion, the second depends instead on the subjective perception of one's own social and emotional conditions (*ibidem*, also Easterlin 2001).

As regards objective and subjective happiness, Kahneman (1999: 5) points out that respondents' impressions about their own lives (SH) and the actual benefits that they have in a certain period of time (OH) are respectively analogous to "remembered" and "total utility". That is to say, what people think and remember about their advantages and successes

in life, for example, does not appear to be more important than what they actually gain from these positive circumstances. These nuances can be observed through the differentiation between SWB and PWB too. Theorists diverge with respect to whether SWB and PWB are just similar research traditions, or rather two distinct approaches concerning the subjective nature of well-being (Chen *et al.* 2012). Some authors point out that it depends on whether well-being is assessed more generically at a higher level, or if it is analysed in detail (*ibidem*). Yet, despite these disciplinary differences, elements of both objective and subjective perspectives of happiness can be identified in the theories mentioned above.

Distinct conceptions of happiness and well-being suggest how a number of debates, based on different perspectives and discourses, can emerge from this topic, even though there are still significant intersections between them, such as in SWB and PWB. For example, in addition to the fact that these indicators eventually depend on people's subjectivity, there is also evidence that positive affect (hedonics) can be directly related to eudaimonic happiness (Kashdan *et al.* 2008). At the same time, even though it claims to have been proven empirically that measures of personal expressiveness (PWB) and hedonic enjoyment (SWB) are strongly correlated (Waterman 1993), they still indicate different types of experience since the former relates to "being challenged and exerting effort", while the latter to "being happy and relaxed" (Ryan & Deci 2001: 146).

In general, subjectivists are mainly interested in 'whether', while objectivists in 'why' people are happy (Kashdan *et al.* 2008: 220). Objectivist scholars focus on meaning and growth in their more holistic perspective which tends to privilege, for example, social instead of economic aspects, and they usually maintain that the subjectivist perspective is not sufficient to describe happiness as a whole (Kashdan *et al.* 2008). In fact, objectivism

does not even consider subjective happiness as something that necessarily corresponds to well-being since pleasure does not promote wellness automatically (Ryan & Deci 2001). Due to these issues, there is a tendency in the philosophical and sometimes psychological literature (e.g., Annas 2004, Ryff 1989, Waterman 2007) to suggest that eudaimonic happiness is “more objective, comprehensive, and morally valid” than hedonic well-being (Kashdan *et al.* 2008: 219).

Subjectivists or mentalists, in turn, maintain that SWB is a more reliable indicator – in fact, hedonic theories have been considered by some scholars as the most extensively studied models of well-being in happiness studies (Chen *et al.* 2012: 1034). According to the objectivist tradition, though, subjectivists should be aware that reports based on people’s feelings might not be as reliable as they assume, since individuals can constantly be positively or negatively influenced by both personal and environmental circumstances (Kashdan *et al.* 2008). However, both subjectivist and objectivist approaches use self-report measures in order to infer levels of happiness, and both ways of “measuring the immeasurable” (Eid & Larsen 2008) appear to have more in common than it may seem.

2.2.2. The (controversial) popularity of SWB

Even though SWB (but also PWB) is often subject of controversy, and authors often question whether SWB adequately assesses psychological wellness, or if it is a mere “operational definition” of well-being, this indicator has been considered as “the primary index of well-being” over the last few decades (Ryan & Deci 2001: 144-145). Moreover, SWB appears as “a major outcome variable” in the field (*ibidem*), including in the compilation of the WHR.

In a temporal dimension, SWB can be evaluated across time and context (global level), through meaningful periods (intermediate level), and immediate events (momentary level) (Kashdan *et al.* 2008: 221-222). As Ott (2014: 2582) explains, SWB is assessed by the collection of relevant data through psychometric questionnaires to which people answer according to their opinions about the best and the worst possible life. Although the reliability of individual answers can be influenced by many factors, subjectivist scholars claim that the average result is considered a valid indicator because “random errors usually offset each other” (*ibidem*). Moreover, as Ryff *et al.* (2002) pointed out, subjectivist scholars support the use of SWB as an indicator of quality of life as it is believed to produce relevant data involving: a) a cognitive process of judgement and attribution, b) constituents of emotional experience, c) a goal-related behaviour, d) time perspective, e) short and long-term effects of life events, and f) cross-cultural variability.

The well-being framework proposed in the literature provides an overview of relevant factors for determining SWB levels, namely health, earnings, the faculty of choice/control, and sociability (Scott 2012: 142). Other aspects are included in the analysis, such as dispositional variables (e.g., optimism, self-esteem, loneliness), social circumstances (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status), stress, and religiosity (Clark 2014, also Eid & Larsen 2008). When it comes to the WHR in particular, indicators such as freedom, generosity and social support have been considered – even though socio-economic factors still play a crucial role, which denotes the study’s concerns with material conditions and quality of life.

Even though the report interchanges ‘SWB’ with ‘happiness’, which sounds more appealing, it is worth reiterating that these terms are not synonymous. As Ryff *et al.* (2002)

have argued, the former is a reflection of experiencing positive instead of negative mood, while the latter is a long-term evaluation of the individual's own life. I argue, moreover, that using people's opinions about their life satisfaction in a given moment is quite a superficial way of collecting data to be labelled and then sold by the global index as the 'happiness' of nations. Even though these understandings of happiness that have emerged within the interdisciplinary field of happiness science have informed happiness indexes such as the WHR, therefore, they have not gone uncontested and a recent body of cultural theory has emerged that has criticised the quantification of happiness.

2.3. Discourses within the happiness report

Before turning to critiques of 'happiness' (Section 2.4), I will look at how the WHR's authors frame the happiness index within the report itself and try to situate it in relation to other measures such as the GDP and especially the GNH. The WHR is powered by data from *Gallup World Poll* and based on SWB surveys, in contrast to the Bhutanese GNH which focuses on PWB (see last sections). While the GNH only analyses the Bhutanese population, the WHR contemplates over 150 nations (UN members) and has consistently ranked wealthy countries as the 'happiest' whereas poor countries are positioned as the 'less happy' countries in the world.

As my data analysis will show, both WHR and GNH have been very popular in international news over the last decade, given the visibility of the former as a major study developed by Western powers and the particularity of the latter as an alternative, more holistic way of measuring 'happiness'. Broadly speaking, the WHR tends to be framed by

scholars and journalists in general as offering a more comprehensive overview of people's well-being than purely economic measures such as the GDP, whereas the GNH is usually seen as even more holistic than the WHR because the Bhutanese index deliberately rejects purely economic measures.

Perhaps because measuring 'happiness' has been recurrently considered as a controversial and polemical initiative especially by more critical thinkers (see Section 2.4 and *passim*), in the WHR website there is an institutional note pointing out that the report is written by "a group of independent experts acting in their personal capacities", but "any views expressed... do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization, agency or program of the United Nations". The text of the inaugural edition of the study begins with an apparently egalitarian discourse on the contradictions of modernity: e.g., "The world enjoys technologies of unimaginable sophistication; yet has at least one billion people without enough to eat each day". According to the authors, indicators related to economic progress do not ensure that people are living better, as issues like an increasing environmental degradation, the new crisis of obesity, depression and "other ills of modern life" can impact upon happiness (WHR 2012, p. 3).

However, despite this sort of holistic approach presented through certain discourses within the text of the WHR, sometimes the authors also reveal the importance given to material conditions when it comes to people's happiness, as when they make certain claims such as: "Not surprisingly, the poor report a rising satisfaction with their lives as their meager incomes increase" (*ibidem*). Moreover, despite arguing that economics does not secure happiness, wealthier countries always end up at the top of the global ranking.

In talking about ‘measuring’ the immeasurable, the authors suggest that the complexity and perhaps vagueness of the concept of ‘happiness’ is related to “traditional views”, whereas framing happiness as a “touchstone” for a nation’s goals and policies reinforces the general idea that “[m]ost people agree that societies should foster the happiness of their citizens.” They give some examples from different institutions and cultural contexts in order to emphasise and justify the supposed ‘universality’ of such practice: the US “Founding Fathers” recognised the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right (see American Declaration of Independence); British philosophers developed the notion of utilitarianism (see Bentham 1988 and Mill 1979); Bhutan created the GNH index; China has been championing a “harmonious society” through happiness research; and the observance of the *Millennium Development Goals* has been highly recommended by the UN (WHR 2012, p. 6-8, see also MDGs 2015). By drawing on a range of national contexts where happiness has been promoted, the authors infer that it is not something abstract and context-specific, linked to individual emotion, but rather a ‘universal’ concept which can be measured globally.

With regards to the use and interpretation of the term ‘happiness’, the authors of the WHR themselves stated that the term has been used in a “general way” (as in the very title of the study) because it “attracts attention more quickly than... [SWB]” – even though this may cause a “risk of confusion” (2012, p. 11). Moreover, when it came to the complexity of making comparisons in happiness across cultures, they admitted that “for a broad range of psychological findings, conclusions are based on experiments undertaken using WEIRD subjects (those from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democracies)”, which (as the abbreviation curiously suggests) “do not represent well what happens in the much larger populations in other countries and cultures” (p. 19). This clearly shows that, even if the WHR

claims to be a more comprehensive study in comparison to mere economic measures, it takes psychological parameters developed in the “WEIRD” contexts and renders them hegemonic – a universal tool with which happiness can be ‘measured’.

In terms of what can influence people’s life satisfaction, the authors mention external “key determinants” such as income, work, community/governance, values and religion; as well as “more personal features”, e.g. mental and physical health, family experience, education, gender and age (WHR 2012, p. 59). If compared to purely economic measures (e.g., GDP) the WHR intends to show that “calculations confirm the powerful effects of many variables other than income” (p. 79), such social capital, trust, freedom, equality, altruism etc. Indeed, even though the WHR 2012 referred to the GDP as a “valuable goal”, it also claimed that it “should not be pursued to the point where: economic stability is imperilled; community cohesion is destroyed; the weak lose their dignity or place in the economy; ethical standards are sacrificed; or the environment... is put at risk” (p. 91). Yet, the authors insist in several editions of the study that the WHR is aimed at and should contribute for policymaking – which corroborates its biopolitical role.

2.3.1. WHR *versus* GNH

Special attention is paid to the famous GNH, especially in the WHR 2012. Indeed, the UN report clearly stated that, according to the Bhutanese measure, “unlike certain concepts of happiness in current western literature, happiness is itself multidimensional – not measured only by... [SWB] and not focused narrowly on happiness that begins and ends with oneself and is concerned for and with oneself” (WHR 2012, p. 95). This claim shows how the WHR positions itself in relation to the GNH which is framed as an index concerned with a more

‘collective’ happiness. In light of their praise of GNH, the question can perhaps be asked as to why the authors of WHR are pushing for a different approach to measuring happiness.

In the first edition of the WHR, GNH deserved a whole chapter written by then president of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Karma Ura, and his colleagues. According to the authors, GNH can impact people’s lives by either increasing people’s happiness or decreasing “insufficient conditions” related to factors such as poor education, unbalanced use of time, and lack of community vitality. But the representation of the GNH as a more ‘collectivist’ index in comparison to the WHR and other (especially economic) measures can also be identified within the text of the Bhutanese study itself. In its more recent edition, then Prime Minister of Bhutan stated at the opening paragraph that the GNH is relevant because it is “more holistic and important than Gross National Product”; it is focused on “development with values”; and its objective is “to ensure that we have a just, equal, and harmonious society” (GNH 2016, p. 1). Accordingly, Ura *et al.* (2012: 7) pointed out that the GNH might be described as “holistic, balanced, collective, sustainable, and equitable”, which denotes that the Bhutanese index follows a particular notion of happiness as a “common public good”.

The most recent editions of the GNH were carried out by the Centre for Bhutan Studies in 2007, then in 2010, and 2015 (published in 2016), and the number of respondents increased over time: from 950 respondents in the former (Ura *et al.* 2012: 14) to a total of 8,871 in the latter publication (GNH 2016). The GNH survey is based on both face-to-face interviews (70%) and structured, electronic questionnaires (30%), and respondents are “randomly chosen... from a list of eligible household members” (GNH 2016, p. 49). The index is based on nine domains: PWB, time use, community vitality, cultural diversity,

ecological resilience, living standard, health, education and good governance. The 2016 report claimed that Bhutanese national happiness increased 1.8% from 2010 to 2015, with 91% of people reporting to experience happiness in their everyday lives.

A particular sentence found in the Bhutanese report encapsulates the discourse researchers and authorities in Bhutan try to attach to the GNH index: “Since the foundation of Bhutan, spirituality and compassion have been integrated with governance” (GNH 2016, p. 5). Accordingly, Alkire (2013: 48) holds that PWB brings a new perspective in the study of happiness as it enables people to “build up from within... [a] different model of humanity”. However, despite this apparently more holistic approach which also considers spirituality in the analysis of people’s well-being, GNH does not ignore living standards and other material factors such as household equipment ownership, livestock ownership, person to room ratio, access to electricity and improved water sources. A key difference between the GNH and WHR variables, though, is that the Bhutanese index does not look directly at ‘income’ – apparently a fundamental parameter for those living in neoliberal societies – as happens in the WHR which even includes the GDP in its analysis.

2.3.2. WHR over time

The WHR has been published nine times so far, from 2012 to 2021 (except 2014). In every new edition, the WHR’s own discourse corroborates certain principles of the study (presented in the inaugural edition) but also brings particular themes the authors pay special attention to each year (see Table 2.1 below). What remains a constant within the report’s content is the almost ‘bipolar’ discourses which try to detach the study from materialism at times but eventually take for granted the importance of material aspects of happiness. For

example, echoing some critical theorists’ arguments within the happiness debate (e.g., Brown 2015, Davies 2016), the authors apparently regret that “happiness became associated with material conditions, especially income and consumption” in the modern era after 1800 (WHR 2013, p. 5). At the same time, claims such as “an individual’s values and character are major determinants of the individual’s happiness with life as a whole” (p. 4) clearly emphasises the difference between the WHR and the more ‘collectivist’ GNH (as discussed above).

Indeed, more egalitarian narratives that appear at times do not prevent researchers from suggesting that happiness is related to higher productivity and earnings (see WHR 2013, pp. 61-63). Moreover, the WHR’s biopolitical role is constantly reinforced through claims in the report itself, for example: even though “some difficult philosophical issues about what constitutes success that are less easy to resolve”, the study still “leads to better policies and a better policy process” (p. 99). Here, the authors suggest that, since existential questions regarding happiness are complex, their research focuses on more concrete issues (normally related to quality of life instead of happiness itself) which are reflected on different parallel themes found in my data. In the table below, I summarise the main topics and what each edition of the WHR focused on over time:

Table 2.1. – Longitudinal elements of the WHR.

<i>WHR over time</i>	<i>Highlights of each edition of the happiness ranking</i>
<i>WHR 2012</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inaugural edition of the study reveals holistic/egalitarian narratives. • Focus on policy implications and causes of happiness and misery. • References to the ‘Easterlin Paradox’ (1974), social inclusion, environmental sustainability. • Discussion of other measures as case studies, e.g. GNH, ONS, OECD.

<i>WHR 2013</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite the discourse that economics doesn't secure happiness, wealthy countries top the ranking.
<i>WHR 2015</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report tries to reinforce that it contributes to public policy and claims to provide "additional information to the standard GDP-style indicators" (p. 105), but doesn't fundamentally alter the universalising project of the survey. • Authors make a link between happiness and economic productivity. • An entire chapter is dedicated to mental illness.
<i>WHR 2016</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to growing readership and influence of the study itself. • Focus on the relationship between happiness, gender, and age. • Two chapters are dedicated to mental health. • Even though attention has been paid to social capital, the report still propagates the biopolitical claim that "happiness and well-being are best regarded as skills that can be enhanced through training" (p. 8) in a motivational tone.
<i>WHR 2017</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance is given to happiness ethics and sustainable development. • Inequality emerges as a special theme. • By claiming that changing the focus from "income inequality" to "well-being inequality" (p. 41) would improve people's happiness, the study doesn't necessarily consider wealth redistribution policies as a 'solution' to increasing well-being. • Despite relying on utopic, utilitarian discourses, therefore, the study reveals an inclination to maintaining the status quo.
<i>WHR 2018</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of social factors, mental health and happiness at work are highlighted. • Discourses like "well-paying jobs" make people happier whereas labour-intensive industry is correlated to "lower levels of happiness" (p. 145) perpetuate generalisations and a capitalist mentality. • Case studies about happiness reveal stereotypical, homogenised narratives on social causes of unhappiness in the US and an "increasing anxiety" (despite economic growth) in China, contrasting the "ingenuity" and "exceptional optimism" of people in Africa.
<i>WHR 2019*</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International and rural-urban migration emerges as a special theme. • Migrants are said to seek "a happier life" (p. 3), and study suggests happiness tends to increase when people move to 'happier', wealthy countries. • Authors make further references to the Easterlin Paradox and dedicate a chapter to social foundations of happiness in Latin America.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study quite politicised brings specific discussions on voting behaviour, prosocial behaviour, and the role of social media in the study of people's well-being.

*WHR 2020**

- Once more, special attention is paid to negative social aspects which may prevent people from experiencing happiness in the industrialised, competitive American society.
- This is a ‘green’ edition of the study as it promotes environmental debates but also questions such as social environment and sustainability.
- However, claims such as “the average country happiness is a very strong predictor of city happiness at higher levels of well-being and economic development” still denote the importance given to material factors.
- Considerations are made about urbanisation as well as the “Nordic exceptionalism” (often at the top of the list).

*WHR 2021**

- Research focuses on Covid-19 and its impacts on people’s happiness (as I touched on very briefly in my final conclusions), e.g. mental health, social connection and work during the coronavirus pandemic.

*These last editions are not included in my sample period (2012-2018).

This longitudinal overview reveals several points touched on in the WHR which directly or indirectly influenced the representation of happiness in the media and the coverage of the index by journalists and newspapers in my sample. Even though the content of the report was not the only ‘raw material’ for making the news (I’ll mention other elements below), it contributed as a reference as well as to positive or negative reception of the WHR in the media. While both discourses in favour of and against to the happiness ranking (and the measurement of happiness more broadly) were also a constant in my sample, some topics stood out following different editions of the study and reflecting its findings (e.g., ‘mental health’ in 2013 and 2015, ‘inequality’ in 2016, ‘social support’ in 2017, ‘migration’ in 2018 – see Table 2.1) – although most of them appeared recurrently in the sample regardless of the year as they were normally framed as intrinsic to the happiness debate as a whole – but also particular moments and events in each national context.

Broadly speaking, thus, I can say that the more philosophical, fundamental debates somehow related to the “nature” of happiness, identified throughout the editions of the WHR

(but perhaps with more emphasis in its inaugural versions), tended to give way to a more ‘concrete’ problematisation of happiness over the years as journalists eventually focused on different parallel discussions or issues which emerged from each set of national newspapers and were framed as obstacles to happiness. I will elaborate on these tendencies and nuances of the WHR coverage in more depth in the methodology and throughout my analysis.

2.4. Criticisms and counter-narratives of happiness

Smiling is said to have “astonishing powers” (Gutman 2013), and expressing positivity appears to open doors and facilitate social life. However, as Ehrenreich (2010a: 195) has argued, thinking positively has become “not only normal but normative” as it seems to be the way in which people are expected to approach life as promoted in media and popular cultural discourses. Nowadays, she argues, being happy is treated as a sort of duty especially in so-called ‘individualistic’ societies, and many discussions have been provoked by this tendency because questions need to be asked about the significance of smiling and being happy as a cultural norm.

In order to clarify what has been said in literature on this topic, I will set out in this section key debates that have emerged about the science of happiness in the context of a body of work in critical and cultural theory that is sometimes referred to as “critical happiness studies” (Hill *et al.* 2020) (see Section 2.4.3). These theories have drawn on statistical information and narratives of happiness that construct alternative discourses of people’s well-being, and are explicitly critical of both the controversial science of happiness (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Davies 2016) and discourses of positive thinking (e.g., Ehrenreich

2010ab) that has emerged, especially in US contexts. This thesis builds on insights from critical happiness studies, particularly the argument that an emphasis on being happy at all costs has specific socio-political implications and that further attention needs to be paid to how these normative discourses are constructed in the media. First of all, I will give an overview of their works as regards to criticisms and its contribution to happiness studies, starting by focusing on discussions about psychosocial aspects of people's moods and attitudes towards life.

As Ahmed (2010: 173) has argued, both pessimism and optimism are evaluative and anticipatory attitudes since they rely on people's subjectivity and expectations at the same time. Ehrenreich (2010a), in turn, claimed that, by being either excessively optimistic or pessimistic, individuals are argued to have unrealistic perceptions of life and a lack of common sense as they see things through their own emotions instead of in actuality. Indeed, reality appears to be distorted in both cases because pessimists project their negativity onto the world, whereas optimists tend to ignore reality by overlooking problems and bad news in order to avoid suffering and feel good about life (*ibidem*).

Most psychologists agree on the fact that people are more likely to be happy with their successes instead of their failures (Davies 2016). Yet, people's reactions to negative (and not only positive) events appear to be determinant of their happiness too. Looking on the bright side is portrayed as better for individuals' well-being, with positive responses to life choices portrayed as more beneficial than negative. Mental health professionals often advise, for example, that thinking positively or having an optimistic outlook on life can improve health, personal efficacy, confidence, and resilience (Ehrenreich 2010a).

Nevertheless, theorists have emphasised that thinking positively as a genuine attitude and positive thinking as a motivational practice are not the same thing. According to Ehrenreich (2010a), systematic positive thinking became mainstream in the US during the twentieth century by stimulating the growth of an ‘industry’ which offers encouraging discourses to help people achieve happiness. However, the author suggests that, eventually, this sort of biopolitical practice may be more useful in boosting American national pride and capitalism instead of people’s well-being itself. Although the happiness industry is commonly framed as a contemporary phenomenon, Ehrenreich argues that the obsession for happiness in the US began with the very optimism of white settlers starting a new life in the ‘New World’, and also as a response to the rigidity of Calvinism which she refers to as “system of socially imposed depression” (*ibid.*, 74, 124).

Although the emphasis on positive thinking has gained traction in society more broadly, a growing body of theoretical work has been critical of the emphasis on happiness and individualism. As Ehrenreich (2010a) has argued, a “depressive culture” based on competitiveness tends to attribute successes and failures to individual ability and effort as opposed to ‘collective happiness’ (see Segal 2017). Indeed, being individualistically responsible for their positive and negative outcomes, people living in individualist, neoliberal societies are often educated towards a way of life in which every person has to develop their own financial independence and, as a consequence, happiness (a similar argument has been made by Littler (2018), which I will revisit later on).

Theoretical criticisms put forward by commentators such as Davies, Ahmed and Segal have been lent support by quantitative research that has argued society needs more equality than prosperity in order to succeed (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). In this sense, the

habit of being positive and staying in a good mood may mask socio-economic privileges that enable particular individuals to realise happiness, if one considers that not everyone is able to act and feel in the same way due to a number of psychosocial, economic, and cultural factors.

Indeed, Ehrenreich (2010a) observes that positive thinking per se does not seem to make people happier in the same way that other actions, more concretely aimed at helping people to live well (or living better), can actually do. For instance, she distinguishes between discourses of positive thinking that focus on individual happiness and material conditions that support well-being, e.g. fighting against hunger, finding the cure for a disease etc. In fact, it has been claimed that the effects of unreasonably optimistic thinking, an apparently innocuous attitude, can be “as delusional as thinking negatively” (*ibid.*, 195), and therefore might neglect the structural conditions that impact upon people’s well-being and lead to unproductive outcomes.

Broadly speaking, it seems that the more people insist on pursuing socially imposed standards of happiness the more they struggle to be happy. This scenario may become even more negative if individuals are incessantly bombarded with images and myths of ‘perfect’ lives by the media, in innumerable advertising campaigns, and now also reverberated on social media (Dean 2010, also Fadina & Hockley 2015). In this way, the happiness dream as it is banally sold and chased today is argued to provoke the completely opposite effect on people who come to experience delusion, frustration, low self-esteem, and even depression for not considering themselves as happy enough, or not being able to experience the ‘right’ standard of happiness (cf. Ahmed 2010).

Ultimately, the discursive construction of happiness tends to position certain individuals as inadequate for not being happy or not taking a positive outlook on life (Ehrenreich 2010b). At the same time, the fact that the crisis of subjective happiness has become so diffused in literature and academia indicates that people are realising that the consumption of ‘illusions’, such as mediated sparkling happiness, acts as a form of what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism”. According to the author, optimism becomes ‘cruel’ when it can’t promise or secure what it aims for: people’s happiness in a competitive, unequal society, for example. Indeed, Berlant refers to “fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer... [and] the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent” (*ibid.*, 51). It is worth noting that, as an example of multiple counter-discourses emerging against a priori ideas on people’s well-being, here optimism itself can be seen as something which overshadows happiness. For Berlant this means that optimism can no longer function as a key element in giving meaning to life through hope, confidence, and a positive attitude; instead of just becoming cruel, it also loses the strength to foster social attachments.

Overall, therefore, and very much in line with the plurality of discourses surrounding happiness, the body of literature associated with critical happiness studies points to a contradiction: on the one hand, people are expected to keep smiling and are encouraged to do so; on the other hand, sometimes smiling appears to be a hopeless task in contemporary neoliberal societies. As Pfaller (2014: 12) has eloquently described, “[w]hereas modernism produced an enthusiastic daring and a certain tolerance for frustration with its utopian promises, the disappearance of utopia... has mainly resulted in a certain passion for lamenting”, which (resonating with Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism”) relates to “the amazing acceptance of, and weak resistance to, neoliberalism’s economic policies in Western societies.”

The causes of unhappiness are multiple, and therefore they are complex to define, but from this theoretical perspective at least discontent can be intimately related to the illusion of happiness and the consequent frustration that it may provoke in reality. However, discontent itself plays a significant role in the construction of one's notion of happiness. In practice, as Ahmed (2010) has argued, happiness can be considered as a passive feeling, whereas unhappiness an active attitude. Indeed, unhappy people do not simply accept their unfavourable condition instead, but their emotional state "can mean to feel... disagreement with what has been judged as good" (*ibid.*, 210). This is one of the crucial points regarding contemporary counter-narratives of happiness, which are very much present in the media discourse about the WHR in addition to literature, as I will show in my analysis.

Nonconformity, delusion and unhappiness, instead of an endpoint, actually become a starting point to re-think standard, conventional notions of happiness. All of these cultural theorists, therefore, have troubled some of the ways in which happiness has been established as a benchmark for societies, and individuals within these societies, to aspire to. Thus, these criticisms come to the fore in attempts to measure happiness.

2.4.1. Happiness in quantified societies

Upon illustrating how complex analysing happiness and subjectivity can be through a critical lens, I will now explain the significance of these arguments to attempts to measure 'happiness'. Data and numbers (more than people's happiness itself) seem to be crucial for "capitalist control societies" (Dean 2010: 68), and everything – even biological and psychological aspects of individuals such as those related to their most inner feelings and

well-being – becomes subject to quantification. Indeed, algorithms and digital technology have been shaping economy, politics, and humanity as a whole (Greenfield 2017) in the context of the so-called “society of control” (Dean 2010).

As Lupton (2016) has argued, algorithms are key elements used in the constitution and exploitation of knowledge through advanced forms of surveillance, evaluation, and ‘optimisation’ of individuals – even though this sort of ‘knowledge’ is frequently used for commercial purposes. Yet, self-tracking or the quantification of the self (*ibidem*) has been increasingly drawing scholars’ and decision makers’ attention in recent years. In fact, the analysis of algorithms is a key trend within cultural theory (Beer 2017), and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) can influence several aspects of human life by means of new technologies and artificial intelligence (see also Harari 2014). In this context, I claim that the example of attempting to quantify something (such as an emotion) which is not a ‘thing’ is also a way of conditioning and determining what happiness is according to privileged people and societies.

Trying to measure happiness as a social indicator is controversial as it is complex in terms of ethics and reliability, even though it is still considered by some as a “more pertinent metric for well-being, from a humanistic perspective, than the buzz of transactions that constitute the GDP” (Ehrenreich 2010a: 3). Moreover, some scholars criticise the exclusive recourse to criteria based on the capitalistic view of happiness in developing these metrics, and the way economics tends to measure human growth and well-being through material indicators, such as earnings and purchasing power (Ahmed 2010, also Layard 2011). Further tensions between contemporary critical-theoretical work and ‘happiness science’ have arisen in relation to the tools with which happiness is measured. For instance, as Davies (2016: 37-

38) has argued, psychometric affect questionnaires are considered by subjectivist scholars to be “all means of rendering subjective experience tangible and visible, and therefore comparable”, but critics point out that the science of happiness grasps for something meaningful through means that are “too cold to adequately capture that meaning.”

At this point, it is worth calling into question not only whether happiness can actually be measured as SWB, but also the way in which results from different nations are interpreted and compared in studies such as the WHR. At the stage of an “inevitable” global capitalism (Ahmed 2010), the mainstream media tends to assume Western conceptualisation of an individualistic happiness as a reference, despite the world’s cultural and ideological diversity, and this tendency is ever more diffused today by means of what Davies (2016: 275) calls “powerful techniques of mass behavioural manipulation”, such as through the biopolitical role of advertising, digital media, and media discourse more broadly (cf. Dean 2010).

When it comes to the science of happiness, developed in parallel to utilitarian and neoliberal ideologies, happiness appears to be distinct from what objectivists maintain: happiness is not necessarily based on people’s conscience and virtue, but rather on a behaviourist conception of a “physical occurrence within the human body” (Davies 2016: 20). According to Bentham (1988: 20), humankind is governed by pain and pleasure, and happiness is something real and objective if considered as “a result of various sources of pleasure”. In fact, producing the maximum happiness for the population is central to utilitarianism (see Mill 1979), and, as Davies (2016: 18-19) has argued, governments put it into practice through a strategic mechanism in which “punishing” is a responsibility of the state, while “rewarding” relates to money and the free market.

In this way, the relatively new science of happiness represents to many a rational alternative to help governments in order to design policies and laws which are believed to improve the welfare of mankind (*ibidem*). Thus, happiness science relates mostly to the measurement of bodily aspects of individuals; but, from this monist perspective, material indicators and the ‘duty’ to smile appear to overshadow alternative meanings of happiness for human beings.

2.4.2. Happiness and neoliberalism

The link that a number of scholars – especially more critical ones – make between happiness and neoliberalism relates to certain factors which can be identified in contemporary societies today. One is the fact that happiness has become “not only normal but normative” (Ehrenreich 2010a: 195, see also Ahmed 2010, Berlant 2011, Davies 2016). The other link made by scholars has to do with the way that measuring happiness on both national and global levels has other aims in addition to the apparently innocuous interest in boosting people’s happiness. Indeed, as critical theorists have argued, attempts to quantify people’s feelings can be intimately related to the manipulation and control that ruling or dominant classes eventually exert over populations (see Davies 2016), which is a clear sign of the biopolitical role of the so-called ‘new science’ of happiness (cf. Frawley 2015).

In order to contextualise these arguments, it is worth giving an idea of how certain key authors have been characterising neoliberalism, and how neoliberalism has actually influenced the way many people see and situate themselves as social actors. Before starting this discussion it is worth pointing out that, even though neoliberalism is formally often seen

as a set of economic policies promoted by the Chicago School and manifested initially by the Regan and Thatcher governments (see Davies 2016: 153-161), Hall (2011: 706-709) associates it with a “hegemonic project”, and Foucauldian scholarship has focused more specifically on how neoliberalism has shaped subjectivity itself. It is this focus on the manipulation of subjectivity via the exertion of biopower that is especially relevant to grasping the implications of the WHR and the measurement of happiness more broadly in my thesis.

In line with Foucault’s (2008) view on the emergence of such a ‘neoliberal’ subjectivity, political theorist Wendy Brown (2015: 30) refers to neoliberalism as “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (*ibid.*, p. 17), where “[a]ll conduct is economic conduct, all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized” (*ibid.*, p. 10). In this way, Brown’s account highlights a sort of threat that neoliberalism is to democracy, as it converts “the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy’s constituent elements into *economic* ones” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

This is why Brown (2015: 19) also points out that, while democracy is seen by some as “the crown jewel of the West”, others think that it is rather “what the West has never really had, or it is mainly a gloss for Western imperial aims” – e.g., positioning itself at the top of a global happiness list that is supposedly ranked according to ‘objective’ measures. The author defines neoliberalism as a “global phenomenon” (*ibid.*, 20, 48) which is not limited to the economic sphere, but also involves social and political dimensions. Indeed, neoliberalism goes beyond economics, and Foucault (2008) understands it as a political rationality of government or a ‘governmentality’. In this way, Bowsher (2018: 86) argues

that neoliberal governmentality “describes the mobilisation of economic theories through practices designed to produce particular societal norms, social relations, and subjective behaviours”, and these practices are also claimed to “produce subjectivities that are turned towards particular strategic ends.” Some terms used in these quotes – relating the production of ‘subjectivities’ to ‘strategic’ choices – reinforce the idea of the biopolitical aspect in the so-called society of control (see Section 2.4.1) that attempts to quantify even subjective aspects of life such as people’s ‘happiness’.

Indeed, measuring happiness has been considered by scholars and authorities as a useful tool in order to support governance and policymaking (Layard 2011, 2012), but it also creates space for the influence and control exerted by governments and dominant cultures as a whole. The intervention that biopower makes on a population level both depends on and potentialises the, as Bowsher (2018: 515-516) puts, “uneven” and “unequal” production of subjectivity in neoliberal societies. In this sense, the author points out that “human capital crystallizes the neoliberal strategy both by shaping individuals into the form of an enterprise and... radically expanding economic rationality across all areas of social existence” (*ibidem*). Therefore, Bowsher holds that biopower is “present at all levels of the social body” and it regulates and distributes “the (unequal) possibilities of life to serve broader objectives such as productivity and accumulation” (*ibid.*, p. 524) – a neoliberal ideology which is perpetuated with the measurement of happiness and the publication of a study such as the WHR itself.

With regards to social behaviours of individuals living in neoliberal societies, Brown (2015: 129-130) points out that not even integration and consensus can ‘collectivise’ their responsibility since contemporary neoliberal governance is a “supreme instance of *omnis et*

singulativim” as it actually “operates through isolating and entrepreneurializing responsible units and individuals, through devolving authority, decision making, and the implementation of policies and norms of conduct”. Her arguments relate to Bowsher’s (2018: 85) observation on the creation of a sort of “empty solidarity” which “defines the neoliberal project as a whole”. For example, the importance given to individual freedom as something positive in neoliberal societies can be seen as negative when it comes to reflecting on how an emphasis on individualism can undermine more sustained, enduring forms of social change.

Interestingly, another insight from Brown’s elaboration on neoliberalism relates to the following observation: while equality “ceases to be an a priori or fundament of neoliberalized democracy”, inequality becomes the “medium and relation of competing capitals” in societies which constantly feature “winners and losers” (Brown 2015: 38) – as the WHR itself promotes. Following a neoliberal perspective, then, happiness apparently depends on the efforts that people are (or are not) able to make in order to live well and feel good. Even though being happy is not just a choice, the duty to be or (even worse) appear to be happy clearly follows the individualistic, neoliberal mentality: one needs to take every responsibility in order to create their own favourable conditions which could perhaps contribute to experiencing happiness.

Happiness becomes, then, object of social comparisons and competition, which can also be explained by some authors’ insights into neoliberalism. As Dardot and Laval (2014: 47, also Foucault 2008) have argued, “neoliberalism combines a rehabilitation of public intervention with a conception of the market centred on competition”. Moreover, political theorist William Davies (see Davies and Dunne 2016: 156) points out that, with the passage from liberalism to neoliberalism there was also a shift from the focus on ‘exchange’ to

‘competition’, which indicates why the market became something that produces inequality: its “moral trait” is that some people will win whereas others will lose (*ibidem*) – but the collectivity does not seem to be a concern.

Accordingly, Gane (2014: 9) holds that, differently from the understanding of the ‘economic man’ as just a “partner of exchange” according to classical liberalism, in neoliberal thought the *homo æconomicus* is an entrepreneurial being, or “entrepreneurial of himself” (Foucault 2008: 226). However, this sort of model is extended beyond economic relations even to “domains of behaviour or conduct” regarding “every social actor in general” (Foucault 2008: 268). In this way, neoliberalism is based on “pure competition” (*ibid.*, p. 131) which is not seen as something ‘primitive’ or ‘natural’ – as it could be associated with simply ‘exchange’ – but rather ‘social’ as it very much relates to the structure and presupposes the participation and support of government that eventually “works in the interest of the market by promoting competition in all spheres of life” (Gane 2014: 20).

The competitiveness observed in neoliberal societies and its relationship with subjective aspects of life – such as happiness and life satisfaction – can be associated, then, with Littler’s (2013, 2018) updated notion of ‘meritocracy’. Indeed, the way the WHR indicates that certain countries and cultures are more likely to report higher levels of SWB, according to particular objective conditions, suggests that specific social groups are privileged or simply doing things the ‘right way’, while others do not seem to be able to show an equally positive performance in the happiness rankings. In line with Littler’s elaboration on meritocracy – as a sort of unfair justification for the aptitude, facility and privilege of dominant classes – living well and being satisfied with life can be seen as a gift

of lucky individuals if one takes for granted the way happiness tends to be conceptualised in neoliberal, competitive societies.

On the one hand, the author points out that “the idea of meritocracy has become a key means through which plutocracy... perpetuates, reproduces and extends itself”, and “the language of meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy and a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture” (Littler 2018: 2). On the other hand, mainstream happiness studies and policies may provide tools and practices which are perhaps more interested in maintaining the status quo – as certain privileged countries are consistently labelled as happier than the poorer and more ‘problematic’ ones – instead of actually challenging schemes and systems in order to promote a more democratic, collective notion of happiness around the world. This links back to the question that the WHR (e.g., 2012: 73) discursively tries to detach happiness from wealth but keeps reinforcing this connection through its findings because ‘privileged’ nations are usually at the top of the list.

As Littler has argued, even though meritocracy emerged through movements for greater equality in the twentieth century, it eventually atomises people “as individuals who must compete with each other to succeed, by extending entrepreneurial behaviour into the nooks and crannies of everyday life” (*ibidem*). In line with the neoliberal ideology illustrated by the insights from other authors in this section, Littler (2018: 3) points out that one of the main problems with the contemporary concept of meritocracy is that “it endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition certain people must be left behind. The top cannot exist without the bottom. Not everyone can ‘rise’.” In this sense, meritocracy functions as “an ideological myth to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities” (*ibidem*); and it has gradually become a discourse related to plutocracy,

“mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism” (Littler 2013: 69). Accordingly, Segal (2017: 202) holds that neoliberalism “promotes its very own ‘utopian’ fantasy that everyone can succeed in life” despite the different conditions each individual (or national group) may have, which the author refers to as “grossly unequal beginnings”.

The insights offered by Littler and Segal are why I use this neoliberal meritocratic discourse as a metaphor in order to frame the WHR as a sort of biopolitical propaganda for privileged countries and dominant cultures in the neoliberal arena. Indeed, the very existence of the report is predicated on the idea of enabling others to climb up the ladder (in the happiness list), but the fact the report is a hierarchical ranking system effectively means it is always a competition with ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

2.4.3. The emergence of critical happiness studies

As a response to the controversial attempt to measure ‘happiness’ and the expectations society tends to create regarding the ‘right mood’ in which people are invited to present themselves in social life, a critical body of work has increasingly challenged practices and ideas related to a sort of individualistic, if not material, and even “hollow”, as Segal (2017) puts, notion of happiness.

The importance of affect as something meaningful and significant has been recalling the attention not only of biologists and psychologists but also scholars from humanities and social sciences more broadly (Leys 2017). At the same time mainstream happiness studies has gained strength with the emergence of positive psychology in the 1990s (Binkley 2014:

25), in addition to further publication of different studies and indexes in the field, more critical authors started to elaborate on this relatively recent ‘reinvention’ of happiness. They question methods used for its quantification as well as key concepts such as subjectivity, intention, and performability, which may give distinct meanings and functions to ‘affect’ (and also ‘happiness’) according to specific narratives and contexts. Along with contemporary sociological accounts of changing lifestyles and the increasing weakness of human bonds – framed by Bauman (2003, 2006) as “liquid love” and “liquid modernity”, for example – the blurring borders between the public and private spheres, love and individualism, rationality and emotion became an object of study as in Illouz’s (2007) elaborations on “emotional capitalism” – according to which emotional and economic relationships eventually define and shape each other.

As I anticipated in the last section, happiness studies is intimately related to neoliberalism. However, while mainstream happiness studies can be seen as a source of conformation to the status quo (e.g., as normally shown in the work of subjectivist scholars), critical happiness studies instead contests undemocratic, counterproductive rules and the very ‘shallowness’ usually related to mainstream elaborations on happiness and its ‘new science’. Binkley (2014: 19) is one of the authors who contests what he calls the “new happiness discourse” due to its popularisation through the temporality of happiness as “enterprise”, or the perspective of “an open future of ongoing possibilities, that strategizes and seeks opportunities for ever greater utility and higher emotional returns on life’s investments”. Binkley (2014: 20-21) clearly makes a link between this new discourse of happiness and utilitarian ethics which tends to generalise and standardise happiness by ignoring ‘individuality’ (cf. Smart & Williams 2008 [1973]) and directly contributes to the “minimisation of any collectivist alternative to individual competition” (Binkley 2014: 23).

In accordance with Foucault (2008) and other theorists discussed in the previous section, Binkley highlights that the aim of the state in controlling people eventually shapes society through a neoliberal way of thinking. In this sense, he claims that even “happiness is neoliberal” as “[t]here is an underlying economic logic that runs through the government of happiness that resonates with the worldview of neoliberal economics and disseminates languages and frameworks mandating a program of reflexive self-government” (Binkley 2014: 24). In such a context, everyone seems to be governed as a “subject of neoliberal enterprise” and happiness becomes “a task, a regimen, a daily undertaking in which the individual produces positive emotional states just as a fitness guru shapes a selected muscle group” (*ibid.*, p. 36). Read against these arguments, the biopolitical role of happiness indexes is made explicit as a means of promoting specific forms of “neoliberal subjectivity” (Bowsher 2018, also Foucault 2008) wherein individuals are made responsible for realising their own happiness.

Another crucial argument to my thesis is the representation of happiness in the media, which, as Frawley (2015) suggests, can be more associated with the very construction of the “happiness problem” instead of the “brighter side” of human condition. Indeed, Frawley (2018: 44) holds that the development of the happiness discourse is also related to the rhetoric in claims-making which complicates the happiness debate. Interestingly, this tendency goes in the opposite direction to positive thinking and the popularisation of ‘mindfulness’ – which Purser (2019) refers to as “the latest iteration of a capitalist spirituality” since such practices usually promise to improve individuals’ productivity and focus (also according to a neoliberal way of living) and may lead to alienation from social, political and more collective issues. At the same time, though, in addition to stimulating

useful debates to improve people's well-being, the "problematization" of happiness in the media can also be related to biopolitics and the maintenance of the status quo if, as Frawley (2015: 3) points out, it promotes discussion "about the nature of individuals and the world" in terms of "how both should be understood and even fundamentally changed."

With regards to the development and diffusion of happiness discourses in Anglo-American societies, for instance, Frawley also points out that happiness as a "public problem" has more to do with an implicit "critique of change" than properly optimising people's mental states: "It expresses a fear of the future... [and a] consequent desire to maintain the present" (*ibidem*). Moreover, according to her analysis of media texts on happiness in the UK press, the author found that the current economic context is normally represented as "natural... or at least unchangeable", and "[c]apitalism becomes a fact of nature and its flaws mere reflections of flawed human nature, of which it is simply an expression" (Frawley 2018: 34). According to Frawley (2018: 44), through the discursive construction of happiness many claims emerge not just to "tell about reality" but "must *convince* us of their reality". In this sense, sometimes newspapers reinforce a particular neoliberal conception of happiness through reporting happiness science uncritically.

These alternative takes on a theme which may seem almost 'innocent' at first glance contrast with the predominantly psychological and economic-focused contribution that subjectivist scholars and researchers (see Section 2.2) offer to mainstream happiness studies. As I am showing in this chapter, there is a clear difference between 'mainstream' and 'critical' happiness studies, in terms of both concepts and objectives. Even though these currents seem to share a common theme, their developments take quite opposite directions: while the former tends to frame happiness as an individual goal and tries to crystallise it into

data for policymaking, the latter goes significantly further by problematising the basis of such attempts to measure happiness, highlighting the role of different subjectivities in the ‘negotiation’ of happiness, and trying to discuss the subject in a more collective sense (e.g., Segal 2017).

Even though some scholars have claimed that their call for the establishment of critical happiness studies as a specific discipline “should not be understood as a call to arms but rather an invitation to critique” (Hill *et al.* 2020: 10-11), critical theorists know exactly the point they want to make by proposing a sharp, critical interpretation of happiness and its systematic study. They claimed, for example: “by refusing individualistic framings we create space for new and different formulations of happiness”, and this contribution to a lucid, sociological interpretation of people’s well-being is set to “call into question the peculiarly inanimate and robotic kind of happiness offered by ‘experts’” by trying to “gather different and diverse voices and contribute to alternative, more caring and collective conceptualizations of happiness” (*ibidem*).

As can be expected, given the subject’s complexity, polemics and dissent are not excluded from the happiness debate – especially as more critical currents aim precisely at contesting certain standards and a priori ideas within it. While discussing happiness and the politicisation of subjectivity, political theorist Grant Duncan (2020: 83-84) has argued that “the premises that support a politics of happiness are tautological and... the research methods supporting it are best described as pseudoscience.” The author argues that, in order to create a “new utilitarian” politics of happiness, researchers aim at establishing a “scientific case” through which happiness is naturalised as a “valid object of empirical inquiry” (*ibidem*). In this sense, he points out that the “new utilitarianism” is “self-contradictory” as

it aims to be a “natural-scientific” and “moral-political discipline” at the same time. Indeed, it attempts to both ‘naturalise’ and ‘moralise’ happiness, which eventually determines or at least influences people’s behaviours and feelings. Moreover, Duncan (2020, p. 88) questioned the usefulness of the widely criticised measurement and manipulation of ‘happiness’ since, in practice, it “fails to provide a politically compelling or original case for what governments ought to do” (*ibidem*).

In this way, the author suggests that, instead of contesting the status quo, the new science of happiness is rather focused on changing people’s behaviour in order to make them more economically productive and assimilate the neoliberal way of living. Still in line with Foucault’s conception of biopolitics, Duncan (2020: 89) pointed out that “[b]iological life has become an open object of knowledge and a field of political intervention”, while “[h]appiness (if seen as an inherent aim of a living body) is one target, therefore, of modern biopower, informing those principles and practices by which we strive to maximize the potentials or performance of individuals and whole communities.” In this context, my critical discourse analysis aims at making visible the power politics at play within the happiness debate and showing, through representative examples collected from the media, the biopolitical role of mainstream happiness studies and how it is reflected in media discourse.

2.5. Happiness across cultures

Research in happiness studies argues that cultural variations may influence the way individuals experience and perceive happiness (Diener & Suh 2000, Rice & Steele 2004, Selin & Davey 2012). According to the authors, each social, ethnic, or national group can

think of happiness according to specific reasons and factors which correlate with aspects of life such as lifestyle, sense of humour, and values that characterise particular populations. Although culture's influence on happiness is debatable, many scholars agree that people's conceptions of happiness can vary across cultures not only because of their objective conditions of life, but also due to various psychosocial factors such as cognitive biases, different emotion norms, and the socialisation of emotions itself (Eid & Larsen 2008). However, even though it can be hard to avoid homogeneous ideas of happiness without using general notions of cultural difference, generalisations can slip into stereotyping if they are not careful (cf. Diener & Suh 2000).

In this context, happiness can be understood as also a cultural matter: it might depend on the way people live, interact, and even how they express their own satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) about life. However, this awareness that conceptions of happiness are culturally specific appears to be rare in practice if (as argued by the cultural theorists discussed previously) an individualistic conception of happiness tends to be dominant in the globalised world. Moreover, some thinkers, within psychology and economics in particular, assume that there is a standard conception of happiness that (more or less tacitly) represents a model to be followed, and they even use this notion, consciously or unconsciously, to construct SWB as an indicator which they sell as the way to measure people's 'happiness'.

However, in practice, measuring the 'immeasurable' is not simple. Conceptualising happiness can be related to people's view of the world which, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, can be influenced or even determined by cultural elements such as the very language one speaks (Piller 2011) – in line with the notion of cultural relativism (see Gellner 1985). Indeed, a number of studies on how culture and language may influence people's

perceptions of happiness have been published over the recent decades. For instance, in the article “Concepts of Happiness Across Time and Cultures”, Oishi *et al.* (2013) investigate happiness and well-being through a linguistic analysis of the term ‘happiness’, and how it changes over time and in different cultural contexts. Dictionary definitions of ‘happiness’ from 30 nations were analysed in the study, as well as historical changes of the term’s meaning in American English.

According to the authors, the definitions of happiness found in dictionaries “reflect not only linguistic heritage but local history and culture” (*ibid.*, 563), and they argued that a cross-cultural analysis of different connotations of the term can be useful for cultural comparisons. To give a few examples, in China happiness can be defined as “a life that makes people have ease of mind”, while in France it can also be the “inner state of perfect satisfaction”; in Japan, the term means also the “natural course of events”; in India, “welfare, quiet... [and] glee”; and, in Mozambique, even “prolonged prosperity” (*ibid.*, 564-567). These nuances are precisely what could be lost in attempts to quantify happiness within well-being indexes – a problem that becomes more pronounced when reflecting in depth upon the relationship between language and culture, two fundamental elements in journalism.

As a strategy to ensure impartiality in considering what happiness can mean for ‘a’ culture (understood as in Mead 1937, cited in Just & Monaghan 1999: 47), professor of linguistics Anna Wierzbicka (2004, 1999) acknowledges the “linguistic problem” as a fundamental question in making cultural comparisons, and proposes a step back in order to realise the difference between how nations differ in happiness and how people usually report their happiness. As Wierzbicka (2004: 37) has argued, although comparisons presuppose a common measure, the definitions of complex terms such as ‘happy’, ‘satisfied’, and ‘well-

being' may differ from culture to culture (and even within them) since they are not simple and universal human concepts. In fact, the author even pointed out that the term 'happy' has undergone a semantic weakening in the English language, since the word refers to something gradable and not absolute: "there is nothing exceptional about being *happy*, and this is why one can be *quite happy, reasonably happy, pretty happy, not at all happy*" (*ibid.*, 38-39), she wrote.

In addition, Wierzbicka warned that, since 'happiness' usually means 'bliss' in other languages, the task of measuring bliss instead of happiness isn't simple either (*ibidem*). Perhaps these practical aspects explain why Kahneman (1999) advised that analysing happiness self-reports in one language only can be easier than in different languages at the same time, and he also suggests that English language is easier to be analysed due to its 'simplicity'. However, even though this measure is considered to be more reliable in comparing individuals of the same culture, doing cross-cultural comparisons should be even more sensitive to certain nuances, requiring, as Wierzbicka (2004: 40, 43) put, a "well-founded semantic metalanguage... based on universal human concepts" and a particular "methodology for exploring cultural norms".

A relevant problem in doing cross-cultural analysis is precisely this task of examining differences and similarities between cultures, and the risk of essentialising and homogenising these cultures. There is also the question of cultural mixing (hybridity), a phenomenon which has become ever more recurrent especially in the context of globalisation. For this reason, the construction and measurement of happiness is considered by some scholars as contentious due to being culturally contingent (e.g., Diener & Suh 2000, Lu & Gilmour 2004). Young people and the elderly, workers and unemployed people,

individuals living in the same nation can experience and express their feelings in different ways. In fact, not every person living in the considered ‘happy nations’ reports to be happy, while some individuals believe themselves to be happy even if they live in countries which are low in the happiness rankings. For instance, 13% of the population in Zimbabwe (with a low average happiness) consider themselves as happy, and 5% of the people living in Denmark (one of the countries with the highest average happiness, according to the WHR) report feeling unhappy (Veenhoven 2012).

Despite all these possibilities, there are scholars who hold that cultures and nations can be studied as unities, and that SWB can be predicted, for example, through the degree of individualism and collectivism in a specific society (Diener *et al.* 1995). Nevertheless, Lu and Gilmour (2004) went beyond the approach suggested by Diener *et al.* (1995) and even split SWB in two types: a) the Euro-American individually oriented, and b) the Asian socially oriented. Even though this sort of distinction reveals a clear sign of stereotyping, the authors propose a “more culturally balanced measurement for the conception of SWB” since “culture and SWB are most productively analysed together as a dynamic of mutual constitution” (Lu & Gilmour 2004: 269, 289).

Although some scholars seem to be sceptical about generalising cultural tendencies with regards to measuring ‘happiness’ – which can be noticed in Layard’s (2003, 2011) narratives, for example – subjectivists have nonetheless made broad claims such as: the most “solid findings” of SWB research is that “individualistic nations are happier than collective countries” (Eid & Larsen 2008: 418, see also Veenhoven 1999). These broad claims that underpin both subjectivist approaches and key happiness indexes very much relate to how happiness has been constructed in a particular way to privilege certain ways of being over

others. Indeed, capitalist countries in which people are expected to be self-sufficient are more likely to see individual happiness as the goal of life. On the other hand, cultures seen as more 'collectivistic' are sometimes said to prioritise social obligations and the maintenance of collective harmony and order (Ahuvia 2002, see also Eid & Larsen 2008).

Furthermore, as Kitayama *et al.* (2000) have argued, interpersonally engaging emotions such as those related to friendship are more likely to enhance happiness in the East Asian countries, whereas people seem to take more advantage of interpersonally disengaging emotions such as pride in the Western world. Indeed, predictors of happiness are believed to rely on a "highly independent and agentic mode of being" in individualistic cultures, while they are normally associated with the "interconnectedness between the self and significant others" in collectivistic societies (Eid & Larsen 2008: 417, also Kitayama & Markus 2000). This tendency shows how the construction of happiness that is central to the analysis of well-being indexes valorises the sort of individualistic thinking that has been so heavily criticised by authors that I have discussed in previous sections. In addition, it runs the risk of leading to cultural stereotyping that masks the heterogeneity of societies labelled 'collectivistic'.

Broadly speaking, collectivism considers happiness as something constructed for and shared by the community as a whole, while individualism promotes happiness in a more independent way, and these perspectives can be associated with Tönnies' (2007) conceptualisation of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (civil society), respectively. Yet, subjectivist scholars' discourse reveals an implicit privileging of the autonomous self as they tend to criticise the collectivistic approach which "may nurture various dispositional qualities that unintentionally create potholes in the road to happiness" (Eid & Larsen 2008: 421). Even though collectivistic cultures are more likely to stimulate

social connections, these authors argue that “a self that is preoccupied with social concerns may acquire... [traits] that create friction in the pursuit of personal happiness” (*ibid.*, 422).

According to the subjectivists, in the context of collectivist societies, people “who adopt individualistic values report higher levels of... [SWB] and self-esteem” in comparison to the individuals who are considered “more collective-minded” (Eid & Larsen 2008: 420, also Heine *et al.* 1999). Moreover, Eid and Larsen (*ibidem*) even claimed that social acceptance by others is “strongly related to happiness in the East, but still, it is *not* happiness itself”. Assertions such as those do not sound as cautious as a cross-cultural analysis requires, since: a) they do not recognise that happiness is understood in different ways in different contexts; b) cultural homogenisation is a process that should be avoided instead of stimulated; and c) in addition to the relativity of defining and experiencing happiness, it is worth mentioning that, as Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) have argued, there are people who can even be averse to (or not necessarily interested in) different kinds of happiness, e.g. personal happiness which the authors clearly associated with Western contexts.

Interestingly, although the writers pointed out that research has found that “happiness is less valued in Eastern cultures than Western ones” due to “opposing cultural views” (*ibid.*, 721), the sort of “aversion to happiness” has been observed both in so-called ‘collectivistic’ (Joshanloo *et al.* 2013) and ‘individualistic’ societies (Gilbert *et al.* 2012, also Ben-Shahar 2002).

When it comes to individualism, Veenhoven (1999: 158) holds that it can have positive and negative consequences, such as the liberal tendency to allow people to be more “autonomous” and the conservative notion of stimulating “atomistic self-containment”,

respectively. The author believes, however, that either positive or negative views on the subject can become popular depending on the cultural zeitgeist, but, contradicting some critical theorists (such as those touched on previously), he claimed that “none of the two views ever gained dominance” (*ibid.*, 159). Yet, Veenhoven’s empirical studies attempt to demonstrate that “benefits of individualisation are greater than its costs”, because “the more individualised the nation, the more citizens enjoy their life” (*ibid.*, 157).

Veenhoven’s (2012: 469) attempt to appease the debate about individualism, therefore, actually fans its flames. The author argues that the subjective practice of appraising life draws more on “how we feel” and “how well innate needs are met”, and less on cognitive comparison with “cultural standards of the good life”. Following this reasoning, he holds that conditions for happiness seem “quite similar across the world” and the consequences of enjoying life are “largely universal” (*ibidem*). The scholar goes further and also suggests that, “if happiness depends on the degree to which human needs are met”, then “average happiness will be higher in societies that fit human nature better than others” (*ibid.*, 468), namely those he deems ‘individualistic’.

Even though Veenhoven refers to general factors such as wealth, freedom, and security which can influence quality of life, he associates them with ‘modern’ nations. Moreover, suggesting that some privileged societies are more capable to “fit human nature” illustrates the loaded nature of his arguments – which are contrasted by some of his colleagues in happiness studies such as Layard (2011) whose narratives tend to detach happiness from wealth.

It is precisely because of this sort of biased perspective on happiness that it is urgent

to question whether SWB is perhaps an indicator designed (almost specifically) to fit societies that valorise materialism and individualism – at least, the way in which it was designed seems to be favourable for getting better results from people living in individualistic, wealthy societies. Happiness indexes, as exemplified by the WHR, therefore, intensify the problems identified by cultural theorists in the previous section about the dangers of uncritically promoting ‘happiness’ as a social norm. Following these arguments, in this thesis I aim to bring to light important ethical and methodological questions concerning cross-cultural research on such a complex subject, like the risks of essentialising cultures and, even worse, imposing a dominant view on other cultures (cf. Joshanloo & Weijers 2014, also Thin 2012).

2.6. National happiness and the supremacy of ‘happy’ nations

Since the WHR started being published in 2012, it has become a reference-point in terms of the measurement of ‘happiness’ in the present-day world. As I mentioned in the introduction, many people show interest in this topic especially when a new edition of the ranking is released: they create expectations about the updated findings and results of the study, and tend to compare how their nations are doing over time as if it were a sort of competition. I argue, therefore, that the controversial attempt of measuring happiness globally feeds into discourses of national identity that construct particular notions of belonging and associate these values with happiness.

In this section, I will discuss the social construction of national identity as something which plays a role in how happiness is reported and represented in different national

contexts. As argued in previous sections, individuals experience and express their satisfaction with life also according to the cultural context to which they ‘belong’ – even though global media can promote a sort of standardisation of narratives of happiness.

In line with this argument, considering collective identities is useful in order to make a further step in understanding how the media interpret the ways in which happiness is commonly understood within but also across national contexts. In my analysis, I will consider the discourses provoked by the WHR as an element which reflects certain values attached to national happiness. In this way, I will highlight media representations of the nuances regarding people’s identities and attitudes towards life, as well as their own understandings of happiness within specific social contexts, and how narratives of happiness can also follow a hierarchical system that draws on discourses of comparison and Otherness.

2.6.1. The social construction of national identity

In order to discuss the attempt to measure national happiness later on in the analysis, it is important to consider certain elements of national identity first. According to Woodward (1997: 39), ‘identities’ and ‘subjectivity’ mean respectively “the positions which we take up and identify with” and our sense of self. Both identity and subjectivity are exercised within social contexts in which discourse produces meanings that are based on and give a sense to fundamental aspects of society such as culture and language (*ibidem*). From this perspective, identities can contribute to people’s understandings of happiness and the ways they experience happiness in everyday life. Identities are related to culture, race, class, gender, nationality etc., and they can be constructed through the processes of socialisation, individuation (since every individual or group of individuals is in a certain sense unique)

and internalisation (because identities are meaningful to people) (cf. Castells 2004, also Giddens 1991).

Although this study entails a relational understanding of the dual concept of individual and collective identities, in this section I will highlight the social aspect related to the sense of belonging which is common to most of the members of a national group – not all of them identify with specific cultures and places in the same way (cf. Smith 1991). Nations are man-made constructions, and ideas of each individual's place in it are informed by a top-down boundary-making which is intimately related to hegemony. Still, any social group exists also because people feel they are part of it.

Some theorists have argued that the contrast between 'similarity' and 'difference' is the basis upon which to compare and identify social identities. Indeed, identity only emerges by being defined against what it is not. Even though identity may seem something fixed or even immutable in a certain sense, as it apparently involves essentialist claims about belongingness, it is actually a relational term (Woodward 1997) and identities may be constructed, and even change, according to equalities and diversities among individuals or social groups (Wodak *et al.* 2009). Therefore, the social construction of national identity, as well as the very perception of the Self and the Other, is intimately related to the practice of identification (Woodward 1997) and the realisation of resemblances and differences, sameness and otherness (Lévinas 1969) between populations. Indeed, the double-edged character of national identity is precisely related to the recognition of commonalities and differences intra- and inter-groups (Parekh 1994), which is also connected to the reflection upon 'whether' and 'how' something or somebody is said to belong to specific communities (Triandafyllidou 1998) such as the nations included in the happiness ranking.

However, it is worth mentioning that identities, which are based on contrasts between the Self and the Other, can create both bonds and distances. While commonalities can unite a community's members, differences observed both inside and outside social groups can, in practice, stimulate contrasts and divisions. Taking as an example the modern concept of nation itself, it normally conveys a "symbolic force" which is put into practice through political thought (Bhabha 2001: 359) with a clear purpose of self-protection. Moreover, comparisons between 'us' and 'them', and what is 'ours' and 'theirs' appear to be central in the construction of those national identities, and particular groups within the nation tend to defend their own positions based on dominant views. However, as Billig (2004: 16) has argued, issues can be caused by the development of patriotism, loyalty and societal identification (which normally refer to one's own beliefs) into nationalism or the feeling of superiority over other countries (usually in respect of the perceptions of the others' beliefs), and these tendencies can be noticed also through media discourse and how communities construct their own hegemony.

2.6.2. Nation, affective place and space

As a situated element of the people who belong to a particular country, national identity can be associated with the concepts of 'place' and 'space'. As Donnan and Wilson (2001: 9) explained, the former is "the distinct space where people live", while the latter refers to "the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other" or a "conceptual map which orders social life".

Living in or belonging to a ‘place’ is a central part of national identity (Rose 1995) precisely because of the significance and identification individuals create with it. Indeed, this identification with one’s own country relates to the national sentiment which is referred to in literature as a sense of belonging (Connor 1978), a fellow feeling (Geertz 1963), and even an irrational and psychological bond (Triandafyllidou 1998) which binds people together. This national sentiment is commonly associated with a place or territory and its concrete elements such as national flags, typical souvenirs, and the very colours that represent each country – elements which transcend materiality through the creation of meaning within a “symbolic community” (Hall 1996), and can illustrate what Billig (2004) calls “banal nationalism”.

According to Anderson (2006), nationality and nationalism are cultural artefacts which should be analysed through the meanings and attachments that they create in society. The author claimed that nations are “imagined communities” because they are constructed and identified through shared commonalities of their inhabitants – which are themselves constructed – and, even though people do not know most of their compatriots, they are able to create an image of their communion in their minds (*ibidem*). Moreover, Anderson (2006) holds that national identities are not distinguished by their falsity or genuineness, but rather by the different ways in which they are imagined.

The nation is, then, usually imagined as a “political community” which is “sovereign” and “limited” as it has “finite, if elastic, boundaries” (*ibid.*, 7). As society emerges from interpersonal relations themselves (Donati 2011), individuals imagine the nation that they are by communicating with each other, and this exercise also involves the images they create of themselves in terms of happiness. Thus, images attributed to a certain

nation tend to represent its own people through verbal and visual messages by which the very national identity is discursively constructed – what is thought and shared by and about people, e.g. their lifestyle, values and stereotypes – and people’s understandings of happiness are not excluded from this sort of existential process. While unity and fraternity can create proximity, though, this sense of belongingness may also give way to seeing one’s own national group as a fixed, secure, isolated and, even worse, superior entity in relation to others.

2.7. Conclusion: The supremacy of ‘happy’ nations?

Above I highlighted some criticisms of subjectivist claims that some nations are ‘happy’ or can be ‘happier’ than others, based on counter-narratives of happiness provided by scholars who do not agree with or are cautious about the logic of this kind of comparison, namely Ahmed (2010), Davies (2016), and Segal (2017). The fundamental issue in determining whether nations are happy or not appears to be intimately related to national identity, hegemony, and the fact that a dominant conception of what it means to be ‘happy’ has emerged from various possible understandings of happiness. As objective conditions for happiness have been supported and widely diffused especially by elite nations to the rest of the world – according to individualistic views which strongly relate happiness to prosperity and competitiveness – the ways in which many people experience happiness today seem to follow a westernised path, as discussed in Section 2.5.

The tendency for particular understandings of happiness to become hegemonic is partially explained by the phenomenon of globalisation which “divides as much as it unites”

(Bauman 1998: 2), and stimulates “fragile identities” among individualised people who usually experience the separation of self from social identity (Friedman 1994: 247). In this context, individuals tend to become ever more similar to each other, and being happy does not seem to rely on what they gain from their own view of the world and cultural background; but it rather depends on how tendencies of individualism more or less tacitly determine what happiness represents to humankind as a whole.

Moreover, as Friedman (*ibid.*, 208) has argued, even though differences can still be spotted among communities and nations, the “culturalisation” of the world is a fact since dominant groups “identify the larger world and order it according to a central scheme of things” – although there are challenges to this idea of cultural homogenisation in relation to fragmentation (Barker 2008) – and this is reflected also in the happiness rankings as an example of the quantification, standardisation, and (even worse) hierarchisation of people’s most inner feelings.

On the other hand, even though there are some ‘objective’ conditions for happiness which are commonly accepted in different parts of the world, individuals, cultural groups and societies can show some nuances as regards to the ways in which happiness is conceptualised. By making this argument I am not referring to the controversial notions brought to the fore by subjectivist scholars (see Section 2.5) which tend to generalise people’s attitudes as regards to happiness in the Eastern and Western world, for example, but I mean sociocultural elements which are prevalent in some populations, and therefore need to be respected and considered in my analysis. For example, an important concept involving cross-cultural reflection and comparison is Said’s (1978) “orientalism”, according to which the West constructs the East as inferior. Indeed, Said discusses particular contrasts that have

historically been made between both parts of the world by describing the Orient as “the Other of the West” (Rose 1995). This representation may seem a simple idealisation of distant lands at first glance, but it actually suggests the supremacy of the West and the exclusion or marginalisation of the rest of the world – which has become normalised through institutionalisation – and this can be conceived as a political project that enabled colonial and post-colonial policy and practices.

Accordingly, Hall (1992: 318) has elaborated on Said’s arguments and considered Western discourse as a “system of representation” or “regime of truth” since it inflects “the language of the West, its image of itself and ‘others’, its sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, its practices and relations of power towards the Rest”. Those authors are central to my analysis as they suggested that this attitude of superiority of dominant cultures eventually involves the whole world and influences, directly or indirectly, also what people mean by ‘happiness’ in a global context. Indeed, elite nations tend to organise the world according to their economic and political interests, and even determine an ‘ideal’ lifestyle which can condition both people’s happiness (mood) and well-being (quality of life), for better or worse.

A globalised world as the socio-political scenario in which happiness is both experienced and constructed is indeed the background that defines the theoretical framework for my analysis. In this chapter, I highlighted that, in addition to philosophical and psychological understandings of the topic, analysing media representations of happiness as communicative practices presupposes a sociological approach to understanding happiness which is intimately related to the notions of culture/counterculture, ideology, biopower and hegemony. Indeed, mainstream conceptions of happiness can be seen as a social norm that dominant classes and nations create and spread, often through media discourse, according to

their own knowledge and interests – a discursive construction in a Foucauldian sense. This is why I argue that the reverberations of a global study such as the WHR – which can perform slightly contrasting roles such as provoking nationalist sentiment as well as engendering more complex questions about people’s well-being – deserves to be object of a critical discourse analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The present study is an analysis of media representations of happiness in international newspapers. It aims to examine how the work of journalists and commentators can contribute to the construction of happiness through discourse and communicative practices in certain national contexts – namely the United States, India and the United Kingdom. From a cross-cultural perspective, I will discuss how the WHR and other relevant topics are framed and interpreted by newspapers, and examine whether mainstream media tends to create ‘myth’ through language and privilege culturally-specific conceptions of happiness in the global context.

The data that I consider for my analysis comes from media texts originally written in English, which I will examine adopting a critical discourse analysis in a Foucauldian sense (see Section 3.3). In addition to Foucault’s (1980, 2002a, 2008) notions of discourse, power/knowledge and biopower, and some insights from critical discourse analysis (CDA) offered by Fairclough (2003, 2010), Entman’s (1993) framing theory and Barthes’ (2009) conceptualisation of ‘myth’ provide key theoretical elements which support my qualitative analysis. In this way, I am not focusing on linguistic analysis in particular – even though I make references to semantics and vocabulary at times – but rather on how media texts produce conceptions of happiness which have deep-rooted political implications, by paying special attention to the contexts in which these texts are produced.

Thematic analysis is part of the process since I will structure my discursive chapters according to relevant themes which emerge from the happiness debate and are inductively drawn out from analysing the articles in my sample. Some basic content analysis is also

useful since I will consider certain elements of texts such as word frequencies as a potential measure of significance. Moreover, although my main focus is on the content of articles, at times images play a role in my discussion, thus semiotic analysis is used as an additional method to make sense of the relationship between image and text.

In light of the results of my analysis, I will then draw comparisons between the ways in which information provided by the WHR has been reported in these different countries. Given that the object of my study is media representations of happiness, I reiterate that my discussion will focus on the work of media producers such as journalists, commentators and opinion leaders. Even though messages are produced for specific audiences and the consumption and reception of media texts play a significant role in ‘shaping’ both discourse and society (see Richardson 2007), I will narrow down my analysis by concentrating on the journalistic dimension of communicative practices in particular, rather than focusing on audiences. In this way, I will thus pay special attention to discourse, framing, sources and the encoding process in making the news.

In order to evaluate media coverage and communicative practices with regard to my topic, I will highlight specific understandings of happiness suggested (directly or indirectly) by newspapers – e.g., if there is a dominant, hegemonic, materialistic conception of happiness which can be observed in particular cultural contexts. Since discourse is not neutral (see Machin & Mayr 2012), I am interested in making visible the writers’ messages, ideologies and agendas in publishing certain news stories. Most importantly, I will focus on whether there is a tendency among writers to either promote or at least assume that some nations offer more adequate conditions for happiness, and if this attitude can be potentially related to questions regarding national identity, hegemony, and unbalanced power relations.

3.1. Sampling

I will use the conceptual framework summarised above (it will be unpacked from Section 3.2 onwards) to analyse media texts that directly refer to the editions of the WHR published from 2012 to 2018 – this period begins with the launch of the first edition of the happiness report and ends at the time in which I collected data after the publication of the sixth edition of the study – and discuss topics related to national happiness more broadly.

My data set consists of English language newspapers and articles from the US, UK and India, collected through the Nexis database, and I sampled all news stories and documents with the terms ‘World Happiness Report’ and ‘national happiness’. Given that some articles contain both terms, I coded the texts depending on which framing was dominant in a given text – e.g., a typical example was that the popular term ‘Gross National Happiness’ appeared in a number of articles which were focused on the ‘World Happiness Report’ in particular, so I counted the most representative according to each media text. The reason why I included the term ‘national happiness’ instead of just ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’ is due to the fact that a number of newspaper articles which contain these broader terms do not necessarily elaborate on questions related to the UN’s happiness ranking or the implications of attempts to measure ‘happiness’.

One of the main criteria used to delimit my sample was to analyse media texts originally written in English as a matter of accuracy and consistency – thus the choice of India, US and UK was in part guided by the presence of prominent international English-

language newspapers in each national context. As discussed in the literature review, analysing happiness across cultures can be complex and avoiding translating texts which include quite subjective terms can prevent “linguistic problems” such as those illustrated by Wierzbicka (1999) (see Section 2.5). Indeed, translating texts into English would require further attention and precision in order to interpret and respect exactly what writers from non-English language newspapers wanted to say in their comments and reports. I thus opted to collect data from different countries but all in the same language, partly for practical reasons.

Given my methodological choice for analysing media texts written in English, the three countries I selected to be examined offered rich material collected from influential newspapers and articles about the topic I am interested in. Interestingly, even though the national contexts I am looking at have certain commonalities, the countries represent different perspectives and worldviews in my sample, which can be related to their colonial/postcolonial relationships (I will revisit this point later on). While the UK was my country of study, the US was chosen as a representative of a dominant Western capitalist society and India as a (often perceived) stereotypical opposite of this.

From an economic perspective, even though the US is the first economy in the world, India is the 5th, and UK the 6th according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2019), which puts them in a privileged situation in terms of available resources and GDP per capita, these countries appear in considerably different positions in the happiness ranking. The WHR 2020, for instance, ranked the UK as 13th, the US as 18th, and India was very low, appearing only in the 144th position – among 153 nations in total.

The US and India, in particular, have been traditionally thought of as examples of societies full of contrasts, which can be perceived differently in relation to their conceptions of happiness. Despite being the most powerful economy, and thereby often regarded as a model to follow in order to achieve individual and material happiness, the US has never been in the top 10 of the WHR. By contrast, India has always been very low in the global list. Nonetheless, India's rich cultural tradition is a source of inspiration for many people seeking an alternative paradigm of happiness, and public discourse has been normally related to narratives of spiritual happiness in that country. Indeed, critical happiness work has highlighted how well-being discourses routinely draw on notions of mindfulness that have often been appropriated from countries such as India (see Davies 2016).

As a third element of my sample, the British press is equally important to this comparative study because of the volume and relevance of the documents found about the WHR. Additionally, the UK offers an alternative, European perspective about happiness rankings. Moreover, from a historical perspective, there is also a link, an intersection point, between the three countries since the UK actively participated in the formation of the other two nations included in this study, and this close relationship can be useful to enhance my comparative study which considers dynamics of association and differentiation, social contrasts, and multiculturalism within the cross-cultural debate.

The US, India and the UK are indeed three examples of different national contexts which still communicate to each other in terms of both: a) *similarities* related to vocabulary and language use, in addition to the framing of certain topics using rationality, as a consequence of the historical relationships these countries have and the dissemination of European thought during both colonial and postcolonial periods (further impacted by

globalisation); and b) *differences* that such colonial/postcolonial relationships generate, e.g. discourses of contestation or even resistance which can be related to the notion of ‘Orientalism’ and the complex relationship between the ‘West’ and the ‘Rest’ discussed by authors such as Said (1978) and Hall (1992) (see Sections 2.7 and 3.3). Indeed, similarities and differences reflected in the sample provide enough raw material to do a nuanced discourse analysis considering power relations and the power/knowledge nexus – when it comes to narratives and representations of the nations selected themselves but also other countries that journalists refer to in their reports and comparisons.

With regards to alternative contexts, which were considered but then dismissed, both Scandinavian and Latin American countries came to my attention because of the ways journalists tend to portray them as having (relatively) positive performances in the happiness rankings despite their socio-economic differences. I decided not to include them in the present work, though, for methodological and ethical reasons. The technical, linguistic question (mentioned above) has been fundamental to the selection of my sample. Moreover, in order to increase objectivity, as a Brazilian citizen I preferred not to focus on Latin American countries because of my attachment to my homeland and continent, and I did not want to be biased by focusing, for example, on the resilience Latin Americans appear to have in order to cope with adverse situations and to try to enjoy life despite having serious socio-economic problems. However, including Scandinavian and Latin American countries may result in different findings and could be a focus for further studies.

I am aware that the focus on English language sources affects my findings especially in relation to the Indian sample. Indeed, gathering media texts written in English means that the material analysed is representative of just a segment of the Indian press and society, and

there may have been more variation in what I found in India if I had looked at non-English sources. As I point out in Section 5.2, English language newspapers are mainly liberal, commercial, and usually read by urban professional and the middle classes in India today (Athique 2012) – which means that these newspapers have a very specific readership within such a heterogeneous and densely populated society. However, this sort of limitation can also be framed as a matter of consistency when it comes to the fact that the Indian newspapers analysed in this thesis do not radically differ from those in the other two national contexts included in my analysis, and this contributes to keeping my focus on the *global media*, its reach and influence in different parts of the world. I am also aware that products of the global media are heavily influenced by and usually based on information disseminated by newspapers and news agencies in English, which represents a particular (yet cross-cultural) perspective on the media itself. Still, due to various issues considered in this chapter, the focus on the English language provided a pragmatic way to limit the sample.

3.1.1. Sample unpacked

The publications included in the sample have been selected according to the newspapers' wide readership and circulation, as well as their different political orientations. The newspapers analysed included:

- a) from the United States: *The New York Times* (liberal, left leaning), *The Washington Post* (liberal, left leaning), *New York Post* (conservative, tabloid), *The Wall Street Journal* (centre, daily business-focused newspaper), *USA Today* (centre, national publication), and *Daily News* (liberal, tabloid).

- b) from India: *The Times of India* (centre-right, known as a mainstream, nationalist newspaper), *Pioneer* (centre-right, nationalist newspaper), *Indian Express* (pro-Congress), *Hindustan Times* (pro-Congress), *The Hindu* (centre-left and pro-CPI, Communist Party of India), and *Economic Times* (financial newspaper).
- c) from the United Kingdom: *The Guardian* and *Observer* (left leaning, independent publications), *Financial Times* (liberal, economic newspaper), *Daily Telegraph* (conservative), *Daily Mail* (right-wing, tabloid), *The Sun* (right-wing, tabloid), *Daily Mirror* (left-wing, considered as a popular, daily tabloid which supports the Labour Party).

All these are well-known broadsheet newspapers and tabloids which can provide a wide view of the coverage of the WHR in particular and national happiness debates more broadly in the countries included in my sample. They are eighteen publications overall (six from each country), with particular aims and style, political inclinations and preferred topics of interest, from which I collected a substantial sample of written material: 497 media texts in total¹.

In terms of the selection of particular news stories that I will elaborate on in my analysis, I will pay special attention to columns, long-read articles and features in which journalists and commentators² are able, not only to share numbers and figures of the happiness ranking – there are a number of brief stories which are limited to reproducing the WHR results – but, most importantly, to reflect on relevant questions, offer interesting

¹ This number refers to my research on the Nexis database. A few extra articles only appeared on the newspapers' websites or blogs – in this case, they are included in the bibliography.

² In case the articles are not signed, my comments will refer to the newspapers instead of specific writers.

examples and give voice to influential sources, make comparisons both within each nation and between nations, and also elaborate on a variety of subtopics which emerge from the happiness debate. This is why my qualitative analysis is designed to focus on newspapers, instead of newer possibilities such as social media where texts tend to be more direct and succinct. In this way, I intend to conduct a rich research project which will consider subtle aspects of the creation of meaning within media discourse and provide in-depth reflections about the subject.

Before starting the data analysis, I read all the articles in the sample, marked each one of them according to its main theme and also considered the subjects indicated on the Nexis document itself (where available). However, the more I read the articles and, most importantly, compared them to each other, the more I realised what each media text was actually *doing* and what it was *representing* in my analysis. The final themes I discuss in each analytical chapter, therefore, were drawn out inductively from my sample, after reflecting on the different ways each article contributed to particular constructions of happiness (their framing).

I adopted a grounded and iterative approach through which I labelled articles according to their main topics or themes. For example, an article published by a newspaper under the ‘international affairs’ (or politics) section could have been included in my ‘well-being indexes’ theme because of the story’s focus on Bhutan and its alternative measure of people’s ‘happiness’. This is why the ‘label’ I attached to articles in my research could have been slightly different, or even more detailed, from the one given by the publication itself. At the start of each analysis chapter, I include tables that outline the final set of main themes I drew out of the data and the proportion of articles that related to each one of them (out of

the whole sample in that national context). Thus, I did not use a systematic quantitative approach (content analysis) but rather compiled quantitative data out of my qualitative approach.

I therefore used quantitative data to demonstrate the emphasis in each national context, then I did a more detailed analysis in which I examined what articles were *doing*, focussing on questions of representation, power relations, truth-claims regarding happiness, which form my qualitative themes. The subheadings that structure my analytical chapters are, therefore, the qualitative themes I have identified through discourse analysis – although they also incorporate discussion of the quantitative data shown in Table 3.1 (below). Thus, the qualitative sub-titles that I have selected in order to structure my chapters are not limited to each ‘main theme’ in the tables because they actually cut across several quantitative themes and/or reflect new qualitative themes emerged that aren’t captured in the quantitative data. Sometimes particular nuances and not so obvious developments in the happiness debate – not always indicated by quantitative data – captured my attention because of the uniqueness of certain frames or ways of representing happiness and other parallel themes in the newspapers. In these cases, then, the qualitative approach was essential in order to identify discourses which did not necessarily stand out in terms of statistics but were rather suggested by parallel debates and spotted by close reading and reading between the lines – e.g., more or less implicit nationalist and orientalist discourses.

For example, in the chapter on America, the subheading *What’s wrong with the US* reflects a significant narrative I identified in the US media where journalists speculate about why the country had performed relatively poorly in the WHR. This section included articles on happiness as a general theme but also other topics (e.g., mental health and economic

inequality) which, together, form a pattern by which writers questioned happiness (or unhappiness) in America today. Sections such as *Happiness and money*, similarly, reflect a discursive formation where happiness was repeatedly linked to economic prosperity and are mostly derived from articles under the economic and business section – but that does not mean that I did not refer to articles categorised under other main themes (e.g., politics, lifestyle), if they were relevant to my discussion. This is why the wording of my subheadings are not exactly the same as the ‘main themes’ shown in the tables – some of them do directly relate to specific quantitative data, as explained above, others reflect more complex constructions of happiness that only emerged after my discourse analysis.

In the table below, I have separated the articles collected from each national sample in order to provide an idea of the distribution in terms of main subjects explored:

Table 3.1. – Number of articles collected from each country and divided by main themes.

Main subjects	US	India	UK	All
<i>Happiness</i>	14	18	23	55 (11%)
<i>Well-Being Indexes</i>	43	61	60	164 (33%)
<i>Economics & Business</i>	25	11	19	55 (11%)
<i>Politics & International</i>	20	57	18	95 (19%)
<i>Health & Environment</i>	6	13	10	29 (6%)
<i>Lifestyle</i>	18	28	46	92 (18,5%)
<i>Other</i>	2	4	1	7 (1,5%)
Total	128	192	177	497 (100%)

The key subjects identified in each national context, as tabulated above, inform the cross-cutting themes of each chapter – reflecting, of course, particular nuances and patterns that emerged from each set of national newspapers at a given time within my sample period. The table shows the main topics of articles, while the subheadings in the chapters may reflect more how articles were framed. For example, even though the whole sample relates to happiness in some way, it appeared as a primary theme in certain articles which normally followed a more philosophical approach to the subject, and therefore could be differentiated from other, more practical texts coded as lifestyle, economics and politics. Some of these articles, instead of framing the subject in a more superficial or even naïve way, rather focused on counter-narratives and the “problematism” of happiness (cf. Frawley 2015) – as in the opening sections of my data analysis, e.g. the subheadings *What’s wrong with the US?* (Section 4.4), *Spiritual and material happiness* (Section 5.4), and *Happiness across the UK* (Section 6.3).

As Table 3.1 shows, happiness as a primary theme was explored quite evenly throughout the sample, in 11% of articles, but they were not the majority in any of the national contexts that I analysed. In fact, in all three countries the articles were more likely to discuss the measurement of ‘happiness’ according to ‘well-being indexes’, and this specific topic represented a third of the whole sample (33%) – a reflection of both the relevance and controversy that it showed in journalists’ and commentators’ narratives.

Even though a comparatively smaller proportion of articles (based on my expectations at least) focused mostly on economics and business (11% of the total), across the sample, numerous texts touched on this theme even though the main focuses of the articles were on different topics (e.g., lifestyle and well-being indexes). Not surprisingly, the

material/economic conceptualisation of happiness was explored in all national contexts. Interestingly, though, the number of articles about economics and business in the US press was higher than in the other two countries – even though the US had slightly fewer articles overall in comparison to both UK and India samples. Articles on politics, in turn, were nearly a fifth of the whole sample (19%) – but appeared in a larger number in the Indian media – reinforcing the idea that happiness has become a political matter, demonstrated in the newspapers through discourses endorsed by governments, authorities and policymakers, but also more critical writers who usually contested the quantification of happiness.

Even though health (usually mental health) and environment were not the main subjects of a large number of articles throughout the sample (actually just 6% of the total), the significance of discourses around these topics provided substantial material for whole sections in my chapters such as one about the environmental debate in the US, as well as specific sections on mental health in both the India and UK analysis chapters. Last but not least, since happiness has been linked to cultural, psychological and behavioural aspects in many articles, the lifestyle section also offered substantial material (18,5%) for my analysis: it provided some of the most interesting articles involving stereotyping, national identity and the way journalists tend to represent nations and cultures – including motivational discourses particularly in the UK press (which had the largest number of lifestyle articles).

To summarise, the scheme below specifies each national sample's qualitative patterns, as reflected in the chapters' subheadings, followed by the most representative quantitative themes they derived from:

- **United States:** *What's wrong with the US* (happiness, mental health, economics,

politics, lifestyle); *Happiness and money* (happiness, economics and business); *Considerations on the measurement of happiness* (well-being indexes, happiness, politics, economics); *Bhutan is no Shangri-La* (well-being indexes, politics, lifestyle, environment); *Happiness and immigration* (happiness, economics, politics); and *Happiness and the environmental debate* (lifestyle, health and environment);

- **India:** *Spiritual/material happiness* (happiness, economics, lifestyle); *The (not so) bad reputation of money* (economics, lifestyle); *WHR: democratic tool?* (well-being indexes, politics); *Happiness: a governmental responsibility?* (happiness, politics, well-being indexes), *Religion as a path towards happiness* (happiness, lifestyle); *Indians' collective spirit challenged* (happiness, lifestyle, well-being indexes); *Changing lifestyle* (happiness, economics, politics, lifestyle); *The impact of mental well-being* (happiness, mental health, lifestyle); *Bhutan: a promised land?* (happiness, well-being indexes, politics, lifestyle, environment); *The nationalist dimension of happiness* (happiness, politics, lifestyle);
- **United Kingdom:** *Happiness across the UK* (happiness, lifestyle, well-being indexes); *Miserable but proudly British* (lifestyle, well-being indexes); *(De)constructing happiness* (happiness, well-being indexes, lifestyle, economics); *What if happiness is boring?* (lifestyle, mental health and environment); *Mental health: fewer statistics, more motivation* (happiness, mental health, lifestyle); *'Us' versus 'Them'* (well-being indexes, politics, lifestyle); *Brexit: a favourable moment for happiness?* (well-being indexes,

politics, economics, lifestyle); *The good, the bad and Bhutan* (well-being indexes, happiness, lifestyle, politics); *Money: apparently more useful than harmful* (economics, lifestyle); *Giving meaning to happiness studies* (well-being indexes, happiness, politics, lifestyle).

The table below shows the number of different types of media texts separated by countries:

Table 3.2. – Number of articles collected from each country and divided by genre.

Media text types	US	India	UK	All
<i>News & short articles</i>	32	79	48	159 (32%)
<i>Long-form work</i>	51	64	73	188 (38%)
<i>Editorials</i>	11	2	7	20 (4%)
<i>Columns & notes</i>	25	39	36	100 (20%)
<i>Interviews</i>	3	4	4	11 (2,2%)
<i>Book reviews</i>	2	4	3	9 (1,8%)
<i>Letters</i>	4	-	6	10 (2%)
Total	128	192	177	497 (100%)

According to the percentages shown above, it remains clear that news, short articles and long-form works formed the majority of the sample (70%). However, even though long-form works (38%) – including formats such as features, long-read articles – as well as editorials (4%), columns and notes (20%) offered more examples in which writers could elaborate on the topics in more depth, there were cases in which information, expressions

and certain cross-cultural comparisons made in all other text types were also considered in my analysis. These genres appeared throughout the three specific national contexts – except letters which were absent from the Indian sample. Long-form works were more frequent in the British newspapers which had 39% of this type, whereas editorials appeared more often in the US press (counting 55% of this type). Interestingly, even though just two editorials were found in the Indian sample, the column-space given to journalists, in addition to a more informal way of writing, made some articles seem like editorials in the Indian newspapers at times.

In my analysis chapters, I picked articles that were representative of dominant topics as well as some that provided a counterpoint no matter which sections of the newspapers they were extracted from. However, as previously stated, longer articles were usually more illustrative of these topics. For example, long-form works, columns and editorials (62% of the sample altogether) were normally where journalists and commentators had more freedom to express their opinions on the topics of interest, and therefore offered more substantial material for my qualitative analysis. Indeed, interesting nuances which contributed to the characterisation of each national sample normally emerged from those more elaborated (at times even opinionated) texts – e.g., debates regarding immigration in the US press; discourses on religion and nationalism in the Indian media; and more confident narratives proposing a sort of deconstruction of happiness especially in the UK ‘quality press’, but also more psychological perspectives on the way British people tend to see themselves and think about ‘happiness’.

When deciding on the texts to analyse in depth in each chapter, I also considered some criteria for encoding news, which have been indicated by Bignell (2002: 88-89). For

example, news stories drew my attention based on: a) meaningfulness, e.g. I am interested in articles where journalists explore the countries' performances in the happiness ranking and social questions related to people's happiness; b) continuity, e.g. I include in my analysis articles which contain follow-up considerations since the WHR has been published annually since 2012; c) composition, e.g. I consider patterns and secondary themes which communicate with each other as they emerge from discussions within a broad and multifaceted topic such as happiness and well-being; d) I highlight journalists' references to elite nations, e.g. wealthy nations have normally been at the top of the ranking, and thus the relationship between happiness and wealth happens to be taken for granted by some writers; e) I pay attention to references to something negative, e.g. even though the central topic appears to be pleasant at first glance, negative social aspects are usually indicated by journalists as obstacles to happiness and used in comparisons between countries etc.

In speaking of writers' references to elite nations in particular, topics related to the influence of wealthy countries are key to my discourse analysis since, as O'Neill and Harcup (2009: 165) and also Galtung and Ruge (1965) have argued, the actions taken by wealthy countries normally arise as "more consequential" in comparison to others. This is why I argue that the happiness debate in the media is far from being just pleasant, carefree or even naïve, as it usually refers to concepts and parameters which are determined according to a particular set of power relations and the social control exerted by dominant cultures. The selection of specific stories and features from my sample, therefore, aims to highlight tensions created between narratives and counter-narratives of happiness, and show how the very understandings of happiness are negotiated through journalistic perspectives.

With regards to the specific national contexts I focused on, at the beginning of each

analytical chapter I will provide more detailed tables showing the number of articles divided by subjects and newspapers within each country. Since I am giving an overview of the whole sample in this section, I can anticipate that the number of articles about the ‘WHR’ and ‘national happiness’ was quite different from country to country. While the number of articles containing these specific terms, respectively, did not change much in the US sample (53 against 75), this difference almost doubled in the British sample (64 against 113) and more than tripled in the Indian sample (40 against 152). This means that American newspapers used the terms more evenly in terms of frequency, whereas the UK press provided a larger number of articles on ‘national happiness’, and the Indian sample had the biggest gap between the use of the terms suggesting much attention paid to discourses involving ‘national happiness’ in comparison to just less than a quarter of the country’s articles containing the term ‘WHR’.

Even though discussing ‘national happiness’ is not necessarily more profound than focussing on the ‘WHR’ itself, overall there was a tendency that the term ‘national happiness’ was more commonly found within more elaborate texts, whereas the term ‘WHR’ appeared also in many articles which just reproduced the findings of the happiness ranking.

3.1.2. Longitudinal analysis

I gathered articles from important newspapers, in terms of having a large circulation, within the three national contexts analysed, resulting in a total of nearly 500 articles, a sample size significant enough to allow me to establish the patterns and nuances which emerged from this data in this time period. In addition to context, the coverage of the WHR and its developments *over time* are also relevant to my discussion. In this way, the study provides a

longitudinal analysis which seeks to capture how media responses may have changed over the period being analysed and to consider the socio-cultural, economic and political factors connected to this. Indeed, societies are not static, the WHR has a new edition every year (see Table 2.1), and journalists also respond to the happiness ranking according to the moment in which they are living.

Looking at the sample as a whole, it remains clear that foundational questions – such as those regarding the nature and the aims of the happiness report – introduced in 2012 and then replicated in the successive editions of the study, appeared in many places throughout the sample because they are at the basis of this kind of discussion. At the same time, some of those ‘special themes’ of each edition, such as mental health and economic inequality, were also largely explored during the whole period of the sample for a similar reason: they are usually taken by journalists as key aspects to the happiness debate. An exception, though, was the 2018 edition’s core theme: migration, which gained more space in the American sample during the months following the report’s publication, most likely because of Trump’s tough measures against immigration at that time.

One of my hypotheses before starting the data analysis was that, given the apparent enthusiasm of some scholars and journalists for the new happiness ranking, there would have been more positive rather than negative reactions to its publication, especially at the beginning of the period analysed, but that was not confirmed since the study has been both praised, taken for granted and also heavily criticised since its inaugural edition. During the whole period of the sample there was not a sharp, clear change or shift in terms of the reception of the report by the journalists as a whole. Indeed, from the very beginning of the WHR’s publication until the last year in which I gathered data, there have always been

different, if not opposed, views within the happiness debate, and journalists both endorsed and criticised the WHR – regardless of the newspaper, and even within a single article at times. Of course, more critical writers tended to position themselves against measuring happiness and the status quo, whereas more ‘superficial’ news normally just reproduced the report’s findings or took them as ‘facts’.

In general, journalists considered findings relating to special themes of each WHR edition – e.g., mental health in the 2013 and 2015 editions; socio-economic inequality in 2016; the importance of social capital in 2017; and migration in 2018. Overall in my sample, though, I found a focus on several topics regardless of the year because they are intrinsic to the happiness debate and also interconnected. However, each national set of newspapers showed particular tendencies which not just followed the content of each year’s happiness report but also reflected the moment which each society was experiencing at a given time. For example, nationalism – a key topic related to hegemony and biopower – did not appear as a major theme in any edition of the WHR, but it did emerge from some news involving Trump’s administration in America, Modi’s leadership in India, and debates about Brexit in the UK. In this way, the journalists adapted their interpretations of the WHR to particular interests and reflections that the study may have provoked in each society at a given time, as my qualitative analysis will show in detail.

3.2. Methodological framework

This doctoral research develops two levels of enquiry: an analysis of the media’s coverage of the WHR and how media discourse contributes to the construction of concepts of

happiness. My discussion will rely mainly on a qualitative discursive approach in order to highlight and elaborate on different narratives that newspapers bring to the fore, and my own analysis will, therefore, provide a further discursive construction of happiness as a sort of metalanguage based on the news. The WHR is itself a representation of reality based on SWB data and the so-called happiness science; journalists, in turn, have their own interpretations of the report and are able to construct media representations of happiness; whereas this present study proposes new interpretations of the subject by providing a representative, holistic overview which emerges from the very dialog between scholars, journalists and opinion leaders as a whole, offering an academic reading of the happiness debate in the media.

In this way, discourse is a central element of my study. Paraphrasing Foucault (1979: 95), who maintained that both discourse and power are everywhere, and “where there is power, there is resistance”, I anticipate that these elements will be omnipresent in my thesis. Indeed, my aim is to deconstruct a priori ideas of a standard, predictable notion of happiness by critically analysing media discourse. My analysis is informed by Rose’s (2001: 136) definition of discourse as “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it”. In this context, discourse is a communicative practice and, as Machin and Mayr (2012: 24) have argued, “language is not simply a vehicle of communication, or for persuasion, but a means of social construction and domination”, and “discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures but is itself seen to contribute to the production and reproduction of these processes and structures.” Discourse is, therefore, able to construct “truth claims” through various elements such as the language it uses, the settings it describes, the sources it gives voice to, the very newspapers, governments and institutions it speaks for (see Rose 2001).

By following this notion of discourse, it remains clear that language is the ‘filter’ thorough which I will examine newspeople’s opinions, impressions and particular choices of what to highlight and omit in the news – which is an indication of ideologies and agendas. This is why my critical discourse analysis will consider language from different approaches, using methods which involve content, thematic, framing, and semiotic analysis. With regards to content analysis in particular, word frequencies may indicate, for example, if newspapers with a financial focus tend to use terms such as ‘income’ and ‘purchasing power’ more often than left-wing publications which may rather focus on ‘solidarity’ and ‘social capital’. Also, whether key terms can be found in the whole sample or show more popularity in specific periods and contexts. For example, ‘money’ appears almost everywhere in the sample. However, sometimes specific terms can also be related to a nation or a period in particular – such as ‘immigration’ which was a special theme in the WHR 2018 and became a popular term within US newspapers during that year, perhaps also because of Trump’s promise to be tough on border control.

In talking about word frequencies, it is worth pointing out that I searched for key terms within the articles sampled with ‘WHR’ and ‘national happiness’, collected from the Nexis database. In this way, particular terms such as ‘money’, ‘generosity’, and ‘immigration’ – which I usually mention at the beginning of each thematic section in the analytical chapters (along with the respective proportion they appeared in each national sample) – derived from my qualitative analysis of both the WHR itself (according to its own text and vocabulary, variables, and findings) and newspapers articles (through the coverage of the WHR and the reverberation of certain relevant, recurring terms associated with the report and the happiness debate more broadly). The frequency of such ‘key terms’ can be

useful to complement my interpretation of and perhaps situate how journalists tended to frame and elaborate on specific topics.

Considering the relevance and proportions of key terms, main themes and the emergence of qualitative patterns within the newspapers, media framing and thematic analysis are an essential part of my methodology since I separate data and structure discursive chapters according to main topics and representative subheadings. Labelling articles by subjects and using word frequencies can, however, guide the selection of relevant debates to some extent, but not automatically determine them according to the popularity/unpopularity of certain key terms. Indeed, defining patterns to be analysed involves a broader systematic analysis of how newspapers can create meaning by framing ideas and diffuse ideologies through media discourse.

As Entman (1993: 53) has argued, framing is precisely “selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others”, a practice which follows a particular set of cultural values and, thus, cannot be considered as neutral or totally impartial. In addition to the choice of what to say, the author points out that writers can also make a piece of information more salient, noticeable and meaningful according to its placement, repetition and association with “culturally familiar symbols” (*ibidem*). For example, the construction of positive images of happy, wealthy nations – following the very data provided by the WHR – can suggest that journalists eventually tend to frame happiness as something related to pleasure and the material world.

A significant advantage of understanding the use of frames in the production of news is to realise and make visible relevant aspects of the social power that discourse can exert,

and the ways in which dominant classes and nations are able to control the “framing of issues” and, thus, “determine... what ‘public opinion’ is” (Entman 1993: 56-57). According to the author, framing is a research paradigm which allows, for example, the researcher to perceive more clearly that, even though journalists are supposed to be objective or impartial in doing their work, they still happen to convey “a dominant framing of the news text that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation” (*ibidem*).

This aspect of news production is intimately related to the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge (1980) in terms of the tendency that ruling and dominant classes as a whole benefit from their own economic and political power in order to produce and diffuse ‘knowledge’. These practices can be associated, for instance, with measuring ‘happiness’ and the regular publication of a study such as the WHR which can be considered as a sort of “institutional apparatus” (Rose 2001: 166, also Hall 1997: 47) that establishes itself a ranking of nations based on levels of SWB which are determined according to dominant norms and values – and it is in this context that the happiness report is seen as authoritative by some people.

3.3. The Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis

In doing Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, my aim is to examine discourse and reveal the power politics at play. I will explore the construction of discourses which show how happiness and the way it is measured has been discussed and represented in the media. In this context, I take the WHR as a reference point: an apparatus which is based on both a

Western rationale to quantifying emotion and a specific conceptualisation of happiness which tends to be related to quality of life (see Chapter 2). Therefore, the coverage of the WHR, with its role and impact when it comes to the media and public opinion more broadly, can illustrate how happiness has become perhaps more political than ever, and how measuring the ‘immeasurable’ can be an example through which powerful, dominant nations try to reinforce their own values and higher socio-economic position in relation to other, less privileged countries.

Building on Foucault’s notion of *biopower* as discussed in the literature review, I argue that the WHR’s role in determining which countries are the ‘happiest’ is actually a way of intervening on a population level in order to normalise who is apparently doing things ‘right’ and suggest how people should behave in order to increase happiness. Therefore, my methodological approach also draws on Said’s (1978) arguments about the sense of superiority that Western powers appear to nurture, naturalise and exert over the rest of the world by producing ‘knowledge’ and imposing (more or less implicitly) their own values and lifestyles as a sort of model for everyone – echoing, thus, the utilitarian doctrine. Indeed, Said’s (1978) notion of ‘orientalism’ reveals the role that the powerful ‘West’ plays in seeing itself as the dominant actor on a global scenario, whereas ‘peripheric’ nations are perceived as subordinate and ‘different’ or just ‘the Other’. Accordingly, Hall (1992: 279) elaborates on the relationship between the ‘West’ and ‘the Rest’ by pointing out that such a binary opposition relies on broad generalisations, not considering heterogeneity within each group, and therefore provides an “oversimplified conception of difference”. In this context, I intend to examine how discourses about happiness construct these power relations through language. One way I can do this is by identifying discursive themes which establish

dominant values in relation to happiness within my data – e.g., materialism versus spirituality, individualistic lifestyles versus collective happiness.

While interpreting the WHR and its coverage, just like analysing discourses in general, as Foucault (2002a: 24) puts, instead of taking for granted their “spontaneous value” or that they are as reliable, accurate and comprehensive as they may claim to be, “we must accept, in the name of methodological rigour, that, in the first instance, they concern only a population of dispersed events” (*ibidem*). In this sense, I argue that even the famous happiness index endorsed by the UN should not just be seen as a reflection, or even an interpretation of ‘reality’ but having a productive role in constructing what happiness means and how it should be acted upon. Moreover, the WHR can be framed as a Western construct which disseminates an elitist view of the world. This hypothesis resonates with what Van Der Bom & Mills (2015: 184) highlighted about the way Foucault takes ‘discourse’: “as a set of regulated practices, generated by a society or by an elite within society, which determine the forms and evaluation of utterances; for example, what can be expressed and considered to be true or valuable.”

This project, thus, takes a lead from other work in critical happiness studies that has engaged with Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis. For example, Frawley (2015: 3) suggests that the contemporary happiness debate (in which also the WHR gained visibility), instead of focusing on fundamental questions such as the “nature of happiness”, is rather concerned with how authors, researchers and journalists think about happiness most of the time, and therefore also “preoccupations, meanderings and shifting beliefs about the nature of human beings and their relationships to each other and the world particular to a given culture at a given time.” As I discussed in the literature review, Frawley’s (2015, 2018)

insights are helpful to realise how tendentious this sort of ‘happiness debate’ can be and that it can be easily associated with the notion of biopolitics. At the same time as particular discourses may seek to change some people’s behaviour in order to adapt to a dominant ‘order’, they can also be trying to maintain and normalise the status quo.

This ‘persuasive’ role of discourse is crucial to my research, and it links to what some authors have written about Foucault’s contribution to critical discourse analysis. Even though scholars such as Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017: 110) do not seem concerned with formalising an approach to discourse analysis which “clearly refuses formalization”, they point out that discourse analysis has different meanings within social sciences and the Foucauldian approach in particular is “more diffuse” than the linguistic ones. Moreover, the authors offer a useful interpretation about how discourse analysis should be enacted.

According to Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), Foucault does not limit discourse to a “system of language” (*ibid.*, 110) or as a “particular instance of language use” (*ibid.*, 114). Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) is not focused on the “internal structure of language” but rather the “external conditions of its expression” (*ibid.*, 115), which indicates its interest in the contexts to be analysed as well as the way discourse samples are selected based on how they ‘constitute’ and ‘problematise’ objects (*ibidem*). These authors claim, then, that “discourses are not objects but *rules* and *procedures* that make objects thinkable and governable, and they do not ‘determine’ things but *intervene* in the relations of what can be known, said, or practiced” (*ibid.*, 120). The Foucauldian approach is particularly concerned with the way individuals “constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge” and how “institutionalised patterns of knowledge... govern the formation of subjectivity” (*ibid.*, 110). This reinforces the relevance of power/knowledge relations and

the importance of a critical analysis that needs to rethink a priori ideas, contest constructed ‘facts’, and see well beyond the “current regimes of truth” (*ibid.*, 116).

Accordingly, media studies professor Mark Andrejevic (2008: 605-606) claims that the Foucauldian approach pays special attention to contesting forms of political and social domination and their discursive frameworks, considering elements such as biopower, surveillance, mental illness and critiques of Enlightenment rationality which, according to Foucault, influenced humanities and social sciences as a whole. When it comes to communication and media studies in particular, Andrejevic (2008: 605-606) reveals that the French philosopher had “a certain journalistic affinity”, perceived through the considerations on the relationship between “regimes of power” and “discursive formations”, as well as “the role power plays in shaping what passes for truth”. However, even though such insights can be useful in order to understand decisions made by journalists and opinion leaders when it comes to making the news and news values, the scholar also points out that Foucault’s work has been under-exploited in journalism studies – probably because of Foucault’s critique of the institutions that journalism “directly relies” on, and the “subterranean antipathy” between French theory and the Anglophone social sciences (*ibid.*, 605).

The Foucauldian way of doing critical discourse analysis fits my own thesis because of its non-standard, critical, and even revolutionary perspective. As Andrejevic (2008) has argued, Foucault’s studies on governance and biopolitics, or the “the management of populations” (*ibid.*, 610), discuss power relations and the role of certain tools – to which I include those related to the quantification of ‘happiness’ such as the WHR – in contributing for “rendering populations participatory (hence productive) and manageable at the same time” (*ibid.*, 612). As I point out in many places throughout the thesis, this tendency is related

to a consumerist and neoliberal ideology which “induces pleasure” through the production of discourse and knowledge (Andrejevic 2008: 612, also Foucault 1972: 119).

When it comes to my analysis, thus, the Foucauldian approach helps me draw out themes and make analytical points from the data, with particular attention paid to power relations and the way happiness tends to be represented in the global media according to a Western point of view. At the same time, the emblematic opposition between material and spiritual happiness, for example, which can be spotted in many places throughout the sample, encapsulates the controversy and tensions normally identified within cross-cultural debates on the quantification of happiness and its implications.

3.4. Advantages and disadvantages of research methods

The main advantage of my research methods is the richness: since I want to examine meaning, I need to use a qualitative approach that analyses texts in detail. In addition to examining the text itself, doing critical discourse analysis presupposes special attention to the social context in which discourse is produced, which will allow me to elaborate on questions that emerge within and between texts (intertextuality), and from the discursive construction of happiness, which will enrich my analysis. Indeed, I will not be limited to discussing what has been written in the newspapers, but also how journalists construct the issue, in what publication and at what historical moment it appeared. This exercise can be done with every piece of writing, but, as previously stated, documents such as long-read articles and features can offer more ‘raw material’ and possibilities to explore, instead of more concise and less elaborated media texts such as news reports.

With regards to the vast amount of material to be analysed, however, as well as the fact that many different subtopics emerge from the happiness debate, a caveat which should not be ignored is related to, as Rose (2001: 161-162) pointed out, knowing where to stop making intertextual connections and how to make them “convincingly productive” and ground them empirically. The rich material that I collected is fascinating, but the sheer volume of material could also make me lose the focus on my topic.

When it comes to data collection, given that Nexis database provides text-only documents from the print media, I will also access the newspapers’ international editions, blogs, and online versions of some articles (where available) since they may offer more elements of the newspapers’ original pages such as pictures, graphics and illustrations which may become objects of semiotic analysis and enhance my discussion³. Indeed, texts and visual artefacts complement and intensify each other’s meaning (Silverman 2006), and they may also denote other aspects such as potent cultural symbols and stereotypes which can be useful in the analysis of the journalists’ intentions while framing their arguments, highlighting particular aspects of the stories, and showing certain images instead of others in order to send specific messages (see Hansen & Machin 2013).

It is worth mentioning, however, that I will include references to extra-text elements only if they are relevant to my analysis. In many cases pictures show generic yellow, clichéd smiley emojis, just people smiling, or standardised images of certain ‘happy’ places’ landscape, which usually have little significance to my discussion other than highlighting,

³ In these cases, the articles will be included in the bibliography with the respective links to the newspapers’ websites and blogs.

for example, Orientalist stereotypes associated with ‘the East’. Moreover, given that I am focusing on the work of journalists instead of the role of audiences, including the readers’ comments to posts on the newspapers’ websites would not result in a systematic and consistent practice since not every article and newspaper published between 2012 and 2018 in my sample is available online, and this would limit my interventions to making references to some comments randomly. However, I will include in my analysis relevant contributions from readers which are used by journalists in the media texts (in-text data), as they are part of the written material that I am elaborating on.

In speaking of the importance of particular methods for my work, doing online research offers many advantages and it deserves to be mentioned here. As Baron (2013) claims, reading texts online is quite practical in comparison to hard copies because one can access them on the screen any time. Additionally, online material is “resource friendly” as it does not need to be printed. Moreover, online research can be very useful to answer questions about content (Riffe *et al.* 2014), as I am using some basic quantitative content analysis which can highlight the significance of particular themes and demonstrate the ideological emphasis of the newspapers. Also, a simple task which needs to be done several times while doing this kind of research is searching for specific words and passages in the texts, and doing this online becomes much easier and saves a lot of time as it is more systematic.

With regards to potential disadvantages of the methodology that I follow in my research, the main criticism of a discursive approach is that it is a more subjective method. As a journalist, I would not necessarily include subjectivity as a disadvantage to my work, but, as a researcher, I need to point out that a qualitative approach may lead me to interpret

both the happiness report and its coverage in different cultural contexts according to my own ideological perspective. Indeed, I might reframe patterns that emerge from the news and construct my own discourse on media representations of happiness as a metalinguistic exercise.

Discourse analysis provides some structure for analysing texts, but, even though discourse analysts conduct the research, they are not supposed to ‘appear’ in the text directly. That is why theorists such as Rose (2001: 142) suggest that a gap in discourse analysis is that it “refuses to be reflexive”, which can be seen, in fact, as something that limits the analyst’s subjectivity in a sense – at least in terms of form or textual structure. To increase the ‘objectivity’, I decided to analyse countries which I am not emotionally attached to. This observation links to the tendency that, as Machin and Mayr (2012: 47) pointed out, it can be difficult to be critical while analysing a text that the researcher very much agrees with, or if it reflects their own ideological viewpoint, which could become even more problematic in talking about one’s own culture and country of origin.

On the other hand, I can take some advantage from my methodological choices given my academic background – which includes Journalism, Sociology, and Cross-Cultural Communication – and my work experience as a reporter for a TV station and a daily newspaper. Indeed, I benefit from an ‘internal’ view of the process of making the news as I experienced the everyday life in different newsrooms and learned how the politics of communication can work behind the publication of news. Insisting on making positive claims about the ‘happiness’ of particular communities, for example, can be part of news values in a given context as I will show throughout my analysis – e.g., within individualistic and materialistic narratives in the US, religious and nationalist statements in contemporary

India, and uplifting or motivational discourses in the UK press. I know that commercial newspapers are ‘products’, and sometimes journalists are oriented or encouraged to frame topics in a certain way in order to sell more papers and increase the profit. At the same time, time pressures may lead to the reproduction of material collected from other sources such as news agencies, which means that a newspaper can also reflect their ideologies and implicit structural circumstances that result in meaning making.

Knowing such mechanisms as an ‘insider’ can help to identify where and possibly even why some discourses happen to be constructed in a certain way rather than another, which can reveal the journalists’ or newspapers’ intentions while creating ‘meaning’. As Hall (1999) has argued, journalists themselves are a product of their environment, background, and organisation – which can reflect on framing or ‘encoding’ topics and articles through more or less emotional, spiritual, competitive, materialistic, rational, and political lenses, for example. This kind of reflection can be related to questions regarding power relations and Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus, which is key to my discourse analysis given the attention that should be paid to certain elements found within media discourses such as hierarchies, institutions, organisation structures and their role in shaping society according to dominant cultures. In this context, even though the professional ideology of fairness does exist in many newsrooms, due to news production processes such as news values this does not always happen or is not put into practice in the end, as I will illustrate in my analysis, and therefore I hope this work can contribute to more considered journalism.

3.5. Conceptualising ‘myth’

As regards to semiotic analysis, Barthes’ (2009) notion of ‘myth’ has drawn my attention to how media representations could promote a standardised, if not Westernised notion of happiness in the global scenario. Indeed, according to the WHR and its press coverage as a whole, wealthy nations normally appear at the top of the happiness ranking, and therefore are directly or indirectly considered as happy places by some journalists – but, in fact, people living in ‘privileged’ nations are not free from problems just because they are rich and count on an efficient welfare system, for example. In practice, by tracing the contrasts between ‘fact’ and ‘myth’ within news stories I will be able to draw comparisons between the different ways in which journalists tend to represent both happiness and the WHR, and therefore assess how they can contribute to the creation of specific ideas of happiness through media discourse.

Myth is, then, a key concept in my research, as it can be created through communicative practices in journalism. By holding that both text and image are communicative media endowed with discursive power (Barthes 2009); photographs are not a passive illustration, but rather evidence which can document and even ‘create’ reality (Dillet *et al.* 2013); and texts should not be considered as merely “reified verbalisation” (Ong 1988: 262), authors suggest that social communication is not something neutral and apolitical. In talking about media texts in particular, they need to be seen as inter-texts or inter-speeches which are intimately related to the *context* in which they are produced, and can send clear messages to the readers – a typical situation in which myth can be created, diffused, and therefore normalised.

Differently from the traditional sense which may include simply a misrepresentation of the ‘truth’, a false belief or even a legend based on supernatural elements, Barthes’ (2009) conceptualisation of myth relates to an ideology full of symbolism which can influence people’s interpretations of reality. Inspired by Saussure’s (2006 [1916]) structural linguistics, Barthes points out that both linguistic and mythical systems are made of a signifier (image/form), a signified (concept/meaning), and finally an association of these two elements (sign/signification) which is claimed to be the myth itself (Barthes 2009: 145).

For Barthes (2009) this linguistic system reveals that, as the signified depends on and hides itself in the signifier, the latter is rather an ‘alibi’ for the former – e.g., a soldier representing the power of an Empire. Turning the discussion to my object of study, I argue that images of materialistic and individualistic happiness, which are usually represented and naturalised today as a model that apparently works for everyone (echoing a utilitarian mentality), can be considered as a myth sold especially by the mainstream media. Indeed, by analysing media texts which directly refer to the WHR, I am interested in highlighting both the mythological role of journalism and the happiness myth – related to the sociological notion of “happiness industry” (Davies 2016) – which can be created through global media discourse. In particular, my main concern relies on the hypothesis that the mass media are likely to assimilate individualistic and materialistic conceptions of happiness which are commonly represented as a “fairy tale” (Fadina & Hockley 2015), and this can help to make visible the imposition of particular lifestyles and dominant ideologies, understood as ways of perceiving reality and society (Bignell 2002).

3.6. Deciphering media texts

As it has been suggested by the link made to Barthes' notion of myth as a manipulative way of creating meaning through language and power, the methodology used in this research has been inspired by methodological insights provided by poststructuralists – who elaborated an innovative way to use, experiment and interpret language (and communication more broadly) in the 1960s and 1970s. Broadly speaking, thinkers of that period proposed to 'deconstruct' reality in order to perhaps understand it in more depth, and this was put into practice by contesting a priori ideas, stimulating the exercise of reading between the lines, and making visible the role of unbalanced power relations in the diffusion of dominant ideologies.

As Foucault (2002b: 380-387) suggested, this new perspective revolutionised how the social sciences interpret the construction of knowledge – which relates to his notion of power-knowledge nexus (Foucault 1980) – and reality came to be seen by some as something fluid and co-created also through a particular set of power relations and the formation of “neoliberal subjectivity” (Bowsler 2018a, also Foucault 2008). This is why I argue that even happiness can be seen as a concept which is discursively created by media discourse in a Foucauldian sense. Instead of something fixed or immutable, this approach helps to highlight that the news are rather representations of reality, and, since connotation and interpretation are able to shape their meanings, *how* something is narrated is equally important as *what* is narrated by journalists (Bignell 2002: 81). Deciding what to say or not to say is, then, intimately related to ideology and the construction of mythic meanings (*ibid.*, 82), and this reinforces the importance of considering the relation between the text itself and its

production while doing discourse analysis, as media texts are able to send specific messages and promote certain interpretations of reality.

As regards to my critical discourse analysis, I will explore patterns in and across media texts in order to show different readings of discursive representations of reality (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002), which are related here to how journalists and opinion leaders normally represent happiness in light of the WHR. In addition to signifier (e.g., descriptions of people living in certain wealthy countries as having “little to worry about”) and signified (e.g., wealthy countries normally report higher levels of SWB), I will consider, most importantly, the third order of signification also called “social consensus” which, as Deacon *et al.* (2007) pointed out, legitimises tradition or social myth. In the present study, myth could be associated with the fact that, for instance, as many journalists eventually assume that people need money in order to be happy, wealthy nations tend to be represented as lands of milk and honey, as happy or at least privileged places in comparison to underdeveloped countries, following predominantly a materialistic, economic rationale as suggested by the happiness index itself.

In order to analyse data, instead of focusing on linguistics and internal relations or “relations of realisation” such as semantic, grammatical, lexical, and phonological relations, as put by Halliday (1994), I will pay special attention to external relations of texts and consider the contexts and structures in which they are produced (see Fairclough 2003). Still, I may refer to certain syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of texts by analysing, for example, specific semantic relations, collocations, assumptions, and grammatical features if they are relevant to my discussion. I will normally highlight, though, the meanings sent through news stories by the selection and quotation of representative extracts of my sample

in order to illustrate how the discursive construction of happiness happens in practice. In this way, I will examine ‘manipulation’ as a practice of imposing narratives in order to determine perceptions (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012) through the identification of media producers’ tones, intentions, partiality/impartiality, language variations, and so on.

3.7. Media texts as representations of reality

Analysing media discourse on happiness and its ‘measurement’ requires a brief acknowledgement of news values, media representations, and hegemonic practices in the global context. Instinctively, it seems tempting to take for granted that what is published by a newspaper is accurate enough – especially in speaking of a subjective topic such as happiness in the post-truth era in which feelings and personal opinions appear to have more weight than objective facts (McIntyre 2018). When it comes to media discourse, it remains clear that news stories are not neutral reflections of reality given that journalists and commentators are able to choose how to tell stories according to the use of a number of elements such as language, narratives, practical examples, sources, and images. Also, newspapers usually give voice to sources who can contribute to either reinforcing or weakening particular points of view in their articles. In this way, what newspapers share is rather a representation of reality.

Representation has been defined as a “process by which signs and symbols are made to convey certain meanings” which are made to seem “natural”; and, by consuming information from the media, people tend to “form expectations about reality based on the represented world” (Newbold *et al.* 2002: 260). As the authors have argued, in order to be

understood by readers media texts are made of codes and conventions of presentation which represent reality. However, by using such codes and conventions journalists may end up making generalisations which tend to overshadow some characteristics of certain individuals or group of individuals that are not necessarily similar to the majority or which deviate in a sense from general ideas attributed to specific collectivities such as a nation. Yet, Allan (2010: 94) pointed out that people tend to consider news stories as “faithful representations of reality” which can, therefore, shape their perceptions “in decisive ways” and “beyond immediate experience”.

Most importantly, the author also highlighted how these dynamics are negotiated in practice: “Subordinate groups are encouraged by the ruling group to negotiate reality within what are ostensibly the limits of common sense, when, in actuality, this common sense is consistent with dominant norms, values and beliefs” (Allan 2010: 96). For example, if newspapers publish certain claims such as “Bhutan is ‘destination happiness’” (*Times of India*, 7/2/2014), “Swiss reign supreme in world happiness ranks” (*Guardian*, 23/4/2015), and “Happiness can change, and does change, according to the quality of the society in which people live” (*New York Times*, 15/3/2018), journalists are framing the happiness debate according to the commercial context and specific political agendas, which can result in making strongly biased or tendentious arguments in the press.

In the post-truth scenario, the idea of ‘fake news’ gives journalists a way of distinguishing themselves against what they see as more opinionated sources, but they can still spin the news to fit their ideological inclinations (see Farkas & Schou 2020). Indeed, suggesting that particular countries which are wealthy or show positive responses to happiness policies tend to be ‘happy’ is actually a construction of reality.

It remains clear, therefore, that the process of making the news relates also to such manipulative (but also not conscious) practices which involve power relations and dominant ideologies. As Bignell (2002: 82) suggested, analysing media discourse should presuppose that newspapers are normally businesses which also aim to generate profit, and therefore news can be considered as a “commercial product”. Moreover, Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007: 7) pointed out that, instead of a “natural phenomenon”, news are rather “institutional practices” which emerge from particular social and historical contexts, and can be very much influenced by dominant cultures such as the Western World which is responsible to the global spread of news through news agencies, for example.

This hegemonic tendency contributes, then, to the standardisation of the news given that news agencies try to sell the same information to different publications and editors around the globe, even if they have different views of the world (*ibid.*, 8). When it comes to the coverage of the happiness index in particular, this sort of ‘standard’ news may overlook specific socio-cultural values and significant aspects of each national context, and this tendency actually neglects Haybron’s (2013: 10) precious suggestion to problematise happiness as “thought of as” instead of “being” something, as a result.

3.8. The power of producing (and reproducing) messages

In my research, I normally refer to the media as “an integrated component of the social order” which “actively maintain the existing power structure”, as Ross and Nightingale (2003: 36-37) put, as well as Hall (1999) in his influential essay *Encoding/Decoding*. At the

same time, I do consider that audiences play an active role in decoding the news and negotiating meanings and ideas advocated by the media (*ibidem*). However, instead of focusing on the reception of news stories from the audience perspective, I am particularly interested in the work of journalists and the process of making the news. Focusing on audiences and the decoding process would require the elaboration of a broader, if not a new doctoral project with its own basis and methodology, but the aim of my study is to narrow down the topic in order to do an in-depth analysis on mainstream media discourse. Indeed, one of my hypotheses is that there can be a dominant, homogenous conception of happiness which can be linked to the quite biopolitical ‘duty’ to be happy that I discussed previously in the literature review.

Following Hall’s (1999: 509) reasoning, I understand that, even though consumption or reception can be considered as a part of the production of meanings, production itself is a “predominant” stage in the communicational process since it is “the ‘point of departure for the realisation’ of the message.” In this way, although it can be up to the reader whether to consume or avoid certain media products and contents, the means of mass communication still contribute to the creation of ‘knowledge’ and public understandings of happiness. Both opinion formers and ordinary people are co-responsible for the construction of ‘happiness’ through language and the processes of encoding and decoding messages diffused also by the media, and they do that according to their own interests and views of the world that are socially informed (see Hall 1999). Yet, this sort of dialog is very much stimulated by the media itself, and this becomes visible especially if one concentrates on the significance of the hegemonic function of the news which can be used to shape society and, more specifically, diffuse particular understandings of reality that are ‘biopolitically’ dictated by dominant classes and nations.

Essentially, the media constantly sell ideas and ‘myths’ that society in general is inclined to consume in a sense, and this is a cyclical process which helps to maintain dominant ideologies. Message producers have, then, the power to draw people’s attention and create meaning based on their own view of the world, which Hall (1999: 513) refers to as “dominant or preferred meanings”. For instance, what information to include or exclude from texts is among the questions that journalists usually deal with every day, which relates to the fact that the politics behind news selection can actually make the “media represent the world rather than reflect it” (O’Neill & Harcup 2009: 163). Even though news values of mainstream media reporting may seem neutral practices at first glance, they can still privilege powerful groups (Hall 1973) which can have benefits through the selection of agenda setting (Herman & Chomsky 1994). For example, while individualism happens to be portrayed as “natural”, mainstream media tend to treat civic or collective values as “marginal” (McChesney 2000) in neoliberal contexts.

It remains clear, therefore, that media representations can be associated with communicative practices of manipulation and social control. Those practices may be more or less explicit; the public may be more or less aware of them; and, in the end, people can even accept what is shared by the media perhaps because there is little alternative (McQuail 1998). Still, the mass media as a whole have manipulative tendencies, and this can be associated with what Anderson (2006) calls print-capitalism, as media discourse can be used in order to disseminate propaganda (Ross & Nightingale 2003), and dominant groups, who are usually the most powerful, normally persuade others through political and ideological leadership (see Allan 2004, also Gramsci 1971). This situation can, therefore, contribute to the dissemination of ‘myths’ which, in this study, relates to standardised ideas of happiness

that mainstream media can create and take for granted.

In this context, my data analysis will consider relevant aspects of news production such as how media discourses on happiness are produced and normalised. In order to do that, I will individuate direct and indirect dialogs between dominant and marginalised voices where available – e.g., opposed views on certain topics from the perspectives of countries with different socio-economic conditions and in different positions in the WHR – as well as patterns and tendencies regarding the relationship between globalisation, national identity and the industrialisation of media production. Therefore, I will show that, even though people themselves play a crucial role in the construction of happiness and actively negotiate with the information they get from news stories, there is still a power differential which allows dominant groups to frame the meaning and contribute to the dissemination of specific narratives of happiness through media discourse.

In the next chapters, the data collected from each nation – namely the US, India and the UK – will be analysed separately, and my discussion will be structured according to the key themes that emerged from each country's press. At the beginning of each chapter, I present the quantitative data derived from coding the articles gathered from Nexis according to main topics. I then present the main themes that I identified in the articles through qualitative analysis. These themes will be addressed in sections using articles that best illustrate or are representative of the topics and discourses found in specific newspaper articles. At the end of each analytical chapter, I write my conclusions from each national context. In the last chapter, I develop a comparative study to relate the findings from the different cultural contexts and conclude my cross-cultural analysis. In order to open up my arguments in my final conclusions, I will also include insights and some extra discussion

and sources which will not necessarily come from my fixed sample, if they are relevant to my discussion.

Chapter 4: Criticisms of ‘happiness’ *versus* the pursuit of individual happiness in the US press

4.1. Introduction

The pursuit of happiness seems so foundational to American culture that it was even mentioned in the statement of the United States Declaration of Independence, originally published in 1776: “all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” such as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. In this passage, Thomas Jefferson and the other co-authors of the historic document clearly refer to the individual’s right to pursue being happy as a fundamental goal, considered not only as legitimate but also an almost sacred purpose in life as though it is a right endorsed by God. However, what happiness is and means has not necessarily stayed static from that period. Indeed, as critical theorists such as Berlant (2011) have discussed more recently, happiness has shifted from being something that individuals have a right to pursue, to being imperative to pursue in the US, but also (and quite contradictorily) put beyond people’s reach – a tendency associated with individualism that has been intensified with the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism from the 1980s.

In this context, the US press is an interesting source of data which shows, or at least suggests more implicitly at times, particular constructions of ‘happiness’ through discursive formations that connect happiness to individualism and neoliberal competitiveness in line with the arguments made by a number of authors (e.g., Foucault 2008, Binkley 2014, Dardot & Laval 2014, Gane 2014, Bowsher 2018a). In talking about the WHR in particular, such index seems to bear out Berlant’s (2011) criticisms as referred to above, because even though

the right to pursue happiness is treated as an inalienable right, the US as a sovereign state does not appear to contribute to a collective happiness at least according to recent statistics. In the several editions of the WHR, the first economy of the world has never been in the top ten of the ranking – the last position occupied by the country was 18th in 2020, behind nations such as Israel (14th), Costa Rica (15th) and Ireland (16th).

One of the pieces of information shared by the WHR (2019) – changes in reported levels of happiness from 2008 to 2018 – offers a perhaps more significant picture, with the US at the bottom of the list in the 112th position (out of 132 nations) along with countries such as Egypt (122nd), India (129th) and Syria (131st), after losing 0.446 points (WHR update, 2019). As Lipset (2001: 3) has argued, even though the US is the wealthiest large industrialised nation, it “devotes less of its income to welfare and the state is less involved in the economy than others in its class”, which means that there is a lack of safety net due to particular meritocratic ideas (see Littler 2018) that see it as the individual’s responsibility to create their own success.

Data about the US seems to suggest, therefore, that a country’s wealth alone does not secure the best outcome regarding its population’s happiness. One of the aims of this chapter is, thus, to examine how public discourses involving different perspectives on happiness and happiness policies are treated and negotiated in the media. Broadly speaking, both criticisms of the new science of happiness and a more or less explicit encouragement to chase individual happiness can be identified within the US sample – which encapsulates in a sense the controversy around these debates in the national context.

In addition to the 'legitimised' pursuit of happiness, liberty, democracy and individualism are included in a set of beliefs and values which, according to McKay (2018: 39), are "uniquely American". Even though those elements can be present in many other cultures, in the US they seem to play a key role at least in terms of the construction of an imagined national identity (see Anderson 2006). Indeed, the US constructs its own national identity based on the proud and apparently dignified way of being a leading, good, wealthy and liberal nation. As regards to the influence of individualism in the American society, McKay (2018: 11-12) holds that it comes from its very formation: "Nothing more accurately seems to represent Americanism than a stress on individual rather than collective action". As a sign of this individualistic (rather than a more collectivistic) spirit, the author also highlights the importance of the role played by private (instead of public) institutions in America, which can be associated with the "continuing success of capitalism" (*ibidem*). In such a context, people's objectives often appear to be related to prosperity and the potential achievement of happiness, which might denote a sign of "futility" in the sense Lane (1978: 19) has elaborated on, as "the encouragement of a belief that one's own worth is measured by economic success (or failure)".

In this scenario, particular ideologies and narratives promoted in the mainstream media appear to be always trying, directly or indirectly, to convince people to buy into the idea that money can actually make people happier – i.e. it is what enables people not only to pursue but attain happiness. A tradition of critical thought from the Frankfurt School has argued, for instance, that popular media stimulates a consumerist behaviour, and links happiness and identity itself to materialist values. These ideologies have been discussed by Marcuse (2002) as he related dominant cultures and lifestyles to materialism, consumerism, and the ways popular media promotes "false needs". "Most of the prevailing needs to relax,

to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs”, he wrote (*ibid.*, 7).

But the apparent ‘freedom’ to be and consume whatever one wants in consumer societies actually hides a dark side. In line with Marcuse, Strinati (2004: 54-55) has argued that people are not really free in consumerist societies since the system stimulates those “false needs” which promote individualist lifestyles, differently from “true” or “real needs” that would allow individuals to be “creative”, “independent” and “autonomous agents” participating in “meaningful and democratic collectivities”. Marcuse (2002: 5) referred to these opposed kinds of needs as “repressive” (or “alien”) and “vital”, and such specific terms reveal the author’s intention to highlight distinct social controls exerted through each kind of needs: while the former tends to imprison, the latter would actually set people free as it “would not prevent individual autonomy, but render it possible”.

Though Marcuse was writing prior to the advent of neoliberalism, his argument reinforces the point made by Berlant (2011) that happiness becomes an imperative at the same time it is put beyond people’s reach in cultural contexts where responsibility is placed upon the individual to pursue happiness rather than the state to support collective well-being (see Littler 2017). Berlant (2011) suggests that, in the end, happiness risks being a fantasy, because it can either be too distant from people’s normal lives (and therefore almost impossible) or even appear to be too easy to be achieved (and therefore almost banal) – but in both cases the assumption that money leads to happiness causes frustration. Beyond the illusion that wealth and consumerism are necessarily sources of pleasure and joy, people tend to become frustrated when they realise that it might not be true. Still, as Luttwak (1999: 205) pointed out, there are Americans who “work only for money” and are “eager to accept

overtime and even seek second jobs, sacrificing their personal freedom and family life to consume more”.

In his lessons on liquid modernity, Bauman (2006: 8-9) discusses people’s fragilities and susceptibility to materialism, and points out that, since “our life is anything but fear-free”, people are usually anxious and more likely to “delay *frustration*, not *gratification*”, which makes them follow the “carpe diem rule” and try to “consume the future... in advance”. The excessive use of credit cards in societies such as the US, for example, can illustrate practices and tendencies that, as Bowsher (2018: 2) explains, produce a new figure or form of subjectivity as “an always indebted but credit-seeking enterprise” which he calls “post-profit *homo æconomicus*”. While Foucault’s notion of *homo æconomicus* encapsulates the neoliberal subject as “profit-seeking”, the new figure proposed by Bowsher (2018: 3) is not even “engaged in competition with others to realise various kinds of profit” but rather in debt and always seeking for credit in a sort of “regime of accumulation”. When it comes to the individual’s happiness, being permanently in debt does not seem to be a comfortable situation though, since it “inscribes concepts of ‘guilt’, ‘duty’, and ‘responsibility’ into the subject, binding them to a creditor and also binding the future to the present” (*ibid.*: 6). Indeed, this situation could potentially influence people’s mood and well-being in a very negative way, as it is a constant reminder that the pursuit of material happiness that is an integral part of banal US nationalism is increasingly unattainable.

Given the arguments made by cultural theorists, it might be expected that the US press would predominantly propagate through media discourse notions of happiness as something individualistic and tied to notions of material wealth. However, a closer analysis of my sample shows that the situation is slightly more complex than this as more negotiated

and intricate discourses (and counter-discourses) also emerge from the happiness debate. Although there is an emphasis on consumerism within popular culture (where it is portrayed as a norm), these counter-discourses either criticise materialism or emphasise people actively rejecting the imperative to consume. However, sometimes this sort of response is not enough in order to contest materialism and individualism thoroughly.

In speaking of American cultural products, for example, in addition to newspapers in particular, counter-hegemonic depictions of happiness have been portrayed in a number of books such as *The Happiness Project* (2009), as well as many films like *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and *Captain Fantastic* (2016). But these forms of anti-consumerism are also quite individualist as they are actually talking about finding oneself or one's own happiness rather than working toward collective change (for a critique see Segal 2017). Indeed, these tendencies reflect the appropriation of notions of spirituality and self-determination into more narrow notions of individualistic positive thinking as authors such as Ehrenreich (2010ab) and Davies (2016) have suggested.

As I anticipated earlier in this introductory section, all these narratives about happiness, ranging from one extreme of the spectrum to the other, have been noticed in the US newspapers throughout the time period of my sample. Unsurprisingly, most of the publications dedicated significant space to discussions of the role of money in the achievement of happiness. The *Washington Post* published articles making identical arguments three different moments: "Money appears to be very closely tied with life evaluation... [But] there's another happiness measure that is far less tied to finances: life experiences" (reporter Niraj Chokshi, 25/3/2016); "[p]eople who say they're really led by income as their top value, or they regard their income as their main source of social status,

or they're very oriented toward consumerism, are very unhappy” (economist and one of the co-authors of the WHR, Jeffrey Sachs, 11/5/2015); “[f]reedom, the ability to choose, is also essential to well-being... But freedom permits people to do self-destructive things that reduce happiness” (journalist Robert Samuelson, 16/4/2012). There were many examples in which journalists and commentators suggested that money does not buy happiness, but in most cases they still followed and reproduced – directly or indirectly, and more or less subtly – certain typical ideas that denote a neoliberal capitalist worldview in their writings.

Considering this background, this chapter will examine whether the media, in particular newspapers included in my sample, circulating in a declared capitalist society such as the US – in which having money, success and power is a dominant discourse and an important part of the construction of national identity – can possibly be contributing in some way to the construction and diffusion of an individualistic, if not neoliberal concept of a ‘standard’ happiness through media discourse and narratives.

4.2. Happiness debate in the mainstream media

In order to analyse the ways in which newspapers tend to explore and represent people’s happiness, it may be useful to question how the mainstream media have been constructing specific notions of happiness (as my analysis will show). Following Entman’s (1993) reasoning, considering the way journalists frame both the results provided by the happiness ranking and their own interpretations and arguments on the topic is key to the identification of discursive formations associated with particular understandings of happiness, for example. Inspired by Foucault’s (2008) lessons on biopolitics, Andrejevic (2008: 612) points

out that consumerist and neoliberal ideology tends to “induce pleasure” through the creation of knowledge. Also, Herman and Chomsky (1988: 1-2) claim that, at the same time the media amuse and inform, they also “inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society”.

This point has been unpacked by Herman and Chomsky as they claimed that “the media serve the ends of a dominant elite”, and therefore “money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (*ibidem*). In this way, these authors suggested that the media try to impose certain ideologies, and the mechanisms through which this happens can be useful to examine, in my Foucauldian analysis, whether mainstream media have been ‘selling’ an idealised and ‘Westernised’ notion of happiness – which is informed by a normalised understanding of an American way of life and may impact audience interpretations and limit public knowledge.

Even though there is a lot of criticism related to the happiness industry in the US newspapers, by endorsing the findings of the UN’s report a number of journalists are actually taking for granted that people’s happiness depends considerably on society’s economic aspects and the individuals’ efforts and responsibilities – which is intimately related to the creation of what Bowsher (2018, see also Foucault 2008) refers to as “neoliberal subjectivities”. Also, by reproducing the results of the ranking as if it were a game and sensationalising the claim that certain countries are the ‘happiest’ on Earth, in a sense the newspapers are also trying to amuse their readership. This strategy can be linked to the fact that, especially in the wake of 24-hour news and rise of digital media, the modernisation of the news media and new technologies, as McChesney (2004) has argued, “have intensified

the need for fresh and attention-getting stories” (p. 78), and commercial media “invariably strive to ‘give the people what they want’” (p. 198) – even though the media themselves also shape public knowledge according to their own political and economic interests that are reflected on narratives which tend to normalise inequalities and position subjects as ‘winners’ or ‘losers’ (cf. Brown 2015: 38, also Davies and Dunne 2016: 156).

However, giving the people “what they want” may lead to audience fragmentation since, as Bennett (2016: 209) has noted, “individuals have the option of consuming just the media realities they prefer, and thus isolating themselves from the information realities of others in society”. In a sense, this practice can be associated with individualism and even the alienation of part of the audience as fragmentation encourages people to tailor news in ways that filters out things they are not interested in (see Bennett 2016). This question may become even more problematic when it comes to the media’s role in the discursive construction of a sense of collectiveness which involves, along with many other social and psychological aspects of a certain population, people’s emotions and their own ideas of a subjective concept such as happiness.

4.3. Sample

Politically speaking, the majority of daily newspapers are more inclined to the centre-right in America, but, as McKay (2018: 154) has argued, if one considers the readership, “this tendency is partly corrected by the broadly liberal large-circulation papers on the two coasts”, such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*. In terms of circulation, the majority of the newspapers are locally organised, but the *USA Today*, the

Christian Science Monitor and, more recently, also the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* publish national editions (McKay 2018: 149).

Furthermore, McKay (2013: 7) claimed that the US is “a country where a dominant ideology imposed by powerful elites is particularly influential”. As regards to the profile of the people who make the news in the US, Graber (2010: 76) pointed out that those professionals have been part of a quite dominant group in society: “At the start of the twenty-first century, four out of five American journalists were white, two-thirds were male, and nearly all had graduated from college, though many did not major in journalism”. When it came to the social and political views of those professionals, Graber (2010: 76) added: “like most people with a social science or humanities degree, journalists tend to be socially more liberal than the general population and to have a keener sense of social responsibility”. These observations provide an idea of how homogenised newspeople appear to be as a group in the US, but, at the same time, also suggest certain social and political values which may show in the data that I will analyse in this chapter.

The sample selected in order to represent the US print media includes the following newspapers: *USA Today*, a broadsheet newspaper with a centrist audience, and pioneer as a national daily publication; *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, considered as the main liberal broadsheet newspapers in America⁴, both publishing national editions at the present day; the *New York Post* was included as a representative right-wing tabloid (Wilson 2001) based in New York, even though just one article about happiness and politics was found in this specific publication; the *Daily News* did not offer a significant number of documents

⁴ The *Los Angeles Times*, one of the main liberal large-circulation papers in the US (McKay 2018: 154), would have also been analysed in this research. However, it was unavailable on both Nexis and ProQuest databases; also, the newspaper’s website was not available in most European countries during the period of data collection.

either, but it was included in my sample as another example of a typical American tabloid; and the *Wall Street Journal* was crucial to my analysis given its economic approach to happiness and well-being. In the following tables, the articles were ordered according to their main topics and subjects:

Table 4.1. Documents containing the term ‘World Happiness Report’ (2012-2018).

<u>WHR</u>	Happiness	WB indexes	Politics & Int’l.	Economics & business	Health & Env.	Lifestyle	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>NYTimes</i>	2	10	2	3	-	1	1	19
<i>WPost</i>	5	7	2	3	1	4	-	22
<i>WSJ</i>	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	5
<i>NYPPost</i>	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
<i>USA T</i>	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	4
<i>DNews</i>	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	8	26	6	6	1	5	1	53

Table 4.2. Documents containing the term ‘National Happiness’ (2012-2018).

<u>NH</u>	Happiness	WB indexes	Economics & business	Politics & Int’l.	Lifestyle	Health & Env.	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>NYTimes</i>	3	6	5	7	8	5	1	35
<i>WPost</i>	-	7	7	5	1	-	-	20
<i>WSJ</i>	3	3	7	1	4	-	-	18
<i>NYPPost</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
<i>USA T</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>DNews</i>	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	6	17	19	14	13	5	1	75

The qualitative themes that recur throughout the different subjects of this chapter are derived from the main subjects (quantitatively) tabulated above, and the proportion of each

main theme within the US sample was: the measurement of happiness (or well-being indexes) (33%); economics (20%); politics (16%); lifestyle (14%); happiness (as a general theme) (11%); and health and environment (5%). When it came to determining which articles I should highlight in my discussion, as I pointed out in the methodology (Chapter 3), I followed Bignell's (2002: 88-89) criteria for encoding news. In this way, I recognised the significance of texts according to elements such as meaningfulness (e.g., the relevance of social and political aspects of happiness in each national context), continuity (given my longitudinal analysis and the several editions of the WHR), composition (as different parallel themes emerge from the happiness debate), and references to both negative aspects (which can be related to the 'problematism' of happiness in public discourses) and the crucial role that elite nations play when it comes to the discursive construction of happiness.

In the first subheading – *What's wrong with the US?* – I provide an overview of how newspapers suggest that Americans are struggling to achieve happiness, and elaborate on the way journalists tended to problematise happiness according to socio-economic conditions identified in many places throughout the national sample (Section 4.4). By highlighting key discourses that stood out from the US data, I illustrate that the happiness debate is not always pleasant and romanticised. For example, recurrent narratives related to inequality and individualism – sometimes associated with difficulties in dealing with mental health issues in a declared competitive society – represent some of the parallel themes which have been commonly associated with happiness (or unhappiness) and the American lifestyle, revealing a sign of the writers' self-criticism at times.

Many key terms related to American society today have been associated with the happiness debate in the US press, but some of them have particularly drawn my attention

either because they confirmed or frustrated my expectations. Surprisingly, the term ‘positive thinking’ was never mentioned in association with ‘WHR’ – despite the popularity of positive psychology in America and the psychological approach followed by the happiness index itself. At the same time, even though ‘depression’ (mentioned in 12% of the US articles) did not become a core theme, that specific word appeared more frequently than the more generic term ‘mental health’ (6%). This may denote some journalists’ concerns with the negative aspects of the topic, but it is still curious that narratives on mental illnesses, or psychological weaknesses at least, did not gain enough space in order to form a specific pattern within the US sample. Indeed, such narratives were normally dispersed among other debates involving the struggle to achieve happiness, and therefore were included in the more ‘generic’ Section 4.4.

A very popular theme among American journalists was the relationship between happiness and money – most commonly found in (but not limited to) economics and business articles (nearly 20% of the US sample) – which deserved a whole section in this chapter (Section 4.5). Indeed, the term ‘inequality’ appeared in a third of the texts (33%) and, along with ‘money’ (29%) and ‘economic growth’ (17%), were mentioned in the majority of the news reports on the WHR – which demonstrates the emphasis on economic well-being in the US context. Yet, even though media discourse does illustrate the entanglement of happiness and material wealth, it also complicates this by drawing attention to inequality fostered by these same socio-economic structures.

Some articles collected from the US newspapers mainly focused on happiness in broader, or even philosophical terms – 15% of the documents containing the term ‘WHR’, and 8% ‘national happiness’ to be precise – and some insights they provided into the

conceptualisation of happiness in the US context were included in different sections where relevant. However, most of the national sample explored well-being indexes and the controversial attempt to measure happiness as a key theme (in 33% of the texts), as discussed in a separate section (4.6).

Paying attention to quantitative results, Section 4.7 was dedicated to ‘Bhutan’, one of the most popular terms that I identified within the US sample. It appeared in 31% of the texts on the happiness ranking; partly due to the popularity of the Bhutanese indicator GNH, often used as an example of an alternative to ‘Western’ ways of ‘measuring’ people’s well-being, but also because of the fact that the term ‘national happiness’ (which I searched for along with ‘WHR’ in the Nexis database) is included in its very title. Interestingly, discourses on Bhutan provide some useful examples of how American journalists try to position the ‘exotic’, Himalayan country in relation to the US and vice-versa, revealing the power politics at play and some writers’ egocentrism, which offered substantial raw material for my Foucauldian critical discourse analysis.

In addition to these recurrent, if not fixed, debates throughout the national sample, specific frames directly emerged from the longitudinal approach of my study. Perhaps because of concerns regarding certain policies of the Trump administration – including the removal of the US from the Paris climate agreement in 2017 – the term ‘environment’ (found in 12% of the texts) was more frequently mentioned than ‘social capital’ (5%), for example, and the link some journalists made between happiness and sustainability, within the environmental debate, was discussed in Section 4.9. Another relevant topic related to American politics was ‘immigration’ (the term appeared in 14% of the national sample) – at least partly because this was a special theme analysed in the WHR 2018, but also Trump’s

tough policies on immigration may have contributed to it – which also provided some insights into happiness and the perpetuation of social consensus regarding the ‘American dream’, and therefore deserved a specific section (4.8).

When it came to the types of media texts, the proportion in the US sample was: long-form works (40%), news and short articles (25%), columns and notes (20%), editorials (8%), letters (3%), interviews (3%), and book reviews (1%) (see Table 3.2 in the methodology). In talking about the different newspapers in the national sample, as the tables 4.1 and 4.2 show, even though the *New York Post*, *USA Today* and *Daily News* have published only a few articles (according to my research on the Nexis database), the total amount of media texts collected from the US newspapers is as substantial as in the other countries included in my sample. It remains clear, thus, that American newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* have shown considerable interest in the topics related to the WHR and national happiness more broadly since the first publication of the UN’s report in 2012.

Broadly speaking, the *New York Post*, *USA Today* and *Daily News* normally offered more superficial coverage of and gave little space to the general results of the happiness ranking, without questioning further aspects associated with people’s well-being, as specified in the tables above. The data analysis also reveals that, even though some of the newspapers do not give much space to the happiness index in particular, some of them paid more attention to the happiness debate since the launch of the UN’s report in 2012. For example, relevant articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have more than doubled since then, and those of the *Wall Street Journal* quadrupled over the period between

2012 and 2018. This is a sign of the ‘happiness boom’ and the attention which the happiness index has drawn in the global media over the last decade.

4.4. What’s wrong with the US?

In line with Frawley’s (2015) insights into the “problematization” of happiness according to specific cultures and moments in history, ‘happiness’ was not always framed as a positive theme in the US sample. On the contrary, the happiness debate was focused on a number of issues related to different subjects explored by the American journalists and commentators. When it came to the problems which may overshadow people’s happiness in the US, the American newspapers tended to suggest that the cause of many obstacles to a better life appear to be related, at least to some extent, to economic inequality and individualism – elements related to the creation of a “neoliberal subjectivity” (Bowsher 2018a) and framed by some journalists as negative aspects of American society, which seem to contribute to some people’s anxiety and dissatisfaction with life (cf. Bauman 2006).

In such a context, financial and economic journalist Robert J. Samuelson was sceptical about one of the ‘pillars’ of the American way of living by pointing out that some social problems can emerge from the very excess of freedom, one of the inalienable rights for Americans: freedom “may be a ‘right’, as the Declaration of Independence says”, but it also “permits people to do self-destructive things that reduce happiness”, and the happiness movement is either “utopian” or “silly and oppressive” (*Washington Post*, 16/4/2012). In this article, Samuelson echoes the problematics of the happiness industry and the social expectation that people *should* be happy (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Davies 2016), which can be

associated with a highly competitive and individualistic way of living. Considering also historical influences, Samuelson offers a reminder that, while “religious dogma encouraged austere rectitude”, happiness became “socially acceptable” during the Enlightenment, but “European cultures formed before the change; America’s didn’t” (*Washington Post*, 16/4/2012), which suggests he is also being dismissive of the happiness agenda from a more conservative approach that foregrounds economic priorities. Moreover, the commentator is being defensive since he points out that ordinary Americans tend to be stereotyped as being more informal and less austere than ordinary Europeans, and perhaps more optimistic while reporting SWB – an attitude which eventually reflects the biopolitical role of the happiness industry.

Being more ‘flexible’ or even too optimistic in reporting one’s own satisfaction with life can indicate the influence of some social expectations related to the fact that people should present themselves as happy, no matter how they actually feel (Ehrenreich 2010ab). However, despite this more or less latent pressure over people to be happy, one of the editors of the WHR, economist Jeffrey Sachs claimed in an interview to journalist Brigid Schulte that, even though “Americans are still relatively happy” according to the ranking, in practice they are “not at the top of our game, and not at the top of the world” (*Washington Post*, 11/5/2015). As regards to his impressions of American culture, Sachs was one of the many opinion formers who clearly blamed the excess of freedom and individualism as the social aspects which normally influence people’s quality of life in a negative way: “There is a deep trend that we in America have put too much emphasis on individual income attainment, and not... making sure that everybody is carried along through benefits” (*ibidem*).

Most of the reactions to the US performance in the happiness ranking reveal some frustration in the newspapers, since the economic superpower has never managed to figure amongst the top 10 ‘happiest’ nations. Not surprisingly, Sachs argues that the reasons for that do not appear to be related to economic issues, but rather to difficulties in dealing with and, most importantly, sharing the accumulated wealth: “A good place to start is making sure that everyone has access to what’s important: Universal health coverage. Universal education” (*ibidem*). This egalitarian discursive formation provided by Sachs’ interview – reinforced by the use of terms such as “everyone” and the repetition of “universal” – resonates with the idea that, as Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have argued, prosperity needs to be combined with equality in order to contribute to the proper well-being of the population as a whole.

In general, though, US newspapers are critical of the fact that the world’s strongest economy does not manage to promote people’s happiness, as reporter Alex Horton has announced: “Perhaps tired of winning, the United States falls in World Happiness rankings – again”, in the country’s “worst showing since the annual report was introduced in 2012” (*Washington Post*, 14/3/2018) – highlighting the US fall in the WHR on a longitudinal perspective throughout the time period of my sample. For Horton, income and GDP do not always translate to happiness among individuals as “belonging and respect in civil society also play vital roles”, but “human beings in America have contributed to eroding happiness... in recent years”, and “[p]resident Trump has not made America happier again” (*ibidem*).

Analysing the US society from a distance, even if living there, British author and journalist Ruth Whippman elaborated on the frequent issues related to anxiety and mental

illness in contemporary America. According to the writer, “[h]appiness in America has become the overachiever’s ultimate trophy... This obsessive, driven, relentless pursuit is a characteristically American struggle – the exhausting daily application of the Declaration of Independence” (*New York Times*, 22/9/2012). The journalist also pointed out that, according to the WHO, the richest nation on the planet is, “by a wide margin, also the most anxious”, and “America’s precocious levels of anxiety are not just happening in spite of the great national happiness rat race, but also perhaps, because of it” (*ibidem*) – a clear counter-narrative of ‘happiness’ in relation to the way it normally appears in neoliberal, subjectivist discourses.

Indeed, even though popular media are often accused of propagating ideologies that encourage individualistic notions of happiness, narratives such as that in Whippman’s article are examples in which some journalists in the mainstream media are making similar criticisms to cultural theorists. By linking an “obsessive” pursuit of happiness to a “characteristically American struggle”, for example, the journalist is giving her version of what authors such as Ahmed (2011) and Davies (2016) wrote about negative effects of the happiness industry, also reinforcing Berlant’s (2011) notion of “cruel optimism” which suggests that neoliberalism creates an atmosphere where individuals are encouraged to feel happy while also creating material conditions that put happiness out of reach.

4.5. Happiness and money

In a neoliberal capitalist society based on individualism and competitiveness, it seems inevitable that happiness ends up discursively connected to money and the material aspects

of life – reinforcing the myth that money brings happiness. Unsurprisingly, nearly 20% of the US sample were articles labelled as economics and business, and ‘money’ was one of the most frequent terms found in the texts – it appeared in 31% of the documents in which the WHR was mentioned, whereas ‘inequality’ featured in 33%, and ‘economic growth’ in 17%. These numbers indicate that such elements were significant even within articles in which the main subject was not directly related to economy and finance.

Despite the complexity of discourses which emerge from the happiness debate, the US newspapers normally followed two main tendencies regarding the relationship between happiness and money: a) money and happiness are not necessarily related, i.e. happiness might also depend on money, but only up to a point (in line with Easterlin 1974); and b) money and happiness are not just intimately related but also directly proportional, i.e. the richer the people are, the happier they tend to be (echoing Veenhoven 1999). Therefore, despite the fact that many journalists and commentators clearly suggested that money alone does not secure people’s happiness, they were not able to dissociate experiencing happiness from practical and material factors related to quality of life.

Even though academic counter-narratives have criticised the exaggerated importance given to money and individual success especially in industrialised societies such as the US (see Ehrenreich 2010ab, Davies 2016), the majority of journalists presupposed in their articles, more or less implicitly, that money does play a crucial role in the achievement of individual happiness since it appears to be inevitable to have to pay in order to have a high quality of life. A clear example of this argument is related to the rise of the suicide rate in the US during and after the 2007-2009 recession, given that, as scholars David Stuckler and

Sanjay Basu claimed in *New York Times* (13/5/2013), “[p]eople looking for work are about twice as likely to end their lives as those who have jobs”.

In this context, media discourse indicates that dissociating money (as the means to achieve not the superfluous but the necessary conditions for a good life) from well-being (as something which is not interchangeable with happiness) appears to be quite impractical, especially in a country in which, for instance, even the most basic and fundamental needs such as healthcare cost a lot of money to the entire population. Indeed, the total spending per capita with healthcare in the US was 9,892 USD, the highest amount of money among the countries analysed by the OECD in 2016.

The US newspapers as a whole did not engage in in-depth discussions of happiness according to a more spiritual approach that framed it in relation to less materialistic conceptions of spirituality and social well-being. Instead, they normally interchanged the concept of happiness with people’s quality of life. In this way, happiness appeared to be something directly related to the body and to pleasure, in line with the arguments of some scholars working on the scientific study of happiness such as sociologist Ruut Veenhoven (1999, 2010). An article written by British journalist and businessman Matt Ridley, in the *Wall Street Journal* (19/11/2010), is an example of this tendency: “happiness has risen during the past 30 years... [and] this coincides with people getting richer”. For Ridley, “[n]atural selection shaped human nature to be ambitious, not to settle for contentment”, and “[c]ontrary to myth, rich countries have slightly happier citizens than poor countries... [Even though] it’s possible to be rich and unhappy, as many a celebrity deliciously reminds us” (*ibidem*). Interestingly, the narrative connecting phrases such as “natural selection” and

“ambitious” in this passage refutes the myth that poor countries are happier by reinforcing another myth that the rich countries are happier.

Ridley’s article illustrates some tensions in the negotiation of certain representations of happiness. For example, he touched on quite delicate points which may contradict the positive relationship between wealth and happiness: first, some negative effects which the excess of money can have over people’s behaviour, such as the struggle to deal with limits, which he used to indicate a sort of exception to the ‘rule’ as he claimed that “it’s possible to be rich and unhappy” in some cases; second, the idea of ambition and competitiveness represented by the problematic term “natural selection”, perpetuating a meritocratic discourse that portrays the competitive pursuit of happiness as an innate tendency (see Littler 2017). Economics professor Robert Frank has elaborated on this latter point as well, but in a slightly different context, as he also considered the role of social comparisons:

“[O]nce a certain absolute income standard is achieved, satisfaction depends more heavily on how one’s earnings compare with the earnings of others... How smart, strong or rich you are matters less than how those attributes compare with those of your closest rivals” (*New York Times*, 10/6/2018).

In this example – published by an arguably progressive newspaper and towards the end of my sample period, but still with a quite ‘conventional’ tone – the narrative seems to characterise US society as intrinsically competitive, also by using the term “closest rivals” – instead of other words such as ‘fellows’ or ‘companions’. These language choices produce a particular discursive formation that reveals, along with competitiveness itself,

individualism and even selfishness, reinforcing the logic of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (cf. Brown 2015: 38) as neoliberal subjectivities (see Bowsher 2018a).

In line with Ridley’s point of view, business and economics journalist Adam Davidson claimed that the Easterlin paradox (see Easterlin 1974) – which says that “people do not become happier as they get richer” – “doesn’t quite hold up” because “the data now indicate that as people get richer, they report getting happier too”, and “most rich countries have reported increases in happiness as they become richer” (*New York Times*, 10/2/2013). In this way, Davidson clearly suggests that money can definitely contribute to happiness. However, when it came to America in particular, the journalist suggested that wealth does not automatically reflect on people’s happiness, and constructed a discourse that fed into a critique of the high level of economic inequality in the country by pointing out the root of the problem: “Americans have not shared in the increased wealth” (*ibidem*).

Despite recognition that happiness had not improved in the US, the sense that money was still somehow related to happiness nonetheless persisted. This was represented in the headline of the article in which the WHR was mentioned for the first time in the *USA Today* (2/8/2012) by journalist Wendy Koch: “If money doesn’t buy happiness... What does?”. The writer also claimed that “higher incomes – *not surprisingly* – boost well-being in poor countries” (my italics). Again, it remains implicit here that, as long as money can boost well-being, it should ‘automatically’ contribute to people’s happiness – a notion which illustrates the argument of some authors (e.g. Almeder 2000, Haybron 2013) that happiness has usually been interchanged with life satisfaction, as well as well-being and flourishing (Wright 2013), by scholars in happiness studies. At the same time, Koch appeared to be cautious about the happiness movement – in her own words, the “United States, home to the smiley face and

the Happy Meal, is attempting to do just that, responding to a movement that has been hailed as revolutionary and derided as ‘silly’ or worse”. Also at the beginning of my sample period, the *New York Post* was emphatic by referring to GDP as “a dollars-and-cents measure” (1/4/2012).

A few years later, even the most important business newspaper in the US questioned the relationship between money and happiness: columnist Jo McGinty suggested in the economic *Wall Street Journal* (21/8/2015) that happiness might not be all about money. It is notable, however, that this example shows the writer’s cautiousness while giving her personal opinion in light of the readership of that specific newspaper’s interest in business and profit, and also reveals a sign of her orientalist frame of the arguably ‘happy’ yet ‘peripheric’ Bhutan: “Please don’t groan when I say this”, she anticipated, “I’m only repeating what a bunch of subversive economists influenced by a small Buddhist country have persuaded governments all over the world is true: Money isn’t everything”.

In this passage, McGinty assumes that readers give significant importance to money as she emphasises that “subversive economists” are the ones who claim that money isn’t everything – not herself. Interestingly, collocations such as “small Buddhist” and “tiny Buddhist country” have been often used in order to create discursive formations in which Bhutan’s limitations in terms of both territory and culture were opposed to the powerful US and the ‘West’ more broadly – even though there is also the point made by some journalists of the country’s strength, for being influential with regards the GNH, in other articles. Yet, by bringing alternative ways of thinking about the politics of happiness into her text, at least the columnist is showing the readers that there can be different opinions on the subject. As a sign of the discussion’s complexity, McGinty eventually seems to agree with those

“subversive economists” when the attention turns to the demand for a more comprehensive assessment of people’s overall well-being: “Mind you, these economists don’t dispute the value of money. But they say if the goal is to assess overall well-being, it’s an inadequate proxy” (*ibidem*).

The limitation of focusing on GDP in order to assess people’s well-being is precisely that money or material resources are not the only solution to all human problems. Some commentators largely supported this especially in more progressive newspapers such as *New York Times* and *Washington Post* – although they emphasise the importance of economy at some points. For example: “The so-called leading indicators no longer answer the most important questions people are raising about how they live” (*New York Times*, 13/4/2014). Following similar reasoning, the *Washington Post* (2/4/2018) gave voice to former chief economist Jared Bernstein, who was categorical: “GDP and well-being are far from synonymous”. As regards to the WHR in particular, even towards the end of the time period of my sample, though, the economist states that the study is a “convincing” and “serious bit of work” that brings new elements of the population’s well-being. However, even though some narratives challenge the GDP, they do not engage with questions such as the biopolitical role of happiness rankings and the maintenance of the status quo – which sounds even more acritical and outdated if propagated by the progressive *Washington Post* after several years of controversies around the WHR.

In addition to the American context, some examples were used by journalists to represent the potentially different relationship between money and happiness in other countries. A few stories reported on China and Korea, for instance, read like advice to American readers, suggesting that the emphasis on social bonds (instead of individualism

and competitiveness) is extremely important to stimulate the well-being of any population. In these cases, though, instead of reproducing orientalist discourses newspapers rather tried to look at other cultures with a sense of openness and interest in learning from their experiences with ‘modernisation’. The *Washington Post* blog⁵ pointed out that “the massive rise in wealth left Chinese people less happy... and feel less secure” (24/3/2017), and people who moved to China’s big cities “got richer” but “less happy than those they left behind” (15/3/2018). Similarly, young people’s migration from rural to urban areas in search of better opportunities was depicted as a phenomenon which causes serious familiar problems in South Korea: the older generation are “struggling” and falling into poverty (*Washington Post*, 23/1/2014) as “multigenerational family structures have become less common as the country modernized” (*Wall Street Journal*, 27/2/2013).

These international stories demonstrate a lot about American values too and contribute to looking at the US society from a different perspective – in comparison to others. By drawing attention to certain stereotypical issues imported from other cultural contexts journalists are also representing their own values through the similarities and differences noticed elsewhere, such as in the distant ‘East’ which recalls some of Said’s (1978) considerations about ‘orientalism’ – although through a slightly different perspective here. Indeed, the meaning created behind the (‘local’, but also ‘universal’) examples reported from China and Korea suggest that Americans should think more collectively. For instance, the prioritisation of money over family has been opposed to the importance of having meaningful social bonds, which suggests a nostalgic and less ambitious view according to a clichéd stereotypical representation of the ‘East’ and the perpetuation of the myth that

⁵ Even though I specify that these articles were published on the *Washington Post*’s blog, I accessed them through the Nexis database.

Eastern societies are ‘collectivistic’. However, overall money and success still seem to be a prerequisite for people’s happiness according to particular discursive formations in the US press, whereas the contrast between individual and collective happiness (sometimes even within the same news report) illustrates the complexity of these debates.

4.6. Considerations on the measurement of ‘happiness’

A third of the US sample (33%) containing either the term ‘World Happiness Report’ or ‘national happiness’ focused on well-being indexes – especially the WHR (and the Gallup Pool Data) but also Bhutan’s GNH – whereas 11% of the texts touched on ‘happiness’ more broadly – including a few editorials, notes in columns, short reports on the WHR ranking and two book reviews. The articles which simply reported the main results of the happiness ranking were usually quite descriptive and very similar to each other. Normally, those articles did not engage in any relevant discussions which could perhaps enrich their content in relation to the happiness index. This is why it appears to be more useful for this analysis to focus instead on counter-discourses on happiness, which provide a better idea of how American newspapers have been reacting to and contesting the proposed practice of measuring people’s happiness through SWB.

In this way, I begin by taking a step back to highlight a foundational question which has been touched on in the US press. The very nomenclature and some key terms used in happiness research have been questioned directly or indirectly in some articles, such as the example in which journalist Wendy Koch gave voice to the professor of psychiatry Arthur Stone in the *USA Today* (8/2/2012), ahead of the launch of the WHR: “Happiness means

many things... We're not even sure we're happy, so to speak, with the term 'happiness' or 'well-being'. This is indicative that there have always been doubts about the basic terminology used by scholars working in the field, as Wierzbicka (1999, 2004) previously argued in essays on happiness and emotion across languages and cultures. Stone also suggested that the terms 'happiness' and 'well-being' sound "too new-agey", perhaps in association with holism, spirituality and self-help as opposed to science and rationality, which could suggest that, even though the science of happiness has gained certain popularity in the last decades, it might not be considered serious and legitimate by some commentators.

Indeed, American critic Kyle Smith wrote in the *New York Post* website (22/3/2017) that, even though the WHR has been usually "treated by the (rest of the) press with the same combination of awe and devotion that greeted the average papal bull in the Middle Ages... this report is mostly rubbish." Interestingly, the writer also pointed out that surveys such as the UN's happiness report "depend on subjective self-reporting... [and] eliding cultural differences", a narrative which makes a link to cultural relativism:

"In Japan there is a cultural bias against boasting of one's good fortune, and in East Asia the most common response, by far, is to report one's happiness as average. In Scandinavia, meanwhile, there is immense societal pressure to tell everyone how happy you are, right up to the moment when you're sticking your head in the oven" (*New York Post*, 22/3/2017).

In addition to linguistic and cultural aspects that may influence happiness research and show that 'happiness' is more complex than 'life satisfaction', discourses created by commentators in the US also suggested that measuring the 'immeasurable' could never

become possible, reliable, or even useful in the end. Indeed, editor Sewell Chan suggested that the WHR needs to be demystified: “there is a significant disagreement about how to measure happiness” (*New York Times*, 17/3/2016). Even though the happiness report has had an impact in terms of policies and has been also a popular topic in the global media over the last years, Chan pointed out that some scholars find SWB “unreliable”, and this is why “they prefer objective indicators like economic and health data” even if “the scholars behind the... [WHR] said they tried to take both types of data into account” (*ibidem*). Interestingly, these last quotes reveal how ideological this question can be – as though certain statistics are free of ideology while others are not.

Indeed, even though the WHR eventually pays special attention to material aspects of life (including the GDP itself) and contributes to the perpetuation of neoliberal subjectivities (in line with Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus), it also considers ‘alternative’, less concrete and more complex variables which are taken by journalists as the main issue or the reason why the happiness ranking comes to be labelled as problematic and unreliable at times. What I argue, in fact, is that the WHR and mainstream happiness studies more broadly are problematic as a whole; and, in this sense, especially regarding the ‘quality press’, I expected more comprehensive critiques of the happiness rankings and the quantification of happiness from journalists in the US sample.

Still talking about discourses involving methodological questions related to measuring well-being, a specialist in economics and financial issues, journalist Peter Whoriskey, seems to accept the reliability of happiness indexes precisely because he links them to material aspects of life: “Even if happiness can be measured accurately, some statisticians wonder whether it will reveal much more than the GDP figure does – after all,

income and life satisfaction often appear to be closely correlated” (*Washington Post*, 30/3/2012). Other commentators had lower expectations of the report inferring that they cannot take it seriously. As the author James Bovard suggested in the *Wall Street Journal*, the study is seen as different, if not opposed, to more concrete studies, and therefore less credible: “Measuring moods is far more difficult than counting people... Is there any reason to expect a federal happiness index to be more credible than the inflation rate?” (*Wall Street Journal*, 6/5/2012).

If there have been questions and doubt about a “federal happiness index”, apparently trusting in a global study which attempts to quantify the happiness of nations is even more complicated. Indeed, the more researchers expand both the sample and the object of analysis, the more complex the study tends to be. Special writer Brenda Cronin explored this question by citing an expert at measuring happiness, Carol Graham, who drew a parallel between global indexes and targeted analysis of well-being in particular nations, confirming that making generalisations can be an issue. Through a discourse against both cultural homogenisation and the standardisation of ‘happiness’ (for a critique see Binkley 2014: 20-21), Graham claimed that well-being data “give you a wider choice set when you are making a policy decision”, but “in these big aggregate comparisons [such as the WHR], you’re lumping together unobservable country differences and cultural differences” (*Wall Street Journal*, 11/4/2013).

In addition to the complexity of such attempts to rank happiness, the critiques in the newspaper articles have been extended to the US government’s decision to invest money in the measurement of ‘happiness’. This kind of public policy was not seen as something worthwhile by all commentators and was even said to have provoked dissatisfaction among

part of the population. Just a few days after the publication of the happiness report's first edition, the *Washington Post's* editorial headline (4/4/2012) went straight to the point: "Measuring happiness? How silly". The text included some of the readers' sharp opinions: "I am outraged at another waste of my money... What a farce" (Hillel Raskas); "What does a taxpayer call it when a government agency uses a flawed premise to measure something immeasurable, the purpose of which has yet to be defined? Hint: It isn't 'happiness'" (Robert Muzzio).

But the critiques were not only towards happiness policies and research. Indeed, these examples help to differentiate reports which were published throughout the whole time period of the sample (2012-2018) and can be either critical of trying to measure happiness because journalists (or even readers as shown in the extracts above) think it is pointless (and often then support the status quo), or critical of the American way of life (and so status quo) – a point I will come back to in the final conclusion.

Considering the fact that some countries (e.g., Venezuela, Ecuador, United Arab Emirates) tried to systematically measure 'happiness' and created ministries in order to boost the levels of happiness within their populations, reporter Adam Taylor quoted the expert Carol Graham (quoted also in the *Wall Street Journal* previously), who claimed that the creation of ministries for happiness can be a "diversion" and may even "border on the government telling people how to be happy or that they should be happy" (*Washington Post*, 10/2/2016). Indeed, even though trying to boost people's happiness may fit with dominant ideas about freedom and their rights to choose 'constitutional rights', it actually reveals the biopolitical nature of happiness policies which are more interested in making people responsible for their own happiness (cf. Andrejevic 2008: 612, also Foucault 1972).

Graham's words resonate with the resistance against such a tacit, vertical practice – widely discussed by critical theorists such as Ahmed (2010), Davies (2016) and Ehrenreich (2010ab) – which relates to the reduced participation of the state when it comes to welfare, especially in neoliberal societies, and the fact that the state eventually transfers to people the responsibility to find happiness – instead of actively solving problems that may prevent them from being happier.

After several editions of the WHR, concerns and opposition to the happiness movement have not disappeared from the American newspapers – on the contrary, such criticisms appear everywhere in the US sample regardless of the year. Interestingly, this sort of discontent seems to be caused by two main (and almost contradictory) reasons: the fact that happiness is supposed to be ‘measured’, and also the relatively disappointing outcome of the US in the ranking. Reporter Alex Horton was among the critics: “For the second year, the United States has taken a tumble in the [WHR]... the worst showing since the annual report was introduced”, also reminding the readers that, even though economy is doing well, “President Trump has not made America happier again” (*Washington Post* blog, 14/3/2018).

The contradiction I referred above reflects the intricate debate in which people struggle to decide whether the study of ‘happiness’ is worth it or not: sometimes journalists’ discourse seems to propose something they see as more valuable such as GNH or “a broader GDP”, and sometimes they use the critiques to dismiss happiness studies as valueless. An article by economics journalist Adam Davidson in the *New York Times* (10/2/2013) encapsulates this sort of negotiation. At the same time he writes that “[h]appiness quantification sounds a bit wishy-washy”, Davidson also suggests that it is actually possible to learn from happiness research: “Still, some of the data make lots of anecdotal sense...

Why does western Long Island score several points higher on the happiness scale than most of Brooklyn? Does being richer make you feel better than being cooler?” The journalist compares different lifestyles in two neighbourhoods of New York: the first as simply a wealthy and perhaps boring place, whereas the second is framed as popular, multicultural, extremely influential in terms of culture and with a stronger sense of community in relation to other areas of the metropolis. From this perspective, the excessive importance given to material conditions has been contested as the writer wondered why the wealthiest won.

4.7. “Bhutan is no Shangri-La”

One of the foreign countries to which the American newspapers most frequently referred while discussing about happiness was Bhutan – it appeared in over 30% of the articles about the WHR. The Himalayan country has been usually considered by journalists in the US as a curious example since its government claimed to have boosted national happiness, and most of the references to this particular country were related precisely to the alternative way of measuring people’s well-being as GNH. However, the stories told about Bhutan were not only happy ones from the perspective of the commentators in America and beyond. If, on the one hand, the myth of the Bhutanese ‘formula’ apparently fascinated some journalists interested in how Bhutan managed to promote perhaps a more collective happiness, on the other hand there were attempts to deglamorise this beautiful, ‘exotic’ country in the US press. As my analysis will show, this can be perceived through both ‘orientalist’ (e.g., when it comes to the Bhutanese ‘isolation’ from the rest of the world) and negative claims (e.g., with regards to racial and religious segregation) in order to favourably position the US in relation to the ‘other’.

In talking about the differences between the ways in which the US and Bhutan try to measure ‘happiness’, the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, economist Klaus Schwab, was given enough space in the *New York Times* (16/12/2013) to express his personal opinion according to which, despite some new ways of thinking about people’s well-being (e.g., GNH), competitiveness and profit are still crucial elements when it comes to understanding growth in the American way. “[A] classification based on the fundamental drivers of growth is essential”, he claimed, and how “economy can develop higher value-added products, processes and business models through innovation is a major determinant of long-term, sustained prosperity”.

In addition to a certain scepticism about alternative ways of measuring ‘progress’, even though Bhutan’s culture has been explored in many articles in a positive tone, some negative aspects have also been highlighted at times. In fact, Bhutan was even depicted as an ‘unhappy’ country in a certain sense. The *New York Times* (29/6/2013) gave voice, for example, to the managing editor of *Bhutan News Service* (a news agency for Bhutanese refugees), Vidhyapati Mishra, who wrote a remarkable article titled “Bhutan is no Shangri-La”. As the title suggests, he heavily criticised the Himalayan country because of its severe immigration policies, and pointed out that it expelled thousands of people of Nepalese origin who went back several generations living in Bhutan, including the writer’s own family. Mishra expressed his disappointment at the fact that such an arbitrary decision did not stain the country’s reputation as a happy place, or “the government-sponsored images of Bhutan as a serene Buddhist Shangri-La”.

The article was published after the second edition of the then ‘incipient’ WHR, and the writer’s sharp criticisms towards Bhutan at least indirectly contributed to strengthen the ‘Western’ happiness ranking in relation to the Bhutanese GNH. A black and white drawing illustrates the article, showing someone representing the displaced people behind a wooden fence through which it is possible to see Bhutan’s peaceful landscape and its hills from a distance. This image depicts the land as a sort of paradise (beyond the reach of some), but also contrasts some aspects of Bhutanese history and politics that actually reveal the dark side of the ‘happy’ country. According to the story, the Hindu and the Bhutanese elite had coexisted largely in peace until late 1980s, but then the king of Bhutan introduced the “One Nation, One People” policy and imposed social norms on everyone: “The edict controlled the smallest details of our public lives: how we ate, dressed and talked. The Nepali language was banned in schools, and Hindu pathshalas, or seminaries, which teach the Sanskrit scriptures, were closed” (*ibidem*). The writer also revealed that “[p]rotests demanding an end to the absolute monarchy... were quashed, and repression – including torture, sexual assault, evictions and discriminatory firing – intensified” at that time.

Benefiting from the space he had in an influential newspaper, Mishra took the opportunity to point out that, since the negotiations between Bhutan and Nepal appear to have made “little progress”, the only hope is that the UN could intervene in order to make Bhutan honour its convention on refugees and allow people of Nepalese origin to return home. In this sense, in addition to indirectly promoting the WHR, the author’s narrative is, thus, pushing for an international intervention which denotes the Western powers’ responsibility to pacify the region – and also the influence of the US in this role, indirectly. Interestingly, the newspaper has sought a voice that actively contradicts the representation of Bhutan and elevates the US, which discursively constructs mythical associations between

the US (but also the powerful ‘West’) and the role of ‘peacemaker’. The arguably progressive *New York Times* often features critical articles exposing ‘truth’, but this also actively constructs US back into an elevated position, which represents a kind of struggle demonstrated in the articles analysed.

Both articles which I referred to above were published in 2013. At that time, the US was 17th in the happiness ranking, and Bhutan was not even in the UN’s list yet. The Himalayan country was included in the WHR in 2015, when it ranked only 79th, and then had even worse results in the following years: e.g., 84th in 2016, 97th in 2017, again 97th in 2018-2019. Still, Bhutan was heavily criticised in the American newspapers, even before being included in the report, and this may have to do with the fact that Bhutan proposes a different model of happiness. These findings reveal that there is a sort of contradiction between the discourses created regarding the happiness of nations and the numbers provided by the WHR itself. Despite the fact that the US has never topped the happiness ranking, it is still amongst the twenty happiest nations according to the study. When it comes to Bhutan, apart from serious criticisms toward the country’s history and politics, it has been considered by many journalists as almost a model in terms of happiness policies, even though it actually appears only in the second half of the UN’s happiness list. These narratives encapsulate the bipolarity of journalists when it comes to which ‘value’ really counts: trying to ‘horizontally’ promote people’s happiness or being ‘vertically’ considered as a happy nation?

Even though the fame attributed to Bhutan as a ‘happy nation’ is quite emblematic in the US sample, some discursive formations reveal signs of orientalism and discussions about the negative aspects of Bhutanese society are clearly defensive in trying to position the US (but also the WHR in relation to GNH in a sense) more favourably also in people’s

imagination and in terms of public opinion. Indeed, there is a sort of “combined strategy”, as van Dijk (1991: 177) puts, of “positive self-representation” and “negative other-representation” in using a deflection technique and pointing out some issues regarding the Himalayan country and denouncing its ‘dark side’ in the US newspapers.

4.8. Happiness and immigration

It is no news that immigration has been a prominent topic in the American media for decades (Perry 2016), but this theme has become particularly topical since president Donald Trump started his election campaign based on nationalist and protectionist discourses, and promised to build a wall between the US and Mexico in order to combat illegal immigration (Kellner 2020). In addition, Trump signed a travel ban in 2017 which prohibited the admission of Muslim citizens from several countries into the US, according to the Executive Order 13769 published on 27th January 2017. Coincidentally or not, the WHR 2018 dedicated significant space to immigration as a special theme that was widely discussed in that edition of the study – which might have contributed to the attention paid to the topic within politics articles published during that year in the American press.

The term ‘immigration’ appeared in nearly 15% of the articles in which the WHR was mentioned in the US newspapers, and some journalists focused on this subject in more depth. Political reporter Maggie Astor, for example, engaged in an interesting discussion about immigration in the *New York Times* (15/3/2018). Surprisingly, she pointed out that the US “ranks highly on the migrant acceptance index, even though the Trump administration has pursued more restrictive immigration laws”, and relied on some findings provided by

the WHR in order to explain this fact. “A person who moves to a country high on the happiness list will probably become happier, and a person who moves to a lower-ranked country will probably become less happy”, Astor wrote. In this sense, the journalist wanted to normalise the idea that, according to the WHR, “the happiness of a country’s immigrants is almost identical to that of its population at large”. In order to support those arguments, Astor quoted one of the editors of the UN study, John Helliwell: “people essentially adjust to the average happiness level of the country they’re moving to” (*ibidem*).

As regards to the US in particular, the WHR 2018 placed the country in the remarkable 9th position amongst the most-accepting nations for migrants, according to the *Gallup World Poll* (2016-2017). However, in the annex dedicated to the *Migrant Acceptance Index*, the authors did not discuss this finding in depth, and a few sentences explaining it showed some vagueness and contradiction. They just claimed that “a common thread tying many of the most-accepting countries together is their long history as receiving countries for migrants”, and then stated that, “[a]lthough the recent U.S. election was marked by considerable anti-immigrant rhetoric, the U.S. ranks among the most-accepting countries” (WHR 2018, p. 163). Following a similar path, journalist Ariel Scotti reported in the *Daily News* (15/3/2018) the data provided by the study and pointed out that the top 10 nations in the WHR 2018 were also amongst the 11 top spots in the immigrant happiness category. Scotti also gave a voice to John Helliwell, who insisted that “[t]hose who move to happier countries gain, while those who move to less happy countries lose” (*ibidem*).

By accepting and following the ideas shared by Helliwell, a co-editor of the WHR himself, journalists did not question but tended to just reproduce the findings provided by the study as well as the naturalisation of inequality which contributes to the creation of

subjectivities such as ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ within the happiness debate (cf. Brown 2015: 38, also Davies & Dunne 2016: 156). In this way, commentators appear to suggest that happiness is apparently something contagious: people’s level of happiness depends on where they are settled and on whom they are living with. However, this assumption appears to be quite generic and simplistic, especially if one considers what has been said on this matter in terms of culture shock (e.g., Orbeg 1960) and cultural homogenisation (e.g., Tomlinson 1991), which could help to explain that the process of adaptation to a new culture may be complex and far from automatic. It seems acceptable that better or worse socio-economic conditions can influence people’s quality of life, but that does not necessarily mean that people will feel the same way the others do just because they moved to countries with stronger economies such as the US.

The dominant discourse through which the happiness report and many newspaper articles have drawn upon does not consider all fundamental aspects which are necessary to understand happiness either as an individual or a social phenomenon. The very fact that human beings presuppose levels of subjectivity that might not be fully assessed through surveys (Kashdan *et al.* 2008) such as those conducted by the WHR team indicates that trying to assess the immigrants’ levels of happiness would require a deeper account of their personal affections in addition to social, economic, psychologic factors etc. For example, even though immigrants may report some concrete information more objectively (e.g., if they are satisfied for having better conditions and new opportunities to succeed in the host country), it might be more complicated to express sensitive questions related to feelings, sensations and needs by answering preformulated questionnaires.

Contradicting the WHR 2018, sociologist David Bartram (2011: 72) argues that “being an immigrant is associated with lower levels of life satisfaction than natives”. Based on data from the *World Values Survey*, he firmly stated that “migrants are mistaken in believing that economic migration is a path to improving one’s well-being, at least to the extent that well-being means (or includes) happiness”; and, even though the relationship between income and happiness tends to be stronger for immigrants than for natives, it is “still relatively weak” even for immigrants in the case of the US (Bartram 2011: 57). It is worth quoting the author on some possible reasons why migration motivated by economic purposes might not solve the problem of happiness, which reinforces the idea that material aspects are just one part of people’s life: “income is indeed related to happiness, but only weakly, and in pursuing greater incomes via migration migrants might unwittingly make sacrifices in relation to other factors that are more important for happiness” (*ibidem*).

In such a context, the media can be seen as conformist since it is implicit in its discourse that, despite the dissatisfaction of some locally born citizens and tough measures against immigration such as those determined by president Trump, developed countries such as the US are still seen as an opportunity for those who want to have a better life – as the co-authors of the WHR 2018 maintained. Interestingly, the main condition for legal economic immigration is that the immigrants should be ready to work hard and, in turn, help the economy of the host country – a sort of ‘good migrant’ discourse which can illustrate Littler’s (2013: 52) notion of meritocracy as “a potent blend of an essentialised and exclusionary notion of ‘talent’, competitive individualism and the need for social mobility”. This sort of countervailing pact seems to be beneficial to both parts though, and perhaps this contributed to the fact that the WHR and the US newspapers tended to agree that the level

of happiness of both natives and immigrants is ‘homogenous’ – in the end, though, equality works really well in theory, whereas inequality prevails in practice.

Broadly speaking, the message given by most of the US newspapers was a positive one as regards to the advantages of immigration – for the immigrants (which feeds the myth of the ‘American dream’) but especially for the host society – which can suggest a positive self-representation. For example, former deputy editor with the *Wall Street Journal* (20/3/2017), Bret Stephens, compared the US to Japan – a country with “low levels of immigration”. The writer referred to high life expectancy, crime and drug-use low rates, and low level of unemployment as positive aspects of Japanese culture, which are “supposed to be a function of a homogenous society with a high degree of cultural cohesion... the antithesis of cacophonous, multiethnic America” (*ibidem*) – in a stereotypical comparison through which he seems to be against cultural diversity. However, Stephens changed his tone when discussing how immigrants can be ‘useful’ to American society, and relayed a positive message on immigration in the end.

Indeed, the journalist pointed out that America’s fertility rate has been falling over the years, and therefore “there could be modest population growth without immigration”. Moreover, Stephens has argued that, “[w]ithout immigration, our demographic destiny would become Japanese. But our culture wouldn’t, leaving us with the worst of both worlds: economic stagnation without social stability”. Finally, he concluded that, “[i]f immigration means change, it forces dynamism”, and “America is literally unimaginable without it” (*ibidem*). But this narrative still reveals self-interest: instead of seeing the admission of foreigners into the US territory more altruistically, considering the displaced people’s own needs and the difficulties that they might deal with in their homeland, the journalist rather

suggested that immigration can be accepted because it is profitable for the host country – a mentality which appears to fit with Western politics and dominant economic frames of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Stephens' article was one of the few examples in which the newspapers clearly presented the US as “multicultural”, but the journalist did it in a negative way in this particular case since the adjectives “multi-ethnic” and “cacophonous”, pejoratively attributed to the American society, have been interrelated and used in opposition to the Japanese homogeneity and cultural cohesion. This time the ‘other’ was put in a privileged position, as the journalist’s discourse suggests that cultural diversity and multiculturalism could even disturb in a sense – which reveals a sign of nationalism and also protectionism within itself. On the other hand, the possibility of seeing immigration as positive is offered due to the fact that it can be profitable, which seems to be the classic sort of biopolitical gesture since it reflects the state’s responsibility to manage its population in order to maximise productivity (see Foucault 2008).

4.9. Happiness and the environmental debate

Perhaps as a way of questioning the negative impact that a consumerist and heavily industrialised nation may cause to the natural world, important questions related to the environment and how its preservation can contribute to people’s quality of life were explored in the US sample, especially by the left-leaning *New York Times*. Special attention was given to the Anthropocene, defined as “a time interval marked by rapid but profound and far-reaching change to the Earth’s geology, currently driven by various forms of human impact”

(Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2017). This specific term was included in the discussion about happiness and gained a significant space in an article authored by science and environmental journalist Andrew Revkin, who even transcribed an excerpt from the WHR 2012 in which the authors of the study elaborate on this specific topic: “We can say that the quest for happiness is intimately linked to the quest for sustainable development” (*New York Times*, 2/4/2012).

According to Revkin, prioritising economic growth over the preservation of the natural world can be a threat to the planet, whereas the Anthropocene appears to be a favourable, if not revolutionary period to improve people’s ways of living and quality of life, as has been suggested by the happiness report itself. However, discursive formations which emerged from the US newspapers did not explore this problematic at the same level as environmental historian and historical geographer Jason Moore (2017) does. Indeed, the expert has even advocated “Capitalocene” instead of “Anthropocene” because it is not ‘all’ humans but certain humans in particular – especially those who live in capitalist, highly industrialised societies – who are the most culpable for damaging the environment.

Given its green policies, Bhutan also appeared in some discussions about the environment in the US press. In another article written by the journalist Andrew Revkin, the Himalayan country was referred to as an example to be followed in terms of sustainable development: “it’s easy to envision [there] a more democratic society” as “Bhutan has a healthy welfare state... and the protection of cultural and natural heritage is clearly a high national priority” (*New York Times*, 10/12/2013). This claim shows the journalist’s impression about Bhutan as a “more democratic society” than the US, and where people seem to be engaged in such initiatives with the right mentality to “form the road to happiness” (*ibidem*) – a quite different frame of the Himalayan country if compared to the

negative other-representation discussed in Section 4.7. Indeed, discourses on Bhutan changed a lot with the shift from debates about happiness science (given some cultural differences and the opposition between GNH and WHR) to sustainability. However, the writer has also argued that, since Bhutan has become a democracy in 2008, those good practices might be at risk given that “the onset of democracy is not universally good for the environment” (*ibidem*).

As another example of the American newspapers’ concerns with sustainability, opinion columnist and editor with the *Wall Street Journal* (3/4/2012), Mary A. O’Grady, drew attention to the UN’s sustainable development goals. The article’s headline sounds even more powerful when one realises that it has been published in a business newspaper: “Happiness prescribed; The United Nations wants the world to focus less on gross domestic product and more on gross national happiness”. In the article, O’Grady gave a voice to the then deputy secretary general of the *Académie Diplomatique Internationale* (ADI), Timothy W. Ryback, who argued that the shift from predominantly economic measures to a more comprehensive notion of people’s well-being is a “step towards adoption of a new global sustainability-based economic paradigm for human happiness and well-being of all life forms to replace the current dysfunctional system that is based on the unsustainable premise of limitless growth on a finite planet”. Curiously, this sort of discourse, in favour of the common good, prioritising the environment over economic growth, and contesting the “current dysfunctional system”, has also been diffused through a prestigious economic newspaper, which shows that some American journalists appear to be actively committed to insist on and relate these narratives to the happiness debate and tackle environmental issues – a reflection of a shift in news values.

4.10. Conclusion

In theory, Americans seem to take happiness so seriously that it is suggested even in the country's Declaration of Independence that the pursuit of happiness is not only legitimate but also a right endorsed by God. This is reflected by the way the declaration was evoked by newspaper articles about happiness, which used it to foreground the sense that US citizens see pursuing happiness as an inalienable right. The sort of 'formal' encouragement identified in the historical document can be related to the argument of cultural theorists such as Davies (2016) and Ehrenreich (2010ab): they have argued that a sort of duty to be happy is being imposed on people living in neoliberal capitalist societies, who are expected to put a smile on their face and look like they are always content in order to succeed in life. Also, these theorists have argued that the US emphasis on happiness has connected it to rise of popular psychology, which places the emphasis on the individual as opposed to collective well-being. For instance, the US as a state does not seem to exhaustively help the population in terms of welfare and the promotion of a "public happiness" – a term used by Hirschman (1982) and Arendt (1990) – as American people are those who spend more on healthcare according to the OECD indicators (2017).

The happiness industry contributes, therefore, to what Foucault elaborates on the formation of neoliberal 'subjectivities' through language and the creation of knowledge, according to a particular set of power relations (see Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2017). Neoliberalism, for instance, seems to encourage people to prioritise themselves and their private goals, which may consist in their 'private' happiness, instead of thinking more collectively and considering the questions that regard everyone or society as a whole (see

Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). As a consequence, individuals tend to assimilate a competitive mindset (cf. Binkley 2014, Dardot & Laval 2014, Brown 2015) and act ambitiously since they have the responsibility to create their own success. But the point is that success is not always guaranteed, and some individuals do not even have the competitive spirit in order to play this sort of ‘game’.

In such a context, it may happen that some people don’t feel happy enough or are not able to experience the ‘right’ standard of happiness created by society itself due to structural inequalities and discrimination (Ahmed 2010); and not being happy tends to be seen, thus, as an individual failure (Davies 2016, Ehrenreich 2010, McMahon 2008). Indeed, an individualistic way of living, as it can be identified in the American society, as well as the discontent felt especially among those living in urban areas of capitalist countries (Glaeser *et al.* 2016), may compromise people’s happiness and even turn it into ‘fantasy’, as Berlant (2011) has nicely put it, since happiness is currently seen as either too distant (and almost impossible) or too easy (and almost banal).

According to some narratives created in the newspapers within the happiness debate, in addition to journalists highlighting the psychological issues related to an individualistic and competitive society such as the US, it seems that a dominant news frame is that making a lot of money alone – without promoting equality and sharing the accumulated wealth in a sustainable manner (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010) – does not help to boost people’s happiness in the end. Indeed, even though the US is the first economy in the world, the country has never been among the top 10 happiest nations according to the WHR. Even worse, the North American country has been falling in the ranking over the last few years: it was placed 13th in 2016, 14th in 2017, and then 18th in 2018-2020. This fact reflected negatively on the image

of America as a cheerful and well-off nation and, given that the country's performance declined considerably while Donald Trump was in charge, it has been written in the *Washington Post* that, contradicting what the politician had promised since his election campaign in 2016, "president Trump has not made America happier again" (14/3/2018).

As regards to the representation of happiness in the US press, the majority of the articles analysed have not been focused on happiness itself, but rather on relevant themes which are commonly associated with people's well-being and quality of life more broadly. This finding reinforces my argument that media debates on happiness rankings are usually related to SWB and quality of life – indeed, SWB is the actual variable on which the study is based – but not properly happiness as it appears in the report's title. In fact, happiness appears as a reference in a number of articles rather than the actual main topic, and this reflects the fact that many journalists tended to explore, instead of happiness itself, more 'concrete', disturbing factors that can influence people's quality of life (cf. Frawley 2015).

Giving more space to concrete data in the newspapers resonates with Davies' (2016) argument that the happiness science promotes the measurement of people's happiness mostly through the 'body' and 'money', or material factors – which eventually contributes to the discursive construction of the implied myth that happiness and wealth are necessarily correlated. Indeed, indicators such as demography, economic growth and GDP, despite being largely considered by commentators as 'not sufficient' to measure well-being, still result as being portrayed as more reliable than more subjective indicators such as SWB. On the other hand, when it comes to the conceptualisation of happiness itself, the US newspapers are predominantly interested in 'subjective' (assessed through personal standards and based on socio-economic factors) instead of 'objective happiness' (conceptualised through ideal

standards and related to finding the real meaning of life) (Kraut 1979). And here the analysis starts to reveal the various nuances of the discourses that emerge from the interpretation of the happiness ranking in the media.

The complexity of the subject and the various topics associated with people's happiness and quality of life very much contribute to the different, if not opposed, views expressed in these debates which frequently generate contradictions found in many places throughout the whole time period of the US sample. For example, even though the newspapers in general accept and reproduce the findings provided by the WHR, each publication of the global ranking have stimulated concerns and critiques regarding the happiness movement in the US press. Moreover, investing money in the measurement of happiness was not seen as something worthwhile by all commentators. Indeed, there is a sort of discontent within the discourse of many journalists and opinion formers, which seems to be caused by contradictory reasons. A number of articles problematise the fact that happiness is being 'measured', but at the same time some authors seem to be disappointed as regards to the outcome of their home country in the ranking. But if they are suggesting that measuring the 'immeasurable' has not become possible, reliable, or even useful, they are suggesting that perhaps the study is not even reflecting the actual reality, and therefore there would be no reason to take the WHR's results so seriously and even feel sorry for their country's (relatively) disappointing performance.

Because the pursuit of happiness is so integral to the imagined community of US identity, rankings that threaten it are criticised. It should be noted that the US still manages to appear in the top 20 countries, but the factors that result in it failing to appear higher in the rankings are significant because they reward countries with higher levels of investment

in social welfare. If journalists took the ranking at face value, they would be supporting an implicit critique of particular national imaginaries – that have existed since the emergence of the US but gathered force since the 1980s due to neoliberal economic policy – which frame the pursuit of happiness as something that can be attained on an individual level. However, as I will note below, critical discourses about happiness rankings were often more subtle in the way they promoted materialist understandings of happiness.

Further (more implicit) contradictions were noted as regards to the way newspapers tend to elaborate on the relationship between money and happiness, and also the contrast between the results provided by the WHR and the actual images and discourses constructed on the happiness of nations. In talking about the role of money in the achievement of happiness, the claims against materialism (according to which money is not considered as the most important factor) are quite explicit, whereas the assumptions and suggestions that money is rather a key element in securing happiness are more implicit in the media discourse. For example, through recurrent claims such as “money isn’t everything” or “money can’t buy happiness” the journalists are expressly declaring that, for them, money is not necessarily a determining factor. On the other hand, more subjectivist narratives such as “happiness increases as the countries get richer” and “people living in happy countries gain, while those in less happy countries lose” suggest that, despite being demonised by some commentators, money still appears as a fundamental prerequisite for those who want to live a ‘happy life’ – it is embedded in people’s mentality and therefore taken for granted, as a common ground. These discursive formations perpetuate the association between meritocracy and plutocracy, criticised by Littler (2018), and also contribute to the creation of subjectivities based on a materialistic, neoliberal ideology (cf. Bowsher 2018, also Foucault 2008).

But media discourse can change dramatically when it comes to stereotyping happiness and constructing certain images and narratives of the happiness of nations, no matter their socio-economic conditions and how they are placed in the ranking. Even though the US is among the 20 ‘happiest’ nations according to the WHR, the country was also very much criticised both for its serious social problems and for not being at the very top of the happiness ranking – which reveals the commentators’ both ambition and frustration, as well as pessimism – whereas Bhutan was portrayed as a ‘happy country’ at times, despite ranking much lower (e.g., 97th in 2018). What sort of happiness is the WHR talking about, then?

This discussion proposes an alternative, critical perspective through which both media discourse and the very usefulness of the WHR are contested. Still, the discourse constructed by the media can impact audience interpretations and contribute to public knowledge: despite the findings provided by the WHR, the happiness of populations can be seen quite differently by public opinion. However, the media are not entirely contesting the happiness ranking: there is no argument against the fact that the US comes way ahead of Bhutan in the list, for example. Although both societies were criticised for certain social and political issues, sometimes Bhutan was praised more often and explicitly than the US itself, especially for its green policies and for apparently being a “more democratic society” in a certain sense. Yet, signs of ‘orientalism’ were detected in some discourses which tended to position the US more favourably in relation to the ‘exotic’ and ‘isolated’ Bhutanese society – even though, as collocations usually insist, this “tiny” or “small Buddhist country” does not seem to be a threat to the powerful ‘West’, apart from offering an alternative measure of perhaps a more ‘collective’ happiness, the GNH, which is sometimes opposed to the ‘Western’ WHR.

This point serves as a cue to reflect on one of the first questions that motivated this research: is the media contributing to a standardisation of what happiness means? By analysing the articles on the happiness ranking in the US newspapers, it was possible to note some particularities but also significant similarities between what has been said by journalists and theorists about the topic. In the last few years, a number of critical theorists suggested that neoliberal capitalism (and the ways of living that it promotes) tends to contribute to a conceptualisation of happiness which is related to pleasure, success and consumerism (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Davies 2016, Pfaller 2014). These thinkers argue that narratives created in films and advertising, as well as on social media, for example, normally portray people's happiness as something that implies a high economic status, and therefore happiness appears to be achievable by those who are able to pay for having nice things and experiences.

Given the way the US has conventionally been criticised for its materialism within cultural theory (e.g., Marcuse 2002), the expectation would be that the American print media would heavily explore the 'commercial' side of happiness – perhaps associating the topic with certain products, describing activities and situations in which Americans find pleasure, and giving significant space to questions related to self-help and positive psychology. To an extent this expectation was borne out: it remains more or less implicit in the newspaper articles that money does play a role in the achievement of happiness, especially when it comes to people's quality of life. Therefore, according to the media discourse money cannot be completely dissociated from people's well-being. However, despite the fact that many American journalists and commentators tended to associate happiness with quality of life, and relied on the WHR findings without questioning the study's reliability and

methodological issues, a number of articles in the US newspapers directly or indirectly problematised the neoliberal tendency of thinking happiness predominantly through an economic point of view which normally “induces pleasure” (see Andrejevic 2008: 612) and reinforces the myth or “social consensus” (see Deacon *et al.* 2007) that wealth and happiness are interconnected. Therefore, this finding contradicts what has been argued by some cultural theorists, who seem to act as though a critique of happiness is something radical that does not appear in the mainstream media, since many journalists (especially the left-leaning ones) made exactly the same criticisms as theorists in their newspaper articles – which very much contributes to public knowledge and stimulates people’s critical thinking.

As regards to the people who are writing about happiness and other related themes, there is another observation to be made here. According to Graber (2010: 76), “journalists tend to be socially more liberal than the general population and to have a keener sense of social responsibility”, and this should be taken into account in my analysis. Based on the American press, though, it remains clear that, even among newspeople themselves, there are commentators who clearly show their sense of social responsibility and think more collectively than others: some of them seem to be ideologically committed to stimulating a more inclusive and sustainable society, for example. However, by looking at the data as a whole and knowing the nuances found within media discourse, one can say that the newspapers are almost bipolar while promoting debates on happiness: there can be contrasts between publications, commentators, articles, and even within the same news report throughout the sample period. In this sense, the discursive construction of happiness in the US portrays it as a nation full of cultural, ethnic, and economic contrasts, resulting in an emphasis on the complexity of happiness itself within mainstream newspapers.

Commentators criticised the role of money but suggested that it was essential for a good life. They were sceptical about the measurement of happiness but felt very disappointed for the performance of their home country in the ranking. They often criticised competitiveness but suggested that the 18th position (for example, in 2018) is not enough for a country such as the well-off US. For the politically engaged writers, protecting the environment appears to be fundamental, but their nation is one of the major polluters in the world and was out of the Paris climate agreement during Trump's government. Bhutan was said to be performing well in terms of sustainability, but at the same time it was also portrayed as a despotic regime against immigrants – which seems to strategically favour the image of Trump's US. America, in its turn, protects its borders at all costs but appears to accept immigration as long as it is profitable for the domestic economy – in a clear biopolitical, neoliberal way of 'managing' people's lives, in addition to overprotecting 'home'. In fact, making positive and negative interventions in these debates depends on the context, the moment and the perspective of who is writing. However, in line with Marcuse's (2002) description of a quite individualistic society, overall narratives of happiness in the US press still suggest national proudness, traits of egocentrism and a clear inclination for neoliberal competitiveness if one reads between the lines.

Chapter 5: Tensions between (un)happiness and nationalism in the Indian media

5.1. Introduction

In order to discuss happiness in contemporary India, one must consider the country's heterogeneity and complexity as it has been heavily influenced by faith and traditions, as an ancient civilisation (Dube 1996), but also its increasing cultural homogenisation brought about by economic processes (Bose 2013), as now an industrialised, economic superpower. This dual aspect of Indian society is constantly represented in my sample through the dichotomy between spiritual and material happiness. In this way, different patterns can be identified within media discourse in the national sample: from religious and sometimes nationalist narratives, which normally try to 'positively' represent the country, to more critical discourses that reveal India's struggles with modernisation, changing lifestyles and a high competitiveness which seems to be inevitable in a neoliberal context (cf. Foucault 2008, Binkley 2014, Dardot & Laval 2014).

Echoing distinct approaches explored since antiquity, journalists and commentators suggested, directly or indirectly, that happiness can be associated with both pleasure or the present moment (such as in Epicurus 2005 [305 BC]) and a process which rather happens over time and presupposes people's patience and virtue (as in Aristotle 1906 [350 BC]). If, as the newspaper analysis indicates, defining and understanding happiness is not a simple task, this becomes even more complicated when it comes to a pluralistic, multilingual and multi-ethnic population which is considered as the largest democracy in the world (Bose 2013). It is thus necessary to understand Indian society in more depth, as well as how its socio-cultural contexts shape news production, in order to grasp how these two discursive

constructions of happiness (as immediate pleasure and virtue emerging over time) come together in ways that give the appearance of critiquing neoliberal economic policy in favour of alternative conceptions of happiness, but in the process create exclusionary narratives of national identity which normalise an emphasis on individual happiness and support Hindu nationalism – although more complex counter-narratives also existed.

India has been shaped by both tradition and modernisation (Bose 2013, Dube 1996, Robb 2011). While the economic liberalisation of the 1990s and ensuing globalisation have contributed to economic growth – but also cultural standardisation at a macro level – social contrasts, economic and gender inequalities, and alternative religious traditions are still some of the elements that promote the heterogeneity of Indian society (Rodrigues & Ranganathan 2015). Since industrialisation gained force over the last decades, India has become third in its number of billionaires according to the *Hurun Global Rich List* (2020), behind China and the US. However, despite these economic successes, in general, discursive formations found in the national newspapers did not represent Indian citizens as very satisfied with life; a narrative which coincides with the WHR findings. In addition to material problems such as unemployment and economic inequality, some journalists also referred to mental illness as a concern since the suicide rate is currently 16.3 per 100k population, which puts India in the 21st position in a global ranking elaborated by the *World Health Organisation* (WHO). In this way, in addition to critiques of the new science of happiness, the Indian sample provided a number of articles in which journalists contested the conditions that many people need to deal with in India, and so the status quo.

Indeed, many social problems were seen to compromise people's quality of life, and this was also reflected in India's steady drop in the WHR. Even though India had a relatively

positive result in the WHR 2019 with regards to generosity, for example – appearing in the 65th position (out of 156 nations), while the UK was 4th and the US 12th though – its performance in the happiness index has been getting worse in the last few years: from 111th in 2013, India fell to the 144th position in 2020. Coincidence or not, the numbers indicate that India’s results in the ranking have been decreasing year by year since Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected. At the same time, my longitudinal analysis will show that biopolitical discourses (aimed at promoting happiness at all costs) increased in the media during the period in which the nationalist politician has been in charge.

This phenomenon reinforces that the political situation of the country needs to be considered in an analysis of the ways in which journalists are representing happiness in the national press. Particular attention should be given, thus, to the increasing success of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the fact that the current government promotes not only Hindu identity, but Hindu-nationalist ideology (see Chakrabarty & Jha 2020) – which can be associated with the intensification of both inequities and inequalities that stimulate social division and disfavour ethnic and religious minorities within the country. Indeed, as Robb (2011: 333) has argued, in practice “Indian elites have... favoured personal and sectional prosperity over social equity and the public interest, while the politicians, despite much-trumpeted schemes for poverty-reduction and popular democracy, have been less focused on inequality.” Besides some eloquent speeches on a collective and more ‘sustainable’ happiness found in the national sample, it seems fundamental, thus, to critically analyse media texts also according to certain elements which are equally important in order to understand Indian society today, such as neoliberal influences, the rise of nationalism and individualism, biopolitics, and India’s postcolonial relationship with the ‘West’.

5.2. Indian media in a globalised context

As a country which demonstrates distinct features and tendencies, India's influences from religion to globalisation makes it an exceptional case to be analysed. In a neoliberal economy, despite spiritual happiness being widely diffused in public discourse, Indian journalists may follow a path towards happiness that is usually embraced by most of the mainstream media around the globe. Still, the access to India's cultural goods such as English-language newspapers and Bollywood films reveal that, as Athique (2012: 157) points out, the country also provides "contra-flows within global media markets traditionally dominated by American and European exports", and those products may share alternative visions of happiness.

Moreover, Athique (2012: 116) has argued that the Indian media can be perceived by transnational audiences through either "cultural proximity" and the affirmation of certain common values, or "cultural distance" which creates "aesthetics of exoticism" – which resonates with Said's (1978) notion of 'orientalism' but also postcolonialist discourses that may emerge from my qualitative analysis. In this way, I can, therefore, examine nuances within the sample in terms of how Indian journalists tend to represent their own country and fellow nationals also in relation to other countries and newspapers, as well as the way they tend to construct narratives of happiness according to social comparisons.

In addition to the fact that India's history indicates that the country has been in contact with many other nations – which has stimulated economic and cultural exchanges (Robb 2011) – economic liberalisation in the 1990s made India open its doors to

globalisation which transformed Indian society (Athique 2012). Indeed, this phenomenon is seen as a watershed in India's history, and even the news media can be described according to before and after that important event (*ibidem*). According to Rodrigues and Ranganathan (2015: 3), certain aspects of modern India, such as an increasing privatisation and the rise of individualism, "have had an impact on the media industry and its role in nation building." As Athique (2012: 136, also Kohli-Khandekar 2006) suggested, after privatisation, basic functions of media – such as facilitating the dissemination of information and public communications as a whole – have been overshadowed by newer functions such as "the generation of intangible commodities of trade, facilitation of new forms of consumption... and the provision of entertainment services."

According to Athique (2012), globalisation has contributed to the development of a vast and complex media system in India, which is characterised by modern infrastructures and commercial organisation and influenced by the cultural diversity of distinct audiences within the country. The heterogeneity of audiences mentioned by the author is associated with India's richness in terms of ethnicities, religions and languages, for example, which may explain the variety of media products available. With reference to my sample, however, it is worth reiterating that, given the existence of many other newspapers published in Hindi and other regional languages with vast readerships, English-language newspapers are a quite specific, if not a limited segment of the Indian media.

From an economic point of view, English-language newspapers are mainly liberal and commercial in India today (Athique 2012). Therefore, as I anticipated in the methodology chapter, I must be clear that my analysis is not considering the Indian press as a whole, but rather some of the most important English-language newspapers which have

particular views of the world and specific readerships. Indeed, these publications are largely consumed by the urban professional and the middle classes (*ibidem*). However, the fact of being ‘limited’ in terms of representativeness of the Indian population does not mean that those newspapers cannot be relevant to my discussion. In fact, some of the most influential and widely circulated newspapers in India are published in English and follow both the model and style observed in other English-speaking countries such as US and UK – which contributes to the consistency of my sample.

In terms of news values in the commercial Indian press, the shift from tradition to new lifestyles have contributed to the expansion of news media coverage since more subjects are now explored (Rodrigues & Ranganathan 2015: 3). At the same time, scholars point out that, in this context, journalists tend to “lose the plot” since more space has been given to “emotive stories” rather than “deep-rooted inequality, injustices and corruption in the country” (*ibidem*). This is why some authors also pointed out that hard stories “find relatively little space in most of India’s English-language newspapers... which are the primary sources of news and information for the country’s urban elite”, and “many middle-class Indians have developed blinders to the distress around them” (Batabyal *et al.* 2011: 210, 214).

When it comes to my analysis, thus, this ‘new way’ of doing journalism and the predominance of commercial English-language newspapers in today’s India may contribute to specific representations of happiness which follow global media discourse. In this way, it may be the case that some commentators in my sample tend to compare India to and also follow the way in which other industrialised nations normally conceptualise happiness and produce biopolitical discourses through the creation of ‘knowledge’ (cf. Foucault 2008). It

can be interesting to observe, however, the responses that Indian newspapers give to certain global trends, considering the postcolonial context, and how journalists position themselves in terms of the sort of ‘standardisation’ of happiness that has occurred in a global, westernised scenario (see previous chapter).

What I can anticipate, though, is that the hypothesis suggested by authors such as Batabyal *et al.* (2011) and Rodrigues and Ranganathan (2015) (cited above) – with regards to perhaps a more simplistic interpretation of the presumed ‘superficiality’ of texts in the Indian mainstream media – actually contrasts with some of my findings given that pessimism and self-criticism were widely explored through media discourse within the happiness debate in the national sample. Interestingly, this reflects and reinforces the image of Indian society’s heterogeneity in many ways.

5.3. Sample

Since English-language tabloids are not common in India, six broadsheet newspapers have been selected for this analysis: *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *Pioneer*, *Indian Express*, *The Hindu* and *Economic Times*. Founded in 1838, the *Times of India* is an influential, mainstream newspaper in India, and it claims to be “one of the most read English-language newspapers in the world” because of “the widespread prevalence of English literacy amongst Indians, a process that began to gather pace in the very years that the press was established in India” (Athique 2012: 15). The *Times of India* is considered by many as a centre-right, nationalist newspaper along with the pro-Modi’s government *Pioneer*. The

Indian Express (pro-Congress⁶) and the *Hindu* (centre-left and pro-CPI⁷) have been responsible for the growth of combative and investigative journalism over the last decades in India (Rodrigues & Ranganathan 2015: 66), and the latter has even been considered as “one of the few remaining English-language broadsheets devoted to serious journalism” in the country (Batabyal *et al.* 2011: 210). Similar to the *Indian Express*, the *Hindustan Times* is also considered as pro-Congress, while the *Economic Times* (Mumbai) completes the list because, like other financial newspapers I have focused on in other national contexts, it is expected to offer a distinct understanding of happiness.

More recently, though, much of institutional media has fallen into line with the Modi government and there has been an erosion of the Congress Party as a party of opposition. In fact, currently there is no meaningful political opposition to Modi at the central level, and the opposition mainly comes from the state governments in India – which is one of the reasons why most of the media critique of the government’s policies are sharper in regional language news media. The critical voice in English-language media has moved largely online to platforms such as Scroll.in.

In total, 192 documents have been collected from the Indian newspapers, published between 2012 and 2018. The Nexis database returned 40 containing the term ‘World Happiness Report’, while 152 mentioned ‘national happiness’. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show the number of documents divided by subject:

⁶ Indian National Congress or simply Congress Party.

⁷ Communist Party of India.

Table 5.1. Documents containing the term ‘World Happiness Report’ (2012-2018).

<u>WHR</u>	Happiness	WB indexes	Politics & Int’l.	Economics & business	Health &Env.	Lifestyle	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>TOI</i>	2	6	2	1	1	2	-	14
<i>H.Times</i>	3	3	1	-	-	-	-	7
<i>I.Express</i>	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	5
<i>Pioneer</i>	2	3	1	-	-	-	-	6
<i>E.Times</i>	1	2	2	1	1	-	-	7
<i>Hindu</i>	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Total	8	17	8	2	3	2	-	40

Table 5.2. Documents containing the term ‘National Happiness’ (2012-2018).

<u>NH</u>	Happiness	WB indexes	Economics & business	Politics & Int’l.	Lifestyle	Health &Env.	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>TOI</i>	1	12	1	11	6	4	3	38
<i>H.Times</i>	4	6	-	11	5	2	1	29
<i>I.Express</i>	4	9	1	8	3	2	-	27
<i>Pioneer</i>	1	10	5	15	4	-	-	35
<i>E.Times</i>	-	4	2	3	7	-	-	16
<i>Hindu</i>	-	3	-	1	1	2	-	7
Total	10	44	9	49	26	10	4	152

According to the tables above, the proportion of each main theme based on the number of articles in the Indian sample was: the measurement of happiness (well-being indexes) (32%); politics (30%); lifestyle (15%); happiness (as a general theme) (9%); health and environment (7%); and economics and business (6%). Articles on ‘national happiness’ were more than three times the number of texts which discussed the ‘WHR’ in particular. However – even though the first term coincides with the title of the well-being index developed in Bhutan, GNH, which was mentioned in 28% of the documents – the majority

of the articles collected from the Indian press mainly focused on the measurement of happiness more broadly (including the WHR, of course), politics and lifestyle.

The liberal *Times of India* concentrated the highest number of articles on both ‘WHR’ (35%) and ‘national happiness’ (25%), although the nationalist *Pioneer* had a similar proportion with regards to the texts on ‘national happiness’ (23%). Even though the leftist *Hindu* had only 4% of the articles in the national sample, its critical coverage of the WHR and quantification of happiness more broadly deserved special attention in my discussion. When it comes to media genres, the proportion in the national sample was: news and short articles (42%), long-form work (33%), columns and notes (20%), interviews (2%), book reviews (2%), editorials (1%), and there were no letters according to my research on the Nexis database (see compiled Table 3.2 in the methodology).

As I explained previously in the methodology chapter, basic elements of content analysis give an idea of both the proportion of subjects and the popularity of certain terms within the sample. However, these numbers do not always determine the relevance of particular debates automatically because, for instance, even though some words may appear less than expected in the texts, they can still be considered as fundamental to my discussion given their relevance. Moreover, allusions to certain topics may be implicit or expressed with different wording, and this is why combining quantitative and qualitative data is crucial for a more comprehensive analysis.

That said, some terms appeared just a few times in the articles even if journalists discussed relevant aspects related to them throughout the sample. That happened with ‘depression’ (included in 6% of the texts), ‘inequality’ (6%) and ‘mental health’ (8%), given

that both economic inequality and mental well-being are arguably popular topics regarding Indian society and of great relevance to my analysis. A relatively underexplored term was ‘generosity’ which is one of the innovative variables examined by the WHR, but the fact that the WHR published detailed information on variables such as generosity separately for the first time in 2019 can explain why the term appeared in only 4% of my sample (which is limited to the period 2012-2018). When it came to material aspects of happiness, coincidentally, both ‘money’ and ‘economic growth’ were mentioned in 12% of the stories.

In comparison to the US sample (see last chapter), the total number of articles collected from Indian newspapers was even higher (192 against 128). As the compiled Table 3.1 included in the methodology shows, the most significant differences between both national samples were that economics and business articles were nearly 20% in the US but only 6% of the Indian sample; whereas politics articles were almost double in India (30%) if compared to the US press (16%) – which may have to do with ‘hard talk’ within the happiness debate but also nationalist discourses found in the Indian press. Even though all the main themes, indicated in the tables, were explored in all national contexts in my sample, these comparisons may indicate a more expressive link between happiness and economics in the US, while happiness was more frequently associated with politics in India.

At the same time as economics and business articles had the lowest proportion in the Indian sample, many journalists in India recurrently elaborated on the contrast between material and spiritual happiness, which became, therefore, the first sub-theme I discuss in Section 5.4 – since it encapsulates the negotiation between key, distinct perspectives through which happiness has normally been framed especially within main themes such as happiness, economics and lifestyle. Moreover, the (usually criticised but sometimes implicit and

apparently socially accepted) importance given to money or material aspects in the achievement of happiness was significant enough to become the object of another section in this chapter (5.5). On the other hand, sharp criticisms found in Indian newspapers – regarding key points discussed within critical happiness studies such as the Western rationale of the WHR and the question of who should be held responsible for happiness – were discussed in Sections 5.6 and 5.7, respectively.

In the following four sections, I unpack and illustrate some key narratives which emerged from the Indian sample through news stories and features that tell us a lot about that population's history and the discursive construction of Indian national identity. On the one hand, the importance of tradition (represented by morals and religion) and the way economic liberalisation contributed to new lifestyles in India became the sub-themes I elaborate on in Sections 5.8 and 5.10, respectively. On the other hand, in order to highlight some effects and implications of the aforementioned cultural elements of Indian society, self-criticisms related to the lack of a “collective spirit” and the impact of mental health issues on happiness in contemporary India were discussed in Sections 5.9 and 5.11, respectively.

When it comes to lifestyle articles, ‘travel’ stood out as a subject of interest and totalled 17% of the documents that mentioned ‘national happiness’, for example. As a neighbouring country and having direct flights from India, Bhutan was the most popular destination within these articles as it appears to be an attractive option for Indians and has even been referred to as “destination happiness” (*Times of India*, 7/2/2014). There is no doubt that Bhutan was the place outside India that the newspapers gave more attention to: remarkably, the term ‘Bhutan’ appeared in 75% of the national sample, indicating Indians’

affection for the “friendly”, Buddhist nation. Despite economic and geopolitical interests in this friendship with Bhutan, the Himalayan country was not always praised by Indian journalists though, and I elaborate on this particular relationship in Section 5.12 (but also in Section 5.8 when it came to comparisons involving faith and religion).

Having derived from main themes such as politics, well-being indexes and lifestyle, ‘nationalism’ was an important sub-theme which emerged from my qualitative analysis as discussed in Section 5.13. Given the nationalist tone taken by the current government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, my expectation was that terms like ‘nationalism’ and ‘anti-national’ would have been found in association with ‘WHR’, but that did not happen in the 2012-2018 period. The association was noticed, though, between the terms ‘anti-national’ and ‘national happiness’: three out of four times in which those terms appeared together happened in 2016 – a year marked by heated political discussions related to nationalism in the global media – and the content of the articles had a nationalist discourse. Both nationalist and biopolitical narratives appeared also within other parallel debates, and this provided relevant material for my analysis – as a Foucauldian observation, this is a clear example that certain discourses play a significant role in the construction of happiness even if this isn’t reflected in raw word counts.

Even though the generic term ‘happiness’ was not used to collect data for this research, it is worth mentioning here that, in association with ‘happiness’, the number of times in which the term ‘anti-national’ appeared in the Indian newspapers has grown significantly over the time period of my sample: it jumped from only twice in 2012 to 43 times in 2016 – the year in which it had the highest frequency during the sample period –

which can reinforce that the happiness debate has been increasingly politicised in the Indian media.

5.4. Spiritual and material happiness

Considering the newspapers analysed in this study, happiness does not appear to be all about pleasant discussions. Indeed, a headline in the *Economic Times* (22/3/2017) invites a more serious debate: “Happiness is no laughing matter”. In fact, happiness appears as almost a background narrative in newspapers most of the time, which allows writers to focus on different social problems (cf. Frawley 2015) and ultimately pay attention to quite the opposite: the issues related to the measurement of happiness and even people’s unhappiness. This tendency recalls Bignell’s (2002) methodological suggestion to consider the “negative aspects” normally explored in media texts, and helps me identify how writers are ‘constructing’ happiness through choices related to news values, language use and discursive formations. References to suffering and pessimism can be identified in some examples found in the Indian press such as in the following passage extracted from the *Indian Express* (22/3/2017):

“‘Who seeds love collects happiness’, declared William Shakespeare. However, Sigmund Freud nixed this, stating, ‘We are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love.’ In trademark neurotic style, Woody Allen commented, ‘To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering, one must not love. But then, one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer; not to love is to suffer; to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love – to be happy then is to suffer,

but suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be happy, one must love to suffer”.

Interestingly, even though the writer borrowed some insights from Western thinkers here, associating happiness and love with unhappiness and even suffering is not a common argument which people easily come across while reading most Western newspapers. By saying that love and happiness imply suffering, the journalist deviates from a ‘common sense’ that associates happiness with pleasure, and also touches on more profound, existential questions in terms of the very nature of human beings, in comparison to other, more superficial texts usually found in the mainstream media. Such a subtle sign of self-talk or the space given to the journalist’s inner voice indicates a particular concern with questions related to the soul instead of the body, or spiritual instead of just material happiness.

Journalists’ discursive negotiation between spiritual and material happiness appears in many places within the Indian sample, and this feature suggests a key difference with what was discussed in the last chapter about dominant representations of happiness in the US, for example. In relation to the US data, Indian commentators tended to dedicate more space to certain considerations about the foundations of happiness in spiritual terms, and some writers appeared to think that Indian wisdom and an anti-materialistic attitude can influence particular understandings of what it means to be happy in Indian society – in spite of more standardised notions of happiness assimilated from the global media. Interestingly, such tendencies can eventually relate to self-orientalism, as I will illustrate below.

An example of those alternative narratives was given by public speaker, professor and columnist Pramod Pathak. In his article, he touched on individuality and cultural

relativism: “there can be individual, cultural and societal differences in both definition as well as perception of happiness” (*Pioneer*, 24/7/2016). Interestingly, this discursive formation echoes Binkley’s (2014) advice not to let the new science of happiness ignore individualities (see also Smart & Williams 2008) and generalise about happiness in a utilitarian way. Moreover, Pathak suggested that Indians have a sort of special interpretation of happiness in contrast to how it is normally seen in ‘the West’:

“[I]t is pleasure that is a determinant of happiness in Western view, whereas the Indian view talks about *ananda* or bliss, which is a spiritual mental state. Naturally, happiness will be determined more by physical and material experiences in the Western viewpoint, while contentment or inner feeling will determine it in the Indian ethos” (*ibidem*).

Pathak’s argument illustrates the discourse of differentiation and represents the duality or the use of a sort of East-West dichotomy which assumes, for instance, that Western values are more inclined to material, whereas Indian values to spiritual happiness – which is also a form of generalisation that the writer himself had criticised. Moreover, the tendency to generalise and presume that at least part of Indian culture keeps a certain distance from the material world and that they are advanced in terms of spiritual growth can be seen as an attempt of positive self-representation, which contributes to the creation of a myth that India is a spiritual nation. In the same article, the columnist clearly links the WHR to the ‘Western’ way to conceptualise happiness: “one view suggests that it is money that gives happiness as per the [WHR]... But there is another and equally vehement school of thought that suggests that money cannot buy happiness” (*Pioneer*, 24/7/2016). The writer associates these views to the “satisfaction of endless desires” and “the end of desire”, respectively. In this way, he

reinforces that, according to a more holistic, spiritual vision of happiness, it is the “end of desire” that matters, as opposed to the mundane experience of pleasure or “endless desires” which are constantly stimulated from a neoliberal perspective – although the country is now a global economic superpower and the Indian media itself is quite commercial (cf. Athique 2012).

Another popular public figure in the Indian newspapers was chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, a politician affiliated with the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who proposed the creation of a ministry of happiness in India. His name appeared in all newspapers of the Indian sample in 2016 and, despite his usual spiritualist discourses, the politician claimed that “indices which determined national growth” such as happiness indexes should be “kept in mind” (*Hindustan Times*, 16/7/2016). Also the *Pioneer* (16/7/2016) gave voice to the chief minister on the same day and, in a discursive formation which shows a clear inclination towards a spiritual path to happiness, he referred to “Yoga”, “meditation” and “deep contemplation”, insisted that “happiness lies within”, and claimed that people need to “understand philosophy of Advait”. Chouhan also highlighted the “philosophy of Nishkam Karmayoga” or “detached action” which “does not let despondency enter our lives” and leads to “harmony”, “love” and “empathy”, which he frames as the “essence of Indian wisdom” (*ibidem*).

By drawing attention to the philosophical basis of the Advaita Vedanta doctrine – often associated with the Indian philosopher Shankara (c.788-820) (Hirst 2005) – the politician made clear references to Hinduism. When it came to the “detached action” – an attitude through which people do not expect any results from their actions and do not aim at individual goals (Ganeri 2007) to find peace and harmony – his narrative presupposes that

there is an ‘Indian way’ of finding happiness which is framed as the right one. Indeed, as opposed to the “essence of Indian wisdom”, materialism was criticised in another article of the *Pioneer* (2/3/2014), in which Chouhan was referred to as if he were a guru: “He said that Lord Buddha’s ideals of mercy, compassion, love, humanism and Ashtang philosophy can pave way for happy life in world burning in fire of materialism”. The article also mentions other religious elements such as “Vashudhaiv Kutumbakam” – a Sanskrit phrase found in Hindu texts meaning “the entire universe is one family” (Pandit 2005: 84) – and “Ashtang” or Ashtanga philosophy which is related to a particular style of yoga practice – which shows that both journalists and sources tended to relate happiness to morality and religion, and indicate that these elements are more central and explicitly linked to common conceptions of happiness in India than in UK and US contexts (an entire section will be dedicated to this topic later on).

However, despite many references to spiritual happiness in the sample, the pleasure element was not ignored by journalists, and a ‘mundane’ and more individualistic interpretation of happiness was also represented in some articles. Journalist Malini Goyal, for example, shared some insights in the *Economic Times* (25/3/2018) from the expert vice-chair of psychology at the University of California, Sonja Lyubomirsky: “Many psychologists equate happiness with life satisfaction”, and “economists often equate happiness with fulfilment of desires, which means whether one is getting what one wants.” Moreover, back to the *Indian Express* editorial (22/3/2017), the editor elaborated on Freud’s quotation “[w]hat we call happiness comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up”. These narratives clearly show a more mainstream view on the matter, which presupposes a physical, immediate experience as opposed to the long-term based concept of an acquired happiness through virtue and self-knowledge.

Therefore, happiness was not always framed as an almost sacred thing in the Indian newspapers. In fact, the imagination of a singular Indian spiritual philosophy can be seen as an Orientalising construct. In practice, it would be hard to pin down one coherent system or philosophy that was present across the sample: India's multireligious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic make-up makes such generalisations extremely difficult. Even the majority religion of Hinduism cannot be pinned down to a clear set of values or guidelines, as it is rather a site of diverse practices and active contestation.

In this sense, it also emerged from the data that Indian journalists were not simply demonstrating the duality of spiritual/material and Eastern/Western values, as some pieces brought a different kind of more negotiated and complex reflection on the concept of happiness, which communicates with the critical theories and counter-narratives of happiness that I explored in the literature review. Columnist Leher Kala, for example, gave her contribution to this contemporary debate in the *Indian Express* (27/03/2017): "one can't help but wonder if our generation's constant preoccupation with happiness makes it even more elusive and if chasing it so determinedly, doesn't cast it further out of our grasp", she questioned.

Indeed, the journalist's argument resonates with what critical theorists such as Pfaller (2014), Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011) have argued in relation to social expectations about people's happiness and the harm they may cause to individuals. Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, more specifically, indicates that society makes us desire the very thing that it puts out of reach. On the other hand, though, public discourses that stimulate a spiritual path to happiness are also widely diffused in the country, as a dominant culture. The Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, for example, tries to construct a positive image of himself by endorsing ethical and religious narratives, even appearing on the television meditating and practicing yoga, but his politics is, in fact, considered by many as non-inclusive and anti-democratic especially to certain social and religious minorities in today's India.

5.5. The (not so) “bad reputation” of money

When it came to the achievement of happiness, media discourse varied in terms of the actual role and the pros and cons of money, but journalists as a whole tended to suggest that money wasn't everything. Coincidentally, both terms 'money' and 'economic growth' appeared in 12% of the texts in the national sample, but journalists made significant observations on the topic more indirectly within other parallel debates. As a typical example of one of the critiques of materialism, columnist for the *Hindustan Times*, Col DS Cheema, was emphatic and condemned the overestimation of money: “No one has ever been content with the money one has; those who have more than they need, try harder to add more”, for “[t]his cycle never ends and in due course, becomes a spiral that leads to many avoidable problems” (*Hindustan Times*, 19/7/2015). According to Cheema, money can be dangerous since it “goes as easily as it comes”, and money-making is an addiction which is hard to get rid of – a narrative which is very much in line with Bowsher's (2018a) arguments on the relationship subjects tend to develop with money in neoliberal societies. “Knowing such bad reputation of money, it is easy to learn some lessons, unfortunately, no one wants to learn”, he complained.

In addition to the individual consequences of the exaggerated importance normally given to money, the columnist extended his criticisms to problems caused by economic

inequality which was framed as one of the factors that threatens collective happiness in India. “[A]ny sensible person should be ashamed of burning money when 80 per cent of his country fellows do not have access to clean drinking water and other basic necessities”. As regards to India’s performance in the WHR in particular, Cheema made a point by questioning the actual role of wealth:

“We rank quite high on the list of billionaires in the world, but are poor in happiness index... The only connection money has with happiness is that it can help one to meet certain needs that can make one happy, but it can never fulfil every desire” (*Hindustan Times*, 19/7/2015).

Despite Cheema’s egalitarian tone, the extract above resonates with the understanding that money does play a role in people’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life (cf. Veenhoven 1999), but this does not mean that the columnist wants to say that money automatically leads to happiness. This example illustrates that writers are often cautious even if they claim that money has its importance. Yet, the tendency to discuss happiness in religious terms, as a particularity of the India media, and criticise certain implications of neoliberalism and the economic boom in the country, for example, reveals that a number of commentators appear to be concerned about the negative effect money, and associated policies, can have over the population. Interestingly, as economics columnist Malini Goyal suggested in the *Times of India* (16/9/2013), there is still time to control the growth of consumerism in India:

“The flip side of being newbies to economic booms and consumerism is that India still has some way to go before it becomes a ‘hypercommercialised’

society... For middle-class India, the dip in the cycle may well be a time for some course-correction.”

Following a similar reasoning, an article in the *Economic Times* (3/11/2013) pointed out that, as “retail therapy is often associated with bringing joy and happiness”, Diwali and other festivals in India “have become a lot about shopping”. But even if the writer elaborated a narrative that stimulates the reflection about the real importance of money, he eventually falls into the trap of taking consumerism for granted and also representing people as neoliberal subjects: “This Diwali, go out, meet people... [a]nd do not worry if you cannot buy those gifts. Just the thought of buying those gifts should give you a rush of happiness”. Indeed, in an apparently anti-materialistic extract, the last sentence sounds contradictory as it associates the possibility of experiencing happiness by just thinking about “buying” material goods – recalling Illouz’s (2007) elaboration on “emotional capitalism” in which emotional and economical relationships shape each other.

A more evident example of the importance given to money was found in the highest circulated English-language newspaper in the country (ABC 2019), the *Times of India* (30/11/2013). The newspaper presented two different perspectives on the role of money in the achievement of happiness, and clearly endorsed a materialistic view. On the one hand, the “Times View” made it clear that “[l]ife satisfaction rises with increase in material wealth”, and “[t]he argument that happiness is subjective and is informed by choice is misleading” since “a person who hasn’t given up the pursuit of wealth but is trapped in poverty and destitution will hardly view his situation as happy”. On the other hand, a “Counterview” considered happiness as “subjective” and highlighted that “not all desires are fired by money”, for example: “there are such things as sleeping or eating or doing good to

others that cause happiness... one may feel happy to be healthy and to have friends.” In this article, any kind of spiritual or transcendent happiness experience was ignored, whereas a more egalitarian view was considered as different, or not a priority to the newspaper and the politico-economic system. This attitude relates to what McChesney (2000) argues that, in the mainstream media, individualism happens to be portrayed as “natural”, whereas civic or collective values tend to be treated as “marginal”, which contributes to the normalisation of individualistic lifestyles and a neoliberal concept of happiness.

5.6. WHR: democratic tool or just a western concept?

As a recurring contradiction throughout the sample period, in addition to the oscillations between spiritual and material happiness, Indian journalists repeatedly criticised but also at times approved or took for granted the attempt to measure happiness. According to the columnist Leher Kala, for example, “[i]f the point is to get the most we can out of life in our short time on earth, it’s great that the... [UN] has placed happiness on the global agenda and its pursuit to our hearts’ content”, since happiness is – echoing American journalists’ discourses illustrated in Chapter 4 – a “fundamental human right” (*Indian Express*, 27/3/2017). However, the practical complexities of the measurement itself have been discussed or at least mentioned in the majority of the articles focused on this particular debate. As Kala has argued, “it’s questionable that such definitive conclusions [of the rankings] can be made from a simple quiz for something as ephemeral as happiness, because it’s so subjective” (*ibidem*).

As discussed in the literature review, people's reactions and responses to the findings provided by happiness studies may vary significantly, and this can be noticed in some articles published in India. The *Pioneer* (31/5/2017) gave voice to the author and blogger Gurbir Singh, then officer in the Odisha Government's Information and Public Relation Department, who shared his personal experience with the reception of the WHR. He revealed: "I had to philosophize; I had to take recourse in whatever spiritual beliefs I could fall back upon for comfort; I had to set aside my national pride, my guilt for being labelled as an unhappy lot." This sort of internal, mental exercise that the coverage of the happiness index may stimulate in some texts can bring to the news in-depth reflections on the topic. Apparently, it makes people think about the macro idea of a global happiness and also about their own conditions and actual situation in this scenario. Instead of just accepting the results brought by the WHR and feeling happy or sad about the performance of their own countries in the ranking, the most important thing in this whole process appears to be the fact that writers are able to share inner feelings and contest or critically analyse the report which is itself a representation of reality.

In terms of the concept behind the happiness index, Singh wrote: "I strongly feel that happiness as an axiom in the report is too strong. It should rather have been 'World Content Report'. Being content is different from being happy. One can still be happy despite being discontent in life" (*ibidem*). This observation echoes the argument made by some authors (e.g., Almeder 2000, Haybron 2013) that happiness is normally interchangeable with life satisfaction today, and the idea that the position a nation occupies in the ranking can have everything and nothing to do with the actual happiness people may or may not experience living there. Accordingly, columnist Pramod Pathak engaged in this same debate by analysing a similar situation from another perspective: "What about those who are not

experiencing happiness even if the gross happiness of the nation is high? Difficult to explain” (*Pioneer*, 30/7/2017).

In this way, Pathak’s argument illustrates the case in which people living in the industrialised and so-called ‘happiest’ countries can still be quite unhappy, whereas Singh’s observation reminds that those who live in the nations which the WHR considers as ‘less happy’ are not necessarily deprived from leading a happy life. Therefore, what both of them are trying to say, in slightly different ways, is that happiness does depend on the wider social environment and lifestyle, but it is also something very personal, subjective, and there is an individual component which is crucial to achieving or experiencing happiness. Expressing a non-‘Western’ point of view, these quotes speak to a larger discursive formation that tries to deconstruct the idea that an idealised happiness becomes possible or at least more likely to be experienced if one lives in privileged, elite nations – which echoes Littler’s (2018) critique of the relationship between meritocracy and plutocracy, even though India itself is an economic superpower but not a ‘Western’ one and it is not labelled as a ‘happy’ country in the WHR. India’s 144th position in the WHR 2020, however, is nothing but ‘a’ representation of people’s well-being in that country, but, as the observations above suggest, ‘happiness’ is too broad and subjective in order to be measured – even worse at a national level as the UN’s study attempts to do.

A remarkable text in the *Hindustan Times* (21/3/2017), titled “Happiness index is a western concept. A realistic one will make us unhappier”, heavily criticised both the WHR, for being a tendentious study, and Indians themselves. Indeed, at the same time the writer was against the UN study he also showed self-criticism by suggesting that the happiness ranking is correct when it comes to India’s poor performance. It is written in an ironic tone

and indicates a defensive stance that appears to be taken by Indian commentators with regards to the report's findings – contrasting India's low ranking with public, biopolitical discourses diffused in the country, which are failing its citizens by claiming that India is not as bad as it appears in the WHR. Essentially, neither India nor the happiness index escaped the writer's disappointment, as he argues that no matter the measures adopted – Western or native/self-determined – India is lagging behind. The unsigned text claims: “The parameters [of the WHR] are too ‘western’ is the usual refrain” and it is based on “alien concepts” for Indians. However, despite claiming that the WHR is a “‘western conspiracy’ to make us feel inferior”, the writer points out that, even if it were based on “things that are close to our hearts” such as “[r]oti, kapda, and makkan [food, clothes and shelter]”, “access to clean water” and “primary education”, “[w]e'll be at the bottom of the barrel, anyway”.

But if, on the one hand, there were frequent criticisms in the Indian media regarding the WHR, the tone normally changed when it turned to the Bhutanese GNH. The refrain in many texts was usually like the words used by then executive director of GNH, Sem De Chhetri, quoted in the *Times of India* (12/8/2015): “People must think of moving from GDP to GNH to lead a happy life”. Also, the *Pioneer* (14/6/2013) claimed in a headline that “Bhutan shows the way to happiness”, and framed the GNH as an advanced tool, “rooted in the concept of people-centred holistic development”.

The fact that the GNH was normally represented as a more democratic index in comparison to the WHR may indicate a further interpretation through which Indian journalists tend to link happiness to spirituality. It can be noticed through the words of then Bhutan's Minister for Home and Cultural Affairs, Lyonpo Minjur Dorji, quoted in the *Pioneer* (17/10/2012): “true human development takes place only when material progress

takes place simultaneously with spiritual growth.” If writers happened to use a negative tone in sections related to the GNH, the criticism was usually more widespread and tended to generalise about the alternatives to GDP more broadly. For example: “If we get too fixated on the alternative to the GDP idea, we lost sight of this process... [of] public policy formulation” (*Indian Express*, 16/2/2017).

In general, terms and expressions (e.g., “elusive”) used in reference to alternatives to GDP such as the GNH tended to be much softer than those used to describe the WHR as a “conspiracy” and its “alien concepts”, for example. This illustrates that the WHR has been framed as a non-democratic, unjust tool which ‘hierarchises’ happiness across nations – even though the UN’s report claims itself to be an alternative to GDP as well. The way some journalists condemned the WHR reveals a sign of self-Orientalism (see Said 2003) in order to counter hegemonic Western notions of individualist happiness. On the other hand, the GNH was normally represented as a more sensible way of ‘measuring’ happiness, and the reasons for that, in addition to different conceptual and methodological features of the Bhutanese study, probably have a lot to do with the political and cultural proximity between India and Bhutan. From a geopolitical perspective, it appears to be easier to stimulate a friendship with a small, non-threatening and dependent neighbouring state than explicitly agreeing with a framework imposed by the powerful ‘West’ – seen as a competitor, but also in a non-specific way as an oppressive and colonial power.

5.7. Happiness: a governmental responsibility?

Despite the fact that the discourse on happiness was associated with faith and spiritual growth at times, and even though the measurement of ‘happiness’ was very much criticised in the Indian newspapers, the country is one of the few – along with Venezuela and United Arab Emirates, for example – in which the governments invested in happiness policies and proposed the creation of a ministry for happiness. In India, chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan had this idea because, as quoted in the *Hindustan Times* (2/4/2016), “worldly possessions and development through statistics were not the only measure of happiness”, but rather “the ministry would work towards keeping people ‘genuinely happy’”.

The opposition made between “worldly possessions” and being “genuinely happy” echoes the tendency of representing the soul (rather than the body) (see McMahon 2004) as the guide towards happiness as evidenced across the Indian sample. However, the attempt to orient people about how they should act in order to be happy through public policies often reflects the biopolitical role of the happiness industry. Indeed, as Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017: 110) have argued, “institutionalised patterns of knowledge”, such as those related to happiness policies, tend to “govern the formation of subjectivity” – which Bowsher (2018a) would have described as “neoliberal subjectivity”.

In an article titled “CM’s happiness ministry is missing groundwork”, journalist Ramani Ranjan elaborated a narrative against happiness policies and deglamorised Chouhan’s proposal to create a ministry (which actually became a department) of happiness, in which “other than the inspiration, there is little in terms of foundation” (*Hindustan Times*, 2/4/2016). The *Indian Express* (16/7/2016) proposed a different framing, and quoted

Chouhan: “Roti (food), kapda (clothes) and makaan (house) are basic necessities, but a human being needs more”. He pointed out that it is necessary to stimulate practices such as yoga and meditation and revise the school syllabus in order to “include how to inculcate positivity” – another sign of biopolitics at play. But the newspaper also quoted the *Right to Food* campaigner Sachin Jain, whose discourse contrasted the biopolitical role happiness policies normally have: “it will have to be ensured that the proposed department does not become a tool to further political interests” (*ibidem*).

Besides such critiques, another article in the *Hindustan Times* (15/7/2016) took a more positive view on the fact that Madhya Pradesh was the first state in the country to have a separate department for happiness, and highlighted Chouhan’s celebration for the achievement: “Economic prosperity cannot be the only parameter of happiness... People need to have the pleasure of ‘man, atma aur buddhi’ (mind, soul and intellect)”. On that occasion, Chouhan was referred to as “the BJP leader who is a strong advocate of the Hindu way of life that lays stress on spiritual and philosophical enrichment over material achievements”.

The creation of a happiness department aimed at making people “genuinely happy” was quite romanticised at times, but, in practice, little was published in my sample as a follow-up on the actual achievements and impact of such happiness policies in India – however, a small number of exceptions did exist in the national sample. Several months after the attention paid to the new happiness department in the media, economist and author Bibek Debroy wrote in the *Indian Express* (16/2/2017): “At the moment, the focus is on volunteers training people to positively impact the lives of others. This is thus an attempt to bring about behavioural changes in people, not behavioural changes within government”. Debroy’s

observation indicates both the weakness of happiness policies and the biopolitical, in a sense passive attitude of the government which basically transfers the responsibility to boost satisfaction with life from the state to the citizens themselves, whereas social problems that should be at least minimised by those policies still remain unsolved.

In fact, this sort of strategy used by the government is related to a neoliberal framework which – not only in India but also in other national contexts such as in the US and UK – seeks to limit the role of the state in social welfare (see Davies 2016). In this way, the emphasis on achieving happiness is, therefore, shifted from public to private, from structures to the individual, echoing the formation of ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ (cf. Bowsher 2018, also Foucault 2008). Individuals are, thus, expected to be positive and responsible for their own successes and failures (Ehrenreich 2010ab), and this may lead to Berlant’s (2011) “cruel optimism” – as this kind of imposed ‘optimism’ cannot promise what it aims for – especially in individualistic, competitive, unequal neoliberal societies.

5.8. Religion as a path towards happiness

Even though journalists did not dedicate entire articles to the relationship between religion and happiness in India, the term ‘religion’ appeared in 26% of the sample and elements of faith and moral principles were touched on directly or indirectly in a number of articles throughout the national sample. In terms of the different approaches to religion in the global media, India follows the way Americans tend to ingrain faith in the national consciousness, instead of embracing European secularisation (Knott *et al.* 2013: 16-17, also Micklethwait & Wooldridge 2009). In this way, the Indian media appeared to be more inclined to

incorporate a “quasi-religious role” since it gave people’s faith a significant visibility, reflecting its wider role as a “primary source of information about religion” (Knott *et al.* 2013: 37) and contribution to the normalisation of religion as a philosophy of life – even when this is not explicitly stated in the media texts.

Journalist Malini Goyal, for example, framed the ‘Indian way’ of achieving happiness as a valid path:

“Those who believe in god are typically happier than those who don’t. The former are found to be more mindful and have a higher sense of gratitude and empathy... It is here that Indian philosophy’s emphasis on being content in the moment helps in boosting happiness” (*Economic Times*, 25/3/2018).

Accordingly, the *Pioneer* (5/11/2012) highlighted that choosing the ethical mode of life has to do with dharma – normally related to duty, morality and piety (Dube 1996: 142) – and claimed that, “[i]f we are unhappy, we are doing something wrong.” In the article, author and journalist Mark Tully suggested that the ways in which religion is conceptualised in different parts of the world can also be related to different attempts of ‘measuring’ happiness – and this sort of distinction can be related to the opposition authors such as Hall (1992) and Said (1978) suggest between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ values. Tully links the Bhutanese GNH to people’s spiritual growth, whereas “[r]eligion in the West has become oriented towards science and technology” (*ibidem*). By judging the ‘West’, though, this discourse tries to reinforce the idea that religion in India is still about tradition.

In line with Tully's inclination towards a perhaps more holistic viewpoint, journalist Mukul Sharma shared his opinion in the *Economic Times* (6/8/2013): differently from other indexes, GNH "measures quality of life and tries to make sure that material and spiritual development happen together." Moreover, the writer expressed disapproval regarding people's detachment from spirituality in the present day: "The result is that one of the greatest coping mechanisms we possess for dealing with perceived setbacks in life to regain a better sense of perspective remains either vastly underdeveloped or totally non-existent." It is interesting that, in the narratives above, not only is spirituality normalised as something related or conducive to happiness, but the ways in which both religion and happiness tend to be conceptualised in different cultures are also being compared indirectly. Through the analogy with economic and happiness indexes, commentators appear to say between the lines that India (and the 'East' more broadly, as opposed to the economically powerful 'West') is on the right track, or at least trying to frame happiness in a more comprehensive way – narratives which take an opposite direction in relation to the orientalist ones.

Hinduism is the predominant religion in India (Dube 1996), and the representation of faith in the national newspapers recalls Foucault's thoughts on unbalanced power relations as well as an attempt at positive self-representation through media discourse. Despite clear contrasts between India and some of its neighbouring countries – such as in the independence of Pakistan and Bangladesh and more recent episodes of the expulsion of Muslims from India – which are partly related to religious questions, there were no direct, explicit confrontations with Islam or Christianity in the articles. Similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism were highlighted at times, though, but Hinduism was inferred to have primacy, or at least be foundational in relation to Buddhism. In an interview for the *Hindustan Times* (25/10/2015), then Bhutan's foreign minister Lyonpo Damcho Dorji, by making use of a

tactful diplomacy, apparently ignored India's religious conflicts and framed his discussion of Buddhism almost as though it was a compliment:

“Many Buddhist teachings are based on Hinduism. Both religions teach you to accept that there is more than one way of enlightenment. India is home to all faiths in world which have co-existed for centuries. It is the world's largest democracy. There is no country better placed than India to deal with religious conflicts”.

However, this apparent amicable relationship between close yet distinct countries with different religions and cultures seemed to be interpreted in a slightly different way from the Indian point of view at times. Indeed, the *Pioneer* (24/9/2012) published that “Hindus have facile fascination for Buddhism, while the reverse is not true”, and quoted the Indian guru and philosopher Sri Aurobindo:

“Buddhism with its exaggerated emphasis on quiescence and the quiescent virtue of self-abnegation, its unwise creation of a separate class of quiescents and illuminati, its sharp distinction between monks and layman implying infinite inferiority of the latter, it's all too facile admission of men to the higher life and its relegation to the world action to the lowest importance possible stands at the opposite pole from the gospel of Sri Krishna and has had the very effect he depreciates; it has been the author of confusion and destroyer of people” (*The Pioneer*, 24/9/2012).

In this discursive formation, terms such as “unwise creation”, “sharp distinction” and “infinite inferiority”, used to describe some aspects of Buddhism in a critical tone, reveal a certain distance between both religions, as well as a reference to Buddhism as opposed to the gospel if seen from a conservative, Hindu perspective. Indeed, one of the relevant points in the extract above is that the writer suggests there is a hierarchy within Buddhism. But, at the same time, Indian society itself – despite its moral, ethical and religious principles – is very much characterised by social and cultural differences, racial and religious segregation, and economic inequality (see Dube 2006).

All these factors, in fact, make India an extremely hierarchical society in itself. In this context, it seems that journalists’ attitude to highlight hierarchies and perhaps incongruences that they observe in other religious and cultural contexts can be seen as a tactic to mask or indirectly mitigate certain weak points or limitations which may be a problem to one’s own communities. At the same time, suggesting that a more holistic (instead of mainly economic) approach would be more comprehensive for the analysis of happiness, and considering Hinduism as the basis or a reference to other beliefs indicates narratives which privilege the construction of happiness in an ‘Indian’ way – an illustration of O’Neill and Harcup’s (2009: 163) argument that media discourse actually constructs the world rather than reflect it.

5.9. Indians’ collective spirit challenged in the news

If narratives related to faith allowed some writers to normalise the idea of religion and spirituality as a philosophy of life, reinforcing the myth that India is a spiritual nation and

contributing to a positive representation of the Indian people, other commentators, in turn, were sceptical and focused on more concrete aspects of society such as generosity, social support and social capital more broadly. In fact, these aspects were framed to represent the way people perhaps do not put into practice what they learn from moral and spiritual discourses. Indeed, India's performance in the WHR brought intriguing results: the country ranked very low at SWB (falling from 111th in 2013 to 140th out of 156 nations in 2019) and social support (142nd), but had better results at generosity (65th out of 156 nations) in the same year. These numbers are from 2019, the year in which the report separately included more detailed information on such variables. Perhaps because of the fact that my sample has been collected from 2012 to 2018, the term 'generosity' was mentioned in only 4% of the articles. However, even in previous years the newspapers made some interesting references to aspects of society such as Indians' altruism and sense of collectiveness.

In speaking of altruism and kindness among human beings, journalist Malini Goyal pointed out that most experts agree that "among the biggest drivers of happiness is having a strong network of and bonds with friends, family and larger community" (*Economic Times*, 25/3/2018). However, in order to illustrate this statement, instead of using examples within Indian society, Goyal made a curious choice: imported them from the US and Latin America. According to mental health research conducted with students in the US, "people in happy, committed, stable relationships tend to be far happier", she quoted. Also, the writer highlighted that strong social bonds and "warm interpersonal relations" can really improve happiness in Latin American countries (*ibidem*).

When it comes to generosity among Indians in particular, journalist Rishabh Raj's article in the *Hindu* (23/4/2017) can be considered as an example of both criticism towards

the WHR but also self-criticism towards Indian people. The headline anticipates Raj's polemic tone: "India is happy, and the rankings just don't match". The picture which illustrates the article shows a group of Indian children smiling and wearing simple but very colourful clothes while lying together in a circle, representing a cheerful, spontaneous and easy-going people. However, behind the discourse constructed by the picture and the headline together, which may suggest an apparent defensive stance at first glance, in the text the writer combined a good dose of irony with sharp criticisms regarding even some positive traits such as altruism that some commentators tended to attribute to the Indian people as a whole.

"I am sure there has been a conspiracy against our country on a global platform", he provoked. But then Raj's discourse revealed its completely opposed intention little by little by criticising his national group in terms of lack of solidarity and social support: "No matter what the trouble is, in India you will always find support (be rich and powerful, please)." When it comes to 'generosity', he went further and made his critical tone very clear:

"We also donate to political parties, sometimes even pay their legal bills... So how can India be ranked low on this? We trust our leaders. We trust their kids and in future we will trust their kids also. We believe in genes. We have a scientific temper" (*The Hindu*, 23/4/2017).

Thus, Raj suggested disapproval using sarcasm in terms of how Indians put (or don't put) their altruism and generosity into practice. By saying that people have a "scientific temper" because they "believe in genes", for instance, as if one could secure that politicians are honest just because they belong to a traditional family, the writer is rather suggesting people's naïveness or even irrationality. The *Times of India* (24/4/2015) followed a similar

reasoning and gave an answer which actually complements Raj's insinuations mentioned above:

“Countries that are at the top of the rankings show evidence of high social capital, while those at the bottom show the opposite: generalized distrust, pervasive corruption, and lawless behaviour (e.g. widespread tax evasion that deprives the government of the needed funds to invest in public goods). No prizes for guessing where India lies”.

Those criticisms of contemporary Indian people and lifestyle denote that, despite the happiness ranking having been condemned in many articles, journalists do not ignore the fact that perhaps Indian citizens are not doing their best in order to change the statistics. Besides material questions related to poverty and economic inequality, even when it came to potential contributions from people in terms of social capital, more sceptical writers offered a harsh perception of Indian society, free from any romanticised sentimentalism. These writers tended to contest the status quo and focus on issues that caused discomfort but needed to be discussed in texts which are supposed to examine the actual conditions for happiness in India. This relates to the tendency to ‘problematise’ happiness through media discourse (see Frawley 2015) which provides relevant material to my discussion involving negative yet intriguing aspects of the discursive construction of happiness, as anticipated by Bignell's (2002) methodological recommendations (see pp. 90-91).

5.10. Changing lifestyle in contemporary India

While the last section revealed journalists' self-criticism with regards to Indians' 'collective spirit' in the present day, in this section discourses change slightly as writers tend to highlight, in a quite nostalgic way, what they frame as a 'natural' predisposition Indians used to have in the past before the country's 'modernisation'.

“Are we really that badly off when it comes to being happy? After all, ours is the country which is so rich in traditions, family values, spirituality and faith. Or, have we become so enamoured with what we call shaan-o-shaukat that we have become enslaved to it, and so falsely believe that happiness comes only with power, fame, wealth, pleasure etc. In other words, are we looking for happiness in wrong places?” (*Hindustan Times*, 25/3/2017).

In this short passage, columnist Rajesh Krishnan has summarised pertinent questions about changing lifestyle in contemporary India. In the media, some commentators endorsed an anti-Western, postcolonial perspective by blaming privatisation and capitalist practices in general for contributing to the belief that Indians are now less happy than they used to be in the past. Indeed, Krishnan pointed out that these transformations in the Indian way of living have a lot to do with the increase of both individualism and consumerism. Accordingly, commentator Mandar Moroney suggested in the *Times of India* (17/2/2017) that egotism is in the root of the problem: “the virtue of sharing is fast disappearing in the current times... And this is the failure of our generation that we didn't teach our kids good qualities”.

In talking about social changes and new ways of living in contemporary India, certain articles created an interesting pattern: some commentators were critical with regards to the education system in India. The *Times of India* (17/2/2017) admitted: “[w]e have failed to teach our children the value of sharing.” Executive director of GNH Centre in Bhutan, Dr Saamdu Chetri, was quoted in another article: “present education system focuses more on individualistic and materialistic concepts... [but it] needs to include spiritualism so as to help students evolve into a better human being” (*Times of India*, 11/8/2015). Once again, spirituality was opposed to individualism and materialism, and was framed as an answer to problems that people living in modern societies might be dealing with. Accordingly, the *Hindustan Times* (19/7/2015) criticised the fact that education has been influenced by capitalism. Seen as a means to achieve success and prestige, the newspaper’s discourse suggested that making money has become a subject to be taught and, therefore, part of the contemporary lifestyle: “Students spend years in honing this skill and develop moneymaking as an art.”

A member of the BJP and columnist with the *Indian Express* (30/4/2011), Sudheendra Kulkarni, offered another example of how education was heavily criticised in the Indian newspapers. In a personal, familiar account Kulkarni described a visit to his hometown and focused on the negative aspects related to poor quality education and changing lifestyles over the last decades. He quoted his cousin who still lives there and claimed that “educated and nouveau riche families... are the most individualistic and least cooperative”, whereas “the uneducated are more humane, honest, helpful and unselfish”. This discursive formation reveals a generational shift and denotes nostalgia of the ‘good old days’. It allows the comparison between different moments in history and the columnist wanted to show that the current scenario is very much influenced by neoliberalism and

individualism. According to the writer, the solution might be retrieving traditional values which are considered as part of Indian national identity but also claimed to be now forgotten and left behind.

In a postcolonial context, narratives discussed in this section were more critical of the country's modernisation than happiness science itself, as they clearly try to recover nationalist, traditional values – which equally position India against 'Western' hegemony as usually happens when journalists focus on the critiques of the WHR, for example. Interestingly, in his article Kulkarni even referred to an icon of India's modern history, who actively contributed to the construction of a common element in such discourses – Indians' national identity: "India is doomed unless it rediscovers its Mahatma [Gandhi]", because "we have stopped paying even lip service to the 'Father of the Nation'" (*ibidem*).

5.11. The impact of mental well-being on happiness

One cannot discuss happiness in India without considering, in addition to other social and economic problems, the statistics involving mental health conditions among the population. According to the WHO (2019), the suicide rate was 16.3 per 100k population and India was 21st in the global ranking of suicides. Despite of the fact that the "treatment of mental illness has progressed in leaps and bounds", the *Hindu* (11/10/2016) pointed out that managing to fight depression is still difficult and even a rarity in India. Indeed, a study funded by the government has shown that "about 260 million Indians suffer from some form of mental illness, making that approximately one in every five Indians", and the WHO has even claimed that "India might be the most depressed country in the world" (*ibidem*).

Despite these figures, terms such as ‘mental health’ and ‘depression’ appeared, respectively, in only 8% and 6% of the media texts collected from the Indian press, which suggests that some journalists may have avoided engaging with this debate more explicitly. This fact is curious because of the important statistics related to mental health in India and the relevance of the topic for the happiness debate, as suggested in the WHR (2013, p. 4) itself: “mental illness is the single most important cause of unhappiness”. In talking about commercial news media, such a ‘taboo’ can be related to the fact that, as Hall (1973) has argued, news values can privilege powerful groups. Moreover, authors Rodrigues and Ranganathan (2015) and Batabyal *et al.* (2011: 210-211) agree that some journalists in the mainstream media might be avoiding distress.

Yet, when some writers touched on this topic, they went straight to the point: “despite the alarming statistics, mental health issues in India are still brushed under the carpet”, the leftist *Hindu* (11/10/2016) denounced. Also, the newspaper claimed that “the statistics are only getting worse. If large-scale intervention is not planned soon, the prognosis for India, with regard to mental health, seems truly grim” (*ibidem*). Also, the *Hindustan Times* (9/10/2018) showed some concern with the effect the WHR can have over people: the very fact that India ranked 133 out of total 166 countries “leads to depression”.

When it came to the comparison between India and other countries in terms of people’s mental well-being, journalist Malini Goyal tried to mitigate what statistics has normally indicated about India by drawing attention to other nations’ weaknesses regarding the topic, and asked:

“How can countries which have some of the biggest users of anti-depressants like Iceland and Denmark be also among the happiest? If suicide is the biggest manifestation of unhappiness then how can Finland, which has one of the highest suicides rates in the developed world, be the happiest?” (*Economic Times*, 25/3/2018).

Here, contesting the fact that the WHR aims to label ‘happy’ countries seems clear and pertinent, highlighting that more privileged nations are not free from problems such as people’s mental health conditions. But the journalist’s focus on problems from elsewhere can be indicative of the priority given to construct of a negative image of the others instead of discussing and, more importantly, trying to improve one’s own national situation.

However, just as self-criticism was noticed in other previous topics in the Indian media, it also appeared in relation to the mental well-being of Indians – including references to stress as one of the negative factors and potential causes of mental disorders. Interestingly, some journalists made a link between mental health and economics by suggesting that people still feel anxious and stressed out despite India’s rising economy. Columnist Rajesh Mahapatra was among those, asking: “Why are Indians becoming unhappier when they have enviable GDP numbers?” (*Hindustan Times*, 26/3/2017), and also associating this tendency with similar situations in other “economic giants” such as the US and China. Another element which reinforces the article’s critical tone is its picture: a water cannon used by the police in order to disperse protesters on the streets. The image represents the power relations through which people can be oppressed by the state, and illustrates how the author describes the root of the problem: “Are Indians unhappy, or just angry? Rising inequality has begun to corrode social cohesion and the ability to build political consensus” (*ibidem*). Both textual

and visual elements in the article suggest injustice and discomfort, and the writer's observations on the lack of correlation between economic growth and the improvement of people's mental well-being echo the idea that making money should not be a fundamental goal, but rather the promotion of a greater, equal and more collective well-being (cf. Segal 2017, Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

As the examples presented in this section have shown, even though terms such as 'mental health' (found in 8% of the articles) and 'depression' (6%) appeared just a few times in the Indian press – despite the theme being explored in more depth in the 2013 and 2015 editions of the WHR – there was significant reference to the potential impact of mental well-being upon the happiness of Indian citizens throughout the national sample. Most importantly, some journalists made a link between mental health issues and problems related to economic inequality, material difficulties and the overestimation of money in contemporary India – and so the status quo. In this way, the tension between material and spiritual happiness can be perceived once again, even if indirectly through the suggestion that material aspects alone do not secure happiness and the excessive attachment to them can even generate stress and mental disorders.

Curiously, an article in the *Pioneer* (9/4/2018) published that “Indians are unhappy people”, and revealed that, “[t]o forget the sorrows (self-created), people are drinking too much which is reflected in mushrooming of alcohol shops and bars everywhere.” Such an attitude can be indicative that, no matter the attention given to faith and spirituality in the country, in practice there are individuals who are not mentally healthy: they seem to try to escape from reality instead of living in the moment, being mentally strong and benefiting from the spiritual growth that many apparently strive for.

5.12. Bhutan: a promised land?

One of the most popular key terms identified within the sample, ‘Bhutan’ appeared in 75% of the media texts collected from the Indian newspapers, and the country was normally represented as an idealised, promised land by commentators. The *Hindu* (26/2/2016) claimed that the Himalayan country looks like “Mother Nature’s canvas on earth” thanks to its natural landscape and Buddhist constructions, and life there appears to be “less complicated” in comparison to industrialised countries. Some positive aspects of Bhutan were highlighted in lifestyle and travel articles, such as in the *Times of India* (7/2/2014) which called it “destination happiness”.

Bhutan was also praised for its commitment to environmental protection – indeed, most of the times in which the term ‘environment’ was mentioned in the sample (21%) were related also to green policies developed in the neighbouring country. The *Hindu* (8/3/2016) pointed out that Bhutan is “carbon negative, and has become a sink for its neighbours’ carbon emissions”. In the same way, the *Pioneer* (3/11/2017) claimed that the country is “an example of development with values”, and then Bhutanese Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, was considered to be a politician with good sense. Even though Bhutan’s economy is still small in comparison to wealthy countries such as India, the newspaper also suggested that Tobgay “would welcome investment only if it is clean, green and sustainable because his nation desires well-being through GNH... which is much more important than GDP for Bhutan.”

Bhutan's apparently anti-materialistic philosophy towards a better quality of life was also highlighted in a lifestyle article in the *Pioneer* (15/1/2013): "Thimpu was... the first capital city I had seen in the world without a mall or even a large shopping complex... [and people] are still happy." It is interesting, though, that the writer indirectly endorsed a materialistic discourse as they suggested that people living in Thimpu were "still happy" even if they did not perhaps have modern facilities usually found in industrialised societies. However, the writer was sceptical with regards to Bhutan's attitude towards a more 'sustainable' national happiness in the present day: "in a globalised world I doubt that the country can prevent some not-so-nice aspects to invade them, no matter what the policy-makers say or do" (*ibidem*). Interestingly, in this last bit of the extract the writer also detached constructed discourses related to happiness policies from what the population may actually experience in 'real life' – which diminishes the credibility of those policies in a sense.

While some commentators tended to highlight the bright side of Bhutan as "destination happiness", others clearly suggested that not everything was rosy in the Himalayan country. When it came to explicit criticisms, the *Indian Express* (29/9/2013) suggested that Bhutan's politics of happiness was not just a matter of policy but also biopolitics and propaganda:

"[I]t is not really clear whether a government can, or should be in the business of making people happy. But by putting the happiness of its population at the centre of its policies, Bhutan, despite its small size... has become an internationally relevant country... [and] the impact of Bhutan's future choices will continue to reverberate far beyond its borders."

Moreover, the *Times of India* (30/11/2013) published that, even though Bhutan replaced GDP with its own “unique” GNH, the country still struggles with practical problems since it “increasingly finds that it can’t force people to be happy in the face of high unemployment and growing national debt” – reinforcing the link between biopower and the GNH, despite this metric is usually praised for being more ‘collective’ in its conception of happiness. Accordingly, the *Pioneer* (24/9/2012) published an article titled “Saying one thing, doing another”, in which it revealed that the then Buddhist kingdom “manages to deceive public opinion with slogans of [GNH]”, but actually thousands of ethnic Nepalese people ended up in refugee camps or moved to other continents in the 1990s as “their citizenship cards were confiscated and terror was let loose.” Indeed, it was even claimed that “Bhutan’s horrific record in human rights is best kept secret” (*ibidem*).

But Bhutan’s limitations were not only highlighted by Indian commentators. In an interview for the *Times of India* (19/1/2015), Bhutanese PM Tshering Tobgay admitted that the country still has a “long way to go” in order to be called a ‘happy nation’:

“Our economy is small, fragile. Our people’s expectations are growing and they are getting impatient. Our country is divided geographically, we have our share of poverty, and we need to address this. We are nowhere as successful as some people who paint a Shangri-La image of Bhutan think”.

This narrative resonates with what has been said also in the US press about Bhutan as not being “Shangri-La” or an earthly paradise. Besides the criticisms related to Bhutan and both its happiness agenda and ‘propaganda’, there are signs in the media discourse which

clearly suggest that India is interested in maintaining a good relationship with the Himalayan country. For instance, the *Pioneer* (16/7/2013) published that New Delhi should “proceed with caution” as regards the cut of subsidies since India needs Bhutan “particularly to supplement its energy sources”, and also because “Bhutan is the last of the Asian nations where China does not have a toe-hold” – denoting political and economic reasons for these narratives.

Other references in the press reinforced India’s interests in Bhutan as a “[s]mall but important” country: “[I]et’s keep it that way” (*Pioneer*, 16/7/2013); “Handle with care, Bhutan is a friend”, it “requires special consideration to prevent it from becoming a ‘Nepal’” (*The Pioneer*, 24/7/2013); and “[n]ot only is the tiny Himalayan kingdom one of India’s closest partners, it has also been one neighbour [who] has so far not given India any headache” (*Indian Express*, 27/5/2017). PM Narendra Modi’s trip to Bhutan as his first official visit abroad was mentioned in all newspapers of the national sample in 2014: it “signals a tweak in policy by making neighbourhood relations as important as those with the Western powers” (*Indian Express*, 14/6/2014). In a veiled reference to Pakistan, Modi claimed in the *Hindustan Times* (16/6/2014): “We know the problem of having a bad neighbour”, and stressed that having good neighbours is a key parameter for happiness while referring to Bhutan. Modi also claimed that his first visit to Bhutan was a “natural choice” as well as a “key foreign policy priority” of his government (*ibidem*). Interestingly, the examples given in this section show, therefore, that perhaps Bhutan’s image and the way other countries have treated Bhutan can be also due to India using the ‘happy country’ to reinforce the geopolitical comparisons with India’s not so close ‘partners’ – e.g., Muslim majority countries.

5.13. The nationalist dimension of happiness

As with the US and UK, nationalism has also been rising during the last decade in India – since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, to be precise – and this was particularly reflected in the Indian sample. As mentioned previously, Modi’s political agenda appears to focus not only on Hindu identity, but rather Hindu-nationalist ideology (see Chakrabarty & Jha 2020), and this tendency has stimulated a more aggressive and authoritarian new mode of being in public which may contribute to boosting the self-esteem of certain Indian citizens. In fact, happiness indexes and policies, public discourses and media texts in particular can influence what people think about a sort of ‘national happiness’. As Andrejevic (2008: 612, see also Foucault 1972) has argued, a biopolitical construction of ‘knowledge’ can contribute for “rendering populations participatory (hence productive) and manageable at the same time”. In this section, I will discuss, thus, these tendencies and also illustrate more reactionary narratives which tried to maintain the status quo and sell a positive image of India at all costs.

Despite the current government’s nationalist ideologies and other factors such as the structure of Indian society, the hierarchy of the caste system, social and religion segregations, and diplomatic tensions with certain neighbouring countries, some commentators such as former president and veteran congress leader, Pranab Mukherjee, tried to represent India as an open society. Historically speaking, Mukherjee pointed out that the situation of being “globally connected along the Silk and Spice Routes” contributed to “a free exchange of culture, faith and invention”, and claimed that Indians’ “national identity has emerged through a long drawn process of confluence, assimilation, and co-existence”

(*Indian Express*, 8/6/2018). He added that, given their “collective consciousness”, “[w]e derive our strength from tolerance... accept and respect our pluralism... [and] celebrate our diversity” (*ibidem*). The politician then argued that “[a]ny attempt at defining our nationhood in terms of dogmas and identities of religion, region, hatred and intolerance will only lead to dilution of our national identity.” He eloquently claimed that Indian nationalism actually flows from “Constitutional Patriotism” or “an appreciation of our inherited and shared diversity; a readiness to enact one’s citizenship at different levels; the ability to self-correct and learn from others” (*ibidem*).

At the same time, though, some of Mukherjee’s comments appeared to suggest that he was aware that this romanticised image of Indian people is actually contested by many in practice. He regretted that India “fared poorly” in the WHR and admitted certain problems and limitations: “We must free our public discourse from all forms of violence, physical as well as verbal... We must move from anger, violence, and conflict to peace, harmony, and happiness” (*Indian Express*, 8/6/2018). Although it is not being inferred in the article that particular groups are responsible for the intolerance and violence he condemns, Mukherjee argued that, in a democracy, “dialog is necessarily not only to balance the competing interests but also to reconcile them” (*ibidem*). Interestingly, these observations denote that the issues he is talking about may be related to unbalanced power relations and nationalist attitudes stimulated by the government.

However, this specific message from the politician, endorsed by the pro-Congress *Indian Express*, does not seem to be a rule within the English-language Indian newspapers as a whole. The pro-Modi *Times of India* (6/4/2016), for example, clearly suggested that not all political parties are as committed as the nationalist BJP in terms of boosting people’s

happiness. Curiously, though, the same newspaper allowed some notable criticisms towards the BJP government on another occasion: since Pakistan ranked higher than India in the WHR, Nationalist Congress Party's Devi Prasad Tripathi claimed that this fact "is a matter of shame for the government of the day." Most importantly, he clearly attacked the current government by arguing that "India's ranking was low due to the 'atmosphere of fear' created in the country" (*Times of India*, 24/3/2017), which sounds like a reference to Modi's nationalist and authoritarian politics. Coincidence or not, after the beginning of Modi's mandate in 2014, India fell from the 111th position in 2013 to 122nd in 2017 (the year in which the article was published).

The "atmosphere of fear" mentioned by Tripathi was explored in another article of the sample as something related to the question of 'freedom'. Predominantly opposed to Modi's government, the *Hindu* let commentators share their democratic views about Indian society and politics. Journalist Rishabh Raj included the sarcastic claim that, in India,

"[t]here is full freedom with a small asterisk mark. Freedom to choose food (*unless it is Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday), freedom to watch cinema (*but no ladies-oriented content about lipsticks and burkha), freedom to love (*but it should be different sex, same caste and in accordance with Indian culture), freedom to divorce over the phone, and so on and on. So many freedoms, such less appreciation" (*The Hindu*, 23/4/2017).

At the same time, despite a wider discursive formation which connected unhappiness to populism and other criticisms of conservativeness and authoritarianism as elements of

Modi's politics, the *Indian Express* (27/3/2017) suggested that India can still be considered democratic especially in comparison to its neighbouring countries:

“It's truly alarming that Indians think our contemporaries in Bangladesh and Pakistan are better off. Nowadays, it's routine for bloggers in Bangladesh to get murdered for being atheists while women still get stoned to death for adultery in Pakistan. Even if it is less liberal than before, India seems passionately democratic in comparison.”

In the extract above, in which there may be even an anti-Islamic undertone, the newspaper suggests that India became “less liberal” since nationalists are in charge, but this fact is not framed as something which makes the country less democratic, at least in respect to some of its neighbours. But how can these nationalist views really influence the way Indians perceive their ‘national happiness’? With regards to the country's poor performance in the WHR, for example, columnist with the *Economic Times* Malini Goyal provided a clue. She clearly adopted a defensive stance and claimed that critics of the WHR “abound”, and “rankings seem counterintuitive” and “disconnected from reality”.

“In WHR 2018, Pakistan is the happiest among SAARC countries and India among the least... Different happiness surveys have often yielded contradictory and inconsistent results, putting a question mark on the subjectivity involved in measuring happiness. For India, the question is how can a poor and populous country – with 1.3 billion people and over 220 million poor – compete in the happiness race with developed, prosperous countries like Finland?” (*Economic Times*, 25/3/2018).

Since the journalist's aim appears to be also to justify that it has not been easy for India to get positive results in the WHR, Goyal used the verb "compete" and the collocation "happiness race", normally used in a pejorative tone, in order to criticise the happiness index and the way researchers attempt to rank nations according to SWB levels. In this sense, the writer is also suggesting that the WHR is an anti-democratic tool – a narrative which attenuates the fact that India ranked very low according to the report.

In talking about the discursive construction of Indian national identity, the *Economic Times* (16/08/2015) made an interesting comparison between the country and other nations' ways of celebrating their 'national day'. In the article, sociologist Dipankar Gupta claimed that most of the top 10 countries in the WHR celebrate "citizenship", whereas the 10 countries at the bottom of the list celebrate "independence". Gupta lamented that, driven by "pure patriotism", Indians "converted... Republic Day into a show of gun power and battle readiness" instead of celebrating "the making of a liberal, democratic constitution" – which suggests that competition and self-assertion still play a role in the relationship between ex-colonies and metropolises. Overall, though, social comparisons were heavily focused on India's neighbouring countries, as noticed in the *Times*: the WHR "places India at the 118th spot, behind even Pakistan (92) and Bangladesh (110)" (10/8/2016) – in which the word 'even' denotes the writer's surprise about India's position in relation to the other nations – and "[e]ven Somalia, Pakistan and Bangladesh score better" (20/3/2016) – a recurrent comparison to Muslim majority countries, which reinforces the cultural distance and contrasts between the different national groups.

However, some commentators' defensive stance became quite exaggerated when more aggressive adjectives were used in order not only to compare but diminish other nations: "India ranked 133rd... coming after terror-riven Pakistan and poorest-of-poor Nepal... [and] was behind the majority of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations, apart from war-ravaged Afghanistan" (*Hindustan Times*, 15/3/2018). Terms such as 'terror-riven', 'poorest-of-poor' and 'war-ravaged' were chosen by the writer in a discursive formation which aims to highlight alleged weak points of the other nations which had a better result in the ranking, and, consequently, enhance the image of India as a better place in comparison to them. This attitude clearly characterises an attempt of positive self-representation of the Indian journalist – which has been indirectly asserted at the expense of the others. For instance, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan were framed almost as competitors – not only in the happiness ranking, but also because they have a difficult relationship with India due to geographic and cultural reasons.

This example of language use and tendentious framing extracted from the *Hindustan Times* can be related to what Titley (2019: 3) has suggested about nation-specific or comparative studies as the field in which racism may arise. As the author has argued, this happens especially "within the transnational systems of colonial and capitalist modernity" and through "relations and networks of neoliberal globalization", which contributes to "social insecurity" and "cultural anxiety". Indeed, the extract in question suggests an implicit racism towards some Muslim majority countries – which is significant in light of the persecution of Muslim minorities in India – and illustrates the way some journalists stereotype and essentialise cultures through discourses that produce an "oversimplified conception of difference" (Hall 1992: 279) as well as "a form of *racialized knowledge of the Other*" (Hall 2009: 260) which is encapsulated in Said's (1978) notion of Orientalism.

Social comparisons were quite frequent in the national sample, and examining these comparisons is useful in order to situate how journalists and commentators tend to negotiate, directly or indirectly, Indian national identity. The *Pioneer* (9/4/2018) summarised the most common causes of unhappiness in India, according to different social groups, speaking to a wider, stereotypical discursive formation which ‘biopolitically’ places responsibility upon individual attitudes and behaviours – but not the structure, the government or political system, for example. “The average Indian is grumpy, disillusioned, spiteful and vindictive. Are Indians too unhappy for the same reasons?” The newspaper also pointed out that the habit of making comparisons between different social groups may contribute to people’s own discontentment: “Most of us are unhappy because we compare and have a poor mindset for happiness... The bottom line is our unhappiness is self-created; we dream too much without doing anything”.

Another significant media representation which actually blames people for their passive attitude and unhappiness was offered by editor and columnist Manas Chakravarty in the *Hindustan Times*. In a clear biopolitical attitude, the writer suggested that Indians are probably struggling to find happiness because they complain too much. The headline of the article anticipates that: “To be unhappy is to be anti-national” (*Hindustan Times*, 9/4/2016). Despite the government’s paternalistic orientation, Chakravarty sent a clear pro-Modi message in his discourse and has been both critical and unemphatic towards his fellow nationals. This is noticeable in sentences like: “What’s worse is the way we treat those who want to make us happy”, “No gratitude, I tell you”, and “Ungrateful wretches. The government is doing so much for you and yet you aren’t happy” (*ibidem*).

Additionally, in Chakravarty's article there were comparisons to other nations, in which the writer's tone became quite hostile, perhaps a sign of his nationalistic ideologies:

“Look, everyone has problems. They have huge problems in Iraq, with half the country in the grip of ISIS and bombs going off every day. Do the Iraqis whine and wail? No sir, they shrug off the bombs, tut-tut a bit at ISIS and then go and have a blast. That's why they rank 112 in the survey, well above India. Look at Somalia, ruined by poverty and piracy. When the happiness surveyors came, did they complain bitterly? Nope, they probably pointed proudly to how well the kidnapping industry was doing. The upshot: Somalia ranks 76th, far above India.

At the same time, the better performance of certain countries in the happiness index has been contested as well:

“You think the countries at the top of the happiness table don't have problems? Consider numero uno Denmark. Do you know the income tax rate there is over 50%? They patriotically pretend to be euphoric about all that stifling socialism. Do the people of New Zealand, where they have more sheep than people, moan and groan about the stink of sheep f**t that pervades the land? No, they say they prefer sheep to people and therefore rank number 8 in the happiness league. How does Israel, hemmed in by enemies, rank number 11? Because they look at the Palestinians and thank Yahweh they are not them. The unkindest cut is Pakistan ranking number 92, much above India. They must have interviewed the terrorists there” (*Hindustan Times*, 9/4/2016).

Here, once more, there were sharp criticisms towards Muslim majority countries, which can be considered as a pattern that emerges from particularly hostile discourses in the Indian press. The above statements suggest a wider discursive formation where nationalist narratives – following, in a sense, the notion that a “symbolic force” of a nation has also to do with self-protection (Bhabha 2001: 359) – can stimulate a defensive and sometimes even arrogant mode of being in public, and tend to draw attention to the problems of the others instead of admitting and offering solutions to one’s own.

Moreover, journalists like Chakravarty appear to be more concerned with the image and the position that his country occupies in the happiness ranking than with people’s actual well-being – a similar sign of ‘propaganda’ that some journalists attributed to ‘happy’ Bhutan (see Section 5.12), a tendency which can perpetuate social myths regarding the ‘happiness’ of populations. This finding reinforces the biopolitical role that the WHR (or mainstream happiness studies more broadly) and its media coverage tend to play while intervening on a population level and conditioning people’s behaviour through language and the production of knowledge which contribute to the formation of neoliberal subjectivities (see Foucault 1972, Andrejevic 2008, Bowsler 2018a).

“We must declare unhappiness anti-national”, the columnist stated. “So next year, when the happiness surveyors come around again, do your patriotic duty, grin from ear to ear, lie a lot and tell them you’re proud to be happy”. In this way, creating an image of a happy India seemed to be a priority for nationalists, who appeared to be particular interested in the way the country was represented in the media as an attempt to secure a positive image of themselves and keep people satisfied at least with what they learned from the news. This rhetoric designated to diffuse positive (or non-negative) self-representations at all costs,

though, even if at the expense of the others, is actually a populist strategy that offers what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism” – as it basically cannot secure what it promises – whereas the actual problems that can directly influence the population’s discontent within the country were avoided within these specific narratives.

5.14. Conclusion

Despite some factors such as the influence exerted by modernisation and globalisation in both Indian society and news media, the fact that the country is among those in which happiness policies have been widely debated and created in order to ‘boost’ people’s happiness, and the tendency to take for granted – more or less explicitly and especially in certain superficial articles – that studies such as the WHR can reflect reality (instead of just constructing a version of it) (see Section 3.7 in the methodology, also Foucault 2002a: 24), the Indian sample evidenced that the actual focus of many journalists appeared to be on or were framed as inclined to the search for happiness from within – and not necessarily in the material world. This approach to a more holistic discursive construction of happiness in some cases is at least partly explained by the significance attributed to religion and spirituality in the Indian society. Even though Indians’ lifestyles have been changing dramatically since the economic liberalisation in the 1990s as the country has become an economic superpower, a number of journalists showed a certain detachment from material well-being, and references to elements related to the ‘soul’ (as opposed to the ‘body’) appeared quite frequently in the media texts about happiness.

Indeed, by sharing their views on ‘alternative’ ways to find happiness beyond the material world, some journalists contributed to the normalisation of religion as a philosophy of life. Interestingly, even the specialised *Economic Times* has claimed that “[t]hose who believe in god are typically happier than those who don’t” (25/3/2018), and spiritual development provides “a better sense of perspective” when it comes to existential reflections about life (6/8/2013). Despite recurrent and sometimes hostile comparisons to Muslim majority countries, for example, there were no direct references to neither Islam nor Christianity when religion was in focus. The same did not happen to Buddhism: even though some similarities between both religions were indicated, there were suggestions of a sort of inferiority and also hierarchy with regards to Buddhism. On the other hand, Hinduism was framed as a reference or inspiration to Buddhism, which denotes the primacy of India’s predominant religion and its fundamental contribution to the development of a spiritual path towards happiness – contradicting Indian journalists’ resistance to other forms of domination such as Western hegemony and sense of superiority.

However, sometimes spiritual narratives about happiness were overshadowed by other debates more focused on material difficulties and socio-economic problems identified within the country. Indeed, some journalists referred to changing lifestyles and blamed the current political and economic system because Indian citizens’ lives have “turned into pieces in search of peace” (*Times of India*, 17/2/2017). Interestingly, criticisms of the Indian educational system became a pattern in the national sample, as it has been related to the adoption of a more individualistic attitude. This observation shows some journalists’ open disapproval of negative effects of modernisation and new lifestyles which appear to be influenced by materialism and the ‘Western’ lifestyle more broadly.

The contrast between narratives of material and spiritual happiness, usually framed as opposed to each other, was also reflected in more specific discussions involving national identity and the attempt to measure people's happiness. For example, by endorsing discourses of religion and a 'transcendent' path to happiness, the newspapers promoted the myth that India is a spiritual nation. But this sort of construction suggests other elements of the media discourse, in addition to an apparent positive self-representation in relation to a quite materialistic, globalised world: the establishment of certain traditional values such as religious identity which is part of a struggle over identity (hegemony). Indeed, by positioning themselves against the quantification of happiness and the WHR in particular, some Indian journalists also revealed signs of self-Orientalism (see Said 1978) in order to counter hegemonic Western notions of individual happiness – which reinforces India's antagonism and opposition to the 'West' in a postcolonial context.

Although some commentators praised the study conducted by the UN, or at least took for granted its findings, others found a way to criticise the index and its controversial methodology and parameters. But criticisms of the quantification of well-being were more concentrated on indexes such as the GDP and the WHR than the Bhutanese GNH, for example. In this way, most Indian journalists appeared to be more likely to openly agree with 'alternative' happiness policies and initiatives adopted by countries such as the apparently innocuous, neighbouring Bhutan than give credibility to the global happiness ranking – designed by and seemingly aimed at favouring Western, dominant lifestyles – in a clear attempt to contrast unbalanced power relations between what Hall (1992) calls the 'West' and 'the Rest'. At the same time, though, turning the focus to 'alternative' ways of thinking happiness (instead of just considering mainstream and economic measures) relates in some way to the idea that, as Kashdan *et al.* (2008: 219) have argued, long-term

eudaimonic happiness would be more “morally valid” than immediate hedonic well-being, and journalists are contributing to this construction.

In terms of SWB, India has not been performing well in the WHR, and this shouldn't be a problem if happiness is conceptualised in a more transcendent (rather than material) way. However, despite criticisms towards the UN's study, some Indian journalists expressed regret for India's low position in the ranking, or at least suggested that the report's findings did not contribute to improving neither the public image of the country nor the population's self-esteem. Moreover, when it comes to happiness policies, India is among the countries that proposed the creation of a department for happiness which would “work towards keeping people ‘genuinely happy’” (*Hindustan Times*, 2/4/2016). Still, such discourse echoes the biopolitical “management of populations” (Andrejevic 2008: 610), and little has been discussed about the actual impact of such policies on people's well-being since, from a longitudinal perspective, the headlines and column space given to the creation of a happiness department in 2016 were not proportional to the attention paid to follow-up news on this matter in the successive years.

Moreover, the repetition of discourses in which politicians promised to make people “genuinely happy” do not mean that a more materialistic perception of happiness has been ignored in the Indian press – quite the contrary. Indeed, English-language newspapers are mostly aimed at middle-class and well-educated people living in a society shaped by neoliberal economic policy and marketisation, in which the news media has become largely commercial (Athique 2012). In this way, some publications allowed writers to frame happiness as if they were actually talking about quality of life – following a reasoning which is very common in mainstream happiness studies (e.g., Veenhoven 1999, 2012).

Sometimes commentators made clear references to the importance of money in the achievement of happiness and assumed that findings provided by studies such as the WHR could really be treated as ‘facts’. The example in which the *Times of India* (30/11/2013) endorsed and tried to normalise a materialistic, individualistic perspective in this context, whereas a ‘counterview’ – framed as “marginal”, as McChesney (2000) would put – offered a more subjective and egalitarian tone confirmed that tendency. The individualistic narrative endorsed by the newspaper did not reinforce, thus, other journalists’ ideas about the “bad reputation” of money but rather contributed to what some authors referred to as the maintenance of the existing power structure (Ross and Nightingale 2003, also Hall 1999) or the status quo.

However, the discursive construction of happiness through journalistic narratives in India was not limited to the dichotomy of tradition/modernisation, changing lifestyles, and therefore the negotiation between body/soul, Eastern/Western values, spiritual/material happiness. Even though these elements and this sort of duality were observed in the sample recurrently and regardless of the year, as they permeated throughout the various main themes and parallel debates explored in this chapter, the complexity of happiness as a broader, more fluid and subjective question also emerged from some journalistic debates. Indian journalists and opinion leaders contributed to the discursive construction of an image of India and its people through language and particular ideologies which normally alternated between positive self-representation and self-criticism – while the former appeared more frequently in narratives against the WHR and in religious and nationalist discourses, the latter became more evident in articles which heavily criticised social problems and the status quo.

Despite the fact that mainstream, English-language Indian newspapers can be influenced by and be considered part of the global media, the segment of the Indian press that I am analysing has shown a national frame tendency which still makes it directed within the country. One of the characteristics which made the data collected from the Indian press even more fascinating was the way journalists and commentators in general tended to express themselves, showing more freedom in terms of style and language if compared, for example, to the American newspapers analysed in the last chapter. Indeed, sometimes Indian journalists tended to write as though they were conversing with their closest friends, using colloquial language and establishing a close relationship with readers. In this sense, a number of articles showed a touch of informality in terms of journalistic style and language use, and stories were, at times, based on personal experiences and impressions.

This spontaneous approach, noticed in many parts of the Indian sample, stimulated some intriguing discussions in which there was, as mentioned previously, explicit self-criticism, even though some commentators insisted in a more positive self-representation of the Indian people, which also made room for comparisons to other nations in quite a hostile tone and even nationalist narratives at times. In these cases, thus, Indian journalists' critical attitude towards the 'West' and hostility towards 'unwelcome' neighbours turned into nationalist discourses which sometimes suggested unbalanced power relations between India, represented as 'superior', and less powerful, 'subordinate' nations such as Muslim majority countries (I will revisit this point below).

Partly because there is no meaningful political opposition at a centre level in today's India, and the opposition comes mainly from the states' governments, some articles seemed to accept the status quo. However, there were many examples in which writers clearly

contested the socio-political reality in the newspapers, especially the leftist *Hindu* which maintained a more independent stance in relation to the current government. The centre-right and pro-Modi *Times of India* published some of the most superficial articles on the WHR's results, but still offered relevant examples to the analysis at times, including a reference to the "atmosphere of fear" related to the rise of nationalism in the country. The pro-BJP *Pioneer* mostly showed its support to the current government. Both considered as pro-Congress, *Hindustan Times* and *Indian Express* promoted relevant discussions within the happiness debate, even though the former was quite aggressive while making comparisons to other nations, which may indicate a sign of self-protection. Surprisingly, the specialised *Economic Times* brought interesting insights to the discussion, even including positive references to spiritual growth and pertinent reflections about the real importance of money in people's lives.

Perhaps also as a reflection of the political moment in India – in which nationalism has been rising since Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been in charge – some journalists and commentators not only took a defensive stance but also, at times, insisted in positively representing India. Sometimes this attitude followed the way some radical nationalists tend to express themselves in public, generating patriotic or even xenophobic discourses aimed especially toward non-partner nations such as Muslim majority countries. On the one hand, some criticisms were directed to the powerful 'West' and its happiness index, as in emblematic articles written in a tone of mock indignation indicating a nationalist denial of the WHR being challenged in the newspapers. On the other hand, less critical journalists acted almost as if they were in a competition – a "happiness race" – and tried to diminish the public image of nations with which India does not have a particularly close relationship

and that had better results in the ranking. Indeed, they seemed to be inferring these countries were backward and regressive.

Those examples clearly contrast with the image that some journalists tried to represent of the Indian philosophy that teaches people to consider the “entire world as one family” (*The Pioneer*, 2/3/2014), as well as the construction of the Indian collective consciousness and national identity as having emerged from the “confluence”, “assimilation” and “co-existence” of different cultures, religions and languages (*Indian Express*, 8/6/2018), which should rather contribute to pluralism and tolerance. This is perhaps why enhancing India’s positive image through the attention paid to the strategic friendship with Bhutan, for example, may have seemed to some writers as an advantage. At the same time, the tiny Buddhist country became globally known as a pacifist “happy country” due to the way India contrasted its image with other neighbouring countries with which India has more complicated relationships.

Still talking about positive self-representations, a relatively underexplored area of coverage of the mental health of Indians, for example, may corroborate some authors’ arguments that journalists in the Indian commercial media tend to avoid some critical or distressing articles (Rodrigues and Ranganathan 2015) and many English-language newspapers in India may be prioritising news that would satisfy elite readers (Batabyal *et al.* 2011). Most importantly, nationalist discourses, which tended to exert a biopolitical influence on how people should conceive happiness in the country, may have masked more detailed analysis of the statistics regarding Indians’ mental health in the newspapers. Indeed, considering that 260 million Indians currently deal with mental health issues (WHO 2019), the use of terms such as “mental health” and “depression” in only 8% and 6% of the sample,

respectively, reflects what the *Hindu* (11/10/2016) denounced: “mental health issues in India are still brushed under the carpet”. There were no long-read articles entirely dedicated to the mental well-being of Indians, which could have offered a more comprehensive notion of the actual impact of psychological problems on people’s happiness. Yet, relevant references to these problematics permeated throughout other themes, and some journalists expressed concerns with regards to mental illnesses in India.

Avoiding such uncomfortable but relevant debate in the media can be seen as a sign of weakness of some journalists, but, at the same time, it also reflects the nationalist attitude I mentioned before, which tends to influence subjectivities and promote a positive mentality among the population by ‘selling’ a better version of ‘reality’. This practice would be part of the government’s propaganda strategy, also used in order to directly or indirectly naturalise negative aspects of society (e.g. mental health issues, a growing inequality, religious discrimination) and keep people ‘satisfied’.

As Duncan (2020: 88) has argued, “new utilitarianism” aims at controlling or managing populations by normalising and moralising ‘happiness’, and a remarkable headline in the *Hindustan Times* (9/4/2016) can be associated with this top-down hierarchy of control: “To be unhappy is to be anti-national”. Indeed, this article is an example of how public discourses can reinforce the idea of happiness as a social norm (see Ehrenreich 2010ab, Davies 2016), supporting a neoliberal agenda where the state tries to limit its role in social welfare by transferring to people the responsibility for their own happiness. However, this shift of responsibility from structures to the individual promotes an individualistic understanding of happiness which creates a scenario where people are free to be happy, but they cannot be sure they will succeed in life and they need to take all the risks

alone. When it comes to positively representing a country such as India and its government in the media, statistics provided by mental health research, for example, which may suggest that many individuals are actually struggling to lead a happy life, do not seem to be the information that journalists or newspapers (which do not oppose the Prime Minister) decide to propagate.

However, despite all these movements and strategies, self-criticism, pessimism and sadness are not absent from the Indian newspapers. Indeed, spiritualist references and nationalist narratives, which aim to create a happy image of India, were often contrasted with examples of hopelessness and sharp criticisms towards the Indian people themselves. Some writers suggested, for instance, that Indians have a passive attitude when it comes to contributing to their own happiness. Reference to frequent complaints and even a sense of victimhood appeared in the *Pioneer* (9/4/2018): “our unhappiness is self-created” and “we dream too much without doing anything”. Also, in a notable article in the *Hindu* (23/4/2017), although the journalist does not seem to agree with the WHR’s concept and methodology, he admits that the report is not wrong with regards to India’s poor performance in the ranking. The writer blames the Indians for “distrust”, “corruption” and “lawless behaviour”, also suggesting that even social support, arguably thought of as an attribute of the Indian people, is rather a privilege of wealthy and powerful citizens – denoting complexity, heterogeneity and inequalities within the national context.

As the analysis made in this chapter has shown, the happiness debate frequently became the unhappiness debate in the Indian newspapers – perhaps against the will of different groups from politicians to spiritualists. This finding complicates the idea that mainstream, English-language newspapers in India tend to explore “emotive” instead of

“hard stories” and avoid distress, as default attitudes suggested by authors such as Rodrigues and Ranganathan (2015) and Batabyal *et. al* (2011).

Indeed, the constructions of ‘happiness’ appearing in the news media reflected India’s heterogeneity and therefore some contradictions in the public discourse. On the one hand, India needs to grow and become an economic superpower like many powerful, sometimes demonised Western societies. On the other hand, the country’s tradition and the sense of a ‘spiritual nation’ does not seem to be enough in order to promote a collective happiness these days. Of course, news stories are just versions of reality. But if one expected to read about the vibrant colours of Holi – the Hindu spring festival – in the Indian newspapers, they probably end up reflecting upon Allen’s conclusion about the nature of happiness, quoted in the *Indian Express* (22/3/2017): “Therefore, to be happy, one must love to suffer.”

Chapter 6: Happiness in British newspapers: The contrast between scepticism and positivity

6.1. Introduction

Britain offers an interesting scenario when it comes to the study of happiness. At the same time as British academics and policymakers have actively contributed to the development of so-called happiness science, they have also shared influential counter-discourses that problematise the topic and stimulate in-depth reflections which tend to deconstruct the image of a ‘standard’, individualistic happiness, as I will discuss in this chapter. On the one hand, Britain has its own ‘happiness tsar’: labour economist Richard Layard, who started working on depression during Tony Blair’s government and then focused on happiness when David Cameron was Prime Minister. For Layard (2011), measuring happiness is not only possible but also necessary, and happiness is not directly correlated to wealth. Although this framework appears to be inviting at first glance since it tries to detach happiness from material factors, it can nonetheless be criticised if drawing upon critical theory since it does not properly challenge the status quo. More critical writers such as sociologist and political economist William Davies, on the other hand, are concerned with the so-called ‘happiness industry’ and its rules which stimulate, as Segal (2017: 9) has argued, “cycles of debt that trap so many today in economic misery”. But it is not just theory that has criticised measuring happiness: as I have been showing in these analytical chapters, media discourse has also focused on these problematics, and the UK newspapers offer substantial material in support of this argument.

Given the heterogeneity of narratives and counter-narratives which emerge from the happiness debate, although the controversial attempt to measure ‘happiness’ has normally stimulated reflection and created dissent in each cultural context that I have analysed, data collected from the UK press provides even more contrast and vibrancy to the images of happiness represented in the media by bringing innovative ways of thinking about and framing the topic. Before happiness and its systematic study began to dominate relevant news stories in Britain, then Prime Minister David Cameron invested £2m per year in the first national happiness survey which began in April 2011, one year before the publication of the WHR’s first edition. To Cameron’s contentment, 76% of Britons reported their life satisfaction at 7 (out of 10) or more. This was a quite positive result, but the PM’s investments in the happiness survey were heavily criticised in the media because of the controversy around the usefulness of happiness research. One year later, the WHR started to be published by the United Nations and, since then, the UK has never appeared in the top 10 of happiest nations. However, the country has significantly improved its performance since 2017 and rose 10 positions in the ranking – jumping from the 23rd place in 2016 to the 13th in 2020 – contradicting speculation about the population’s higher anxiety and stress levels because of the risks and uncertainties caused by Brexit.

In this context, one can ask which criteria have been observed to indicate that British people are getting happier despite the fact that social, economic and political issues are at a delicate moment of the country’s history. This question appears to be intimately related to money, individualism and nationalism at first glance, but the discourse constructed by commentators in my sample, and the dominant media frames they drew upon, showed much more nuanced narratives through different interpretations of the happiness of the British population. What is particularly interesting in media texts from the UK press is that the ways

in which discourse has been constructed are far from being obvious or predictable, and readers are encouraged to create their own notion of happiness because in many ways – despite their eclecticism – these texts suggest that happiness is something subjective. Overall, happiness discourse in the UK seems to hold promise in troubling any notion of a standardised happiness that can be unproblematically measured across contexts. However, at the same time the emphasis on subjectivity itself carries dangers as the type of subject posited is often informed by neoliberal notions of individuals being responsible for their own happiness through market-led solutions and high competitiveness, as eloquently discussed by authors such as Binkley (2014), Brown (2015) and Bowsher (2018a).

Moreover, the national sample speaks to a wider discursive formation which shows how politicised the happiness debate has become in the contemporary UK. In talking about the practice of measuring happiness in particular, the *Financial Times* encapsulated the impression that its time may have already passed. While happiness as a guide to government policy appeared to be “part of the zeitgeist” when Barack Obama and David Cameron were in office, the newspaper pointed out that “it now seems strangely out of step with the times: whatever you think is driving Britain’s current PM Theresa May or US president Donald Trump, it seems unlikely to be surveys of life satisfaction” (25/1/2018). According to the article, the main point now is what happiness means for government policy and whether the academic study of well-being can really contribute to it.

More recently, though, Richard Layard claimed in an interview for the *Observer* (19/1/2020)⁸ that, since “people’s votes reflect more how they feel in terms of non-economic causes of their enjoyment of life than the economic causes”, governments still tend to make

⁸ This article is not included in my fixed sample.

well-being their target because of “self-interest”. This reinforces the idea that, in a Foucauldian sense, happiness indexes have opened space for something commonly thought of as an emotion to be subject to biopolitical intervention in order to strengthen the governance of the population. Indeed, the WHR itself states its aim is about encouraging policy intervention, which corroborates that it has a productive role in constructing what happiness means and how it should be acted upon.

However, media discourse about these developments had a complicated role with the biopolitical management of ‘happiness’ and often questioned and criticised these interventions. With regards to the scientific approach to happiness, even though some journalists took for granted that measuring happiness is a trendy “new paradigm” which could help in “redefining our notion of growth” (*The Guardian*, 11/4/12), the practice was also, at times, considered ‘totalitarian’ and ‘manipulative’. Indeed, even though the apparent ‘warm welcome’ from a non-conformist newspaper such as the *Guardian* happened at the launch of the WHR, back in 2012, controversy was a constant within heterogeneous discourses of happiness as both positive and negative opinions about the study were recurrently found in the national sample regardless of the year.

What remains clear is, as my analysis will show, the ability that especially ‘quality press’ had to contest systemic attempts to measure and intervene in happiness and contribute to re-thinking a priori ideas related to a standard notion of happiness in contemporary societies. This tendency makes discourses shared by some British journalists even closer to academic criticisms of happiness science and policy. Yet, recurrent ‘motivational’ articles – which follow a biopolitical tendency associated with the happiness industry – contrasted with some writers’ concerns with rationality and scepticism towards ‘happiness’,

demonstrating that there is also room for journalists to explore narratives related to positive thinking in the British press. One of the main patterns that stands out from the national sample is, indeed, the opposition but sometimes also negotiation between scepticism and the positivity embraced by journalists in the UK, which the rich material collected from newspapers will illustrate.

6.2. Sample

Similarly to the samples analysed in the previous chapters, I have selected a total of six newspapers in order to represent the British press – in this case, three broadsheets and three tabloids. The *Guardian* (including a few articles from the *Observer*, a sister newspaper of the Guardian Media Group published on Sundays) was chosen for its critical approach and left of centre editorial stance. The *Telegraph* contributes to the analysis with a more conservative perspective, whereas the *Financial Times*, a liberal, international daily newspaper, offers a specialised framework focused on business and economic news. As regards to the tabloids, the right-wing stance is represented by the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* – both with wide circulation across the UK and known as influential and opinion-forming publications especially with regards to the general population – whereas the *Daily Mirror*, considered as “the only popular daily that supports the Labour Party” according to Nexis database website, contributed with its leftist perspective.

In total, 177 documents were collected from the UK press through the Nexis database, and the articles were not counted twice in the cases in which they contained both

the terms ‘WHR’ and ‘national happiness’. Instead each article was only registered once and added to the table to which it was predominantly related, as follows:

Table 6.1. Documents containing the term ‘World Happiness Report’ (2012-2018).

<u>WHR</u>	Happiness	WB Indexes	Economics & business	Politics & Int’l.	Lifestyle	Health &Env.	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>Guardian</i>	2	8	1	1	7	2	-	21
<i>F. Times</i>	4	2	5	2	2	1	-	16
<i>The Sun</i>	2	3	-	-	4	-	-	9
<i>D. Mail</i>	2	2	-	-	1	-	-	5
<i>Mirror</i>	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	4
<i>Telegraph</i>	1	3	1	-	3	1	-	9
<i>Total</i>	11	22	7	3	17	4	-	64

Table 6.2. Documents containing the term ‘National Happiness’ (2012-2018).

<u>NH</u>	Happiness	WB Indexes	Economics & business	Politics & Int’l.	Lifestyle (+Brits)	Health &Env.	Other	<i>All</i>
<i>Guardian</i>	6	21	4	9	11	3	-	54
<i>F. Times</i>	1	7	5	3	-	1	1	18
<i>The Sun</i>	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	3
<i>D. Mail</i>	2	2	1	1	9	-	-	15
<i>Mirror</i>	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
<i>Telegraph</i>	2	6	2	2	8	2	-	22
<i>Total</i>	12	38	12	15	29	6	1	113

In the same way as both the American and Indian samples, the majority of the articles in the UK newspapers were focused on well-being indexes or the measurement of happiness (34%, the higher proportion for this specific topic in relation to the other two national contexts). A particular difference, in comparison to the US and India, was that lifestyle

articles came in second place representing 26% of the UK sample – more than double the average of this specific main theme if considered my entire sample (see compiled Table 3.1 in the methodology). In descending order of frequency, there were also articles on happiness more broadly (13%), from which interesting insights were taken and used in different sections in order to illustrate different positions on happiness in the UK context; then, economics and business articles (11%, which coincides with the average for this main theme); politics (10%, or half of the average which was increased by the number of politics articles found in the Indian sample); and, finally, health and environment (6%, again, precisely the average for these themes considering the sample as a whole).

The *Guardian/Observer* had the highest number of published articles, with remarkable proportions regarding both the ‘WHR’ (33%) and ‘national happiness’ (48%) within the national sample. The *Financial Times* was second when it came to articles on the ‘WHR’ (25%), whereas the *Telegraph* was second with articles on ‘national happiness’ (nearly 20%). In talking about media genres, the proportion in the UK sample was: long-form work (42%), news and short articles (28%), columns and notes (20%), editorials (4%), letters (3%), interviews (2%), and book reviews (1%) (see compiled Table 3.2 in the methodology).

As the tables 6.1 and 6.2 show, the number of documents related to ‘national happiness’ is almost double that of those which explored the ‘WHR’ more specifically in the UK sample. Most of the documents containing these terms were published in broadsheet newspapers, whereas a substantially lower number appeared in tabloids – although sometimes exceptions happened as in the cases of ‘WHR’ in the *Sun* (with double the articles of the other tabloids) and ‘national happiness’ in the *Daily Mail* (predominantly lifestyle

articles). Unsurprisingly, the *Financial Times* concentrated the highest number of documents related to economics and business specifically (52% of the total, considering both ‘WHR’ and ‘national happiness’ together); whereas none of the tabloids dedicated entire articles to the discussion of the happiness report from, for example, a strictly political perspective.

The distribution between the different subjects was more balanced when it came to articles containing the term ‘national happiness’, which were significantly more diverse from each other in comparison to those mainly focused on the happiness ranking. With regards to more evident patterns among the newspapers, the *Guardian* normally criticised the primacy of money in the achievement of happiness and contributed to the debate about stereotypes and attitudes towards experiencing happiness in the country. When it came to psychological aspects of happiness related to national character and identity, the *Telegraph* concentrated half of their articles with this topic as a background issue and tended to follow an optimistic approach by relying on positive thinking practices in order to send a positive message to their readership – in line with conservative doctrines of individualism.

In talking about mental health, statistics were relatively underexplored within the sample at the same time that motivational discourses gained more column space – especially within articles under the newspapers’ health and lifestyle sections (as I mentioned the case of the *Telegraph*) – and these findings will be shown in detail in Section 6.7. Taking advantage of this tendency that journalists focused on psychological aspects of happiness, I decided to begin my analysis with sections about narratives involving personality and attitudes towards life as a way of exploring the British way of living, as discussed in Sections 6.3 (on happiness across the UK) and 6.4 (on the ‘British’ character), before turning to more recurrent themes such as the influence of money and the measurement of happiness.

Indeed, innovative discourses related to different, original ways of representing happiness in the media were provided especially by texts included in that remarkable 26% of lifestyle articles which served as raw material for two other interesting sections in this chapter. A fairly post-structuralist exercise, proposed by some British journalists in order to ‘deconstruct’ a priori ideas of happiness, was discussed in Section 6.5; whereas the unusual perspective – at least regarding what one usually expects from the mainstream media – that frames happiness as actually something ‘boring’ became the sub-theme I elaborate on in Section 6.6.

In talking especially about main themes such as politics and well-being indexes, the UK sample provided enough material to develop other three different (yet related) sub-themes: starting by highlighting discourses which reveal a highly competitive spirit and the tendency to compare the UK to other nations (Section 6.8); then, the potential effects of Brexit for the happiness (or unhappiness) of Britons (Section 6.9), a topic which emerged from my longitudinal analysis since the EU referendum happened during the time period of my sample; and also the discussion of narratives involving the ways UK journalists tended to portray Bhutan, a true protagonist when it comes to happiness news (Section 6.10). In addition to these particular paths through the UK sample, more ‘expected’ (yet necessary) sections were included in order to show how British journalists explored the relationship between happiness and money (normally identified within economics articles), discussed in Section 6.11, and, of course, the most popular topic, with 34% of the national sample, the well-being indexes and the quantification of happiness more broadly in Section 6.12.

6.3. Happiness across the UK

In contrast to arguable traits of the British character such as ‘shyness’ (see Scott 2006) and ‘self-deprecation’ (see Thomas & Antony 2015, also Mills 2017) – points I will discuss in more depth in Section 6.4 – clear signs of positivity and a motivational tone appeared since the beginning of the period in which journalists started to explore the WHR and the measurement of happiness in the UK press. Just a few months after the launch of the WHR in 2012, the ONS published its first happiness study in the UK under the Cameron government. The findings indicated that, “[a]fter years of being thought of as a nation of grumps and complainers... [the] index has disclosed that we are surprisingly cheerful”, journalist John Bingham revealed in the *Telegraph* (25/7/2012). In his representative article, Bingham showed that the situation appeared to be quite comforting at least for those interested in maintaining the status quo. According to the official study, “[m]ore than three quarters of the population rate themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with their lives and 80 per cent have a strong sense of self-worth” (*ibidem*).

The national happiness index provided an overview of the people with the highest levels of well-being in the country, and the most contented members of society at that time were pensioners and teenagers – essentially the non-economically active population. However, married couples and homeowners appeared to be “more satisfied with their lives than others” (*ibidem*), which suggest that levels of happiness also depended on people’s age and personal and economic stability. When it came to gender, the research found that women are “consistently more upbeat and content than men”; whereas “people in rural areas emerged as more contented than those in towns and cities.” Indeed, Bingham pointed out that those living in the West Midlands and London were considered as “the most depressed”,

and Londoners were said to be “by far the most anxious people” in the country – interestingly, those who were most happy tended to align with the paper’s readership.

In talking about the best places for those who want to lead a happy a life in the UK, the *Telegraph* (25/7/2012) mentioned research that has indicated Scotland (particularly the Western Isles, Shetland and Orkney), Rutland, Bath and the South East region (except London) as areas where people reported the highest levels of well-being in 2012. The *Daily Mail* (28/8/2015) revealed that, despite the fact that “Britons have dreamed of retiring to the seaside” for generations, statistics have shown that “[t]hriving seaside communities have become some of the most deprived areas in Britain” and “every single one of the ten British towns with the highest divorce rates was beside the sea”. It is interesting that the link between divorce and unhappiness emerged here, reinforcing the ONS finding that married couples usually report higher satisfaction with life in comparison to other demographics, and aligning with the newspaper’s own socially conservative ideology.

Still on the quality of life in the capital, journalist Max Davidson agreed in the *Daily Mail* that Londoners are “the most miserable people” in the country: “They are doing OK economically... But money alone does not dictate happiness” (*ibidem*). Although many people usually head to London in search of job opportunities and higher stipends, some commentators revealed that what really makes the majority of Britons happy was the opposite of the capital’s typical buzz: apparently, they prefer a quiet life in the countryside. Indeed, even though people say there is no recipe for happiness, Davidson pointed out that “[l]ife in the country, a good view and not too many neighbours seem to help” (*Daily Mail*, 28/8/2015). Accordingly, the *Guardian* (20/1/2018) published that recent research indicated Northern Ireland, Craven in Yorkshire, North Warwickshire and Orkney as the best places

to live, “confirming the suspicion that all the UK needs for cheer is green hills, decent house prices, few people and lots of sheep.”

Even though people might assume that emphasis on the countryside is due to the newspapers’ demographics, it is notable the *Guardian* (20/1/2018) also mentioned it but more sarcastically in tone. Yet, these examples suggest that some Britons do not need to be surrounded by many people in order to be happy: references to “not too many neighbours” (*Daily Mail*, 28/8/2015) and “few people” (*Guardian*, 20/1/2018) indicate that perhaps silence and peacefulness is the preference at least for part of the population. As an example of how some Britons find happiness in a remote place such as Orkney, the *Sun* (20/1/2013) gave voice to an ‘ordinary’ couple – Margareth (66) and Al Richards (77 years-old) – who live in the Scottish island “which statistically makes them the happiest people in the UK”, as surveys repeatedly indicated Orkney as Britain’s best place to live in terms of quality of life. According to Margareth, the secret of the island is all about the simple and healthy life people are able to live there, which apparently contributes to social capital and meaningful social bonds, and therefore strengthens social equality and security as well as the inhabitants’ sense of collectivity – a narrative which resonates with the idea of a good life suggested by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) and contrasts those discursive formations about the struggles people may experience in London, for example.

But journalists did not always romanticise living away from the big cities. Considering different regions within the country, some commentators elaborated on particular lifestyles and people’s attitudes in the north and south. Differently from the study mentioned in the *Telegraph* (25/7/2012) I referred to above, the *Observer* (23/4/2017) published the headline: “Scotland a happy place? Don’t make me laugh”. In the *Telegraph*

(6/8/2014), novelist Andrew Martin shared his stereotypical view on some psychological and socio-economic aspects that he personally attributes to populations from distinct regions of England:

“The northern tone is famously glum. It is actually not possible to say, ‘Have a nice day’ in the northern accent. I think this derives from the factory floor or the trade union meeting, the communal endeavour associated with the North. You kept your head down. In the south, by contrast, there was the sole trader, who exuberantly cried his wares... [But] Northerners are not as gloomy as they once were, because they’re not as northern as they once were. Globalisation has seen to that. It has also eroded the class system.”

This specific extract shows that the perception of people’s mood can be related to stereotypes and the class politics of the newspaper which is inferring that collective labour and struggle is negative, whereas globalisation and individualism is good – a narrative Bowsher (2018a) would have criticised by associating it to the formation of “neoliberal subjectivity”. Indeed, Martin’s comments are influenced by cultural homogenisation due to the process of globalisation (Friedman 1994) and eventually tend to normalise a dominant culture as well as a standard lifestyle which is seen as the right way to find happiness, in line with parameters such as those considered by the WHR and usually observed in elite nations.

On the other hand, chief leader writer for the *Guardian* (20/11/2012), Randeep Ramesh, pointed out that the unhappiest people in Britain are not always the most deprived – a notion that helps to deconstruct a priori ideas of a thriving and happy south and a deprived and less happy north of England. Ramesh wrote that “reported life satisfaction in Hartlepool

was higher than in Blackburn despite similar levels of deprivation”, and the leader of the government’s Behavioural Insights Team, David Halpern, tried to explain: “Look at Rutland, which is similarly wealthy to Wokingham. Yet levels of life satisfaction are much higher.” According to Halpern, in addition to the financial situation other factors such as being in contact with nature are equally important to people’s well-being: “Rutland is built near lakes. So we think environment does make a difference to happiness. It seems that if you can see a tree you are happier” (*ibidem*). This argument perpetuates a longstanding discourse where the stressful city is portrayed as lying in contrast with the “good life” offered by the countryside (see Fitzgerald *et al.* 2016).

Based on the examples chosen to illustrate this section, it remains clear that, even though some newspapers allege that globalisation has contributed to a sort of standardisation of people’s lifestyle within a small country such as the UK (as novelist Andrew Martin suggested in the *Telegraph*), there is prejudice when it comes to defining who is happier than who across the country, and dominant classes still appear to be seen by many as a ‘model’ to be followed – which is also related to individualism and the Thatcherist idea that the individual is more important than society. However, insights such as those provided by Ramesh and Halpern, in the *Guardian*, reminded readers that happiness, as something subjective par excellence, depends on many factors which cannot be limited to mere preconceptions normally related to material understandings of quality of life, the reputation of places, and stereotypes which are usually attributed to wealthy countries or the wealthiest regions of a particular country.

6.4. “Miserable” but proudly British

Among the three sets of newspapers included in my sample, those published in the UK showed more evident examples of self-stereotyping in which journalists elaborated on certain perceived traits of their most common national characteristics. With lifestyle articles representing 26% of the UK data, the national sample provided substantial material in order to illustrate this sub-theme. Despite the discretion of most of British people, whose shyness and reserve are apparently part of their national character as suggested by Scott (2006: 137), talking publicly about some of their stereotypical attributes as a national group does not seem to be a taboo for the British press. Even if there is also a tendency of representing the UK as a strong and proud nation despite of the difficulties they (as any other population) need to deal with, many commentators did not spare words when it came to highlighting certain awkward, if not negative aspects of the British way of living. It sounded like journalists wanted to be transparent by pointing out certain problems they admitted they had instead of just focusing on positive self-representation (although this eventually appears). But they constructed these narratives with a sense of humour, to demystify those problems and show self-confidence at the same time – which seemed to be related to the way they imagine themselves as a national group (see Anderson 2006).

According to the UK data, British people tend to be sarcastic while communicating in public and they are usually ‘up for a laugh’. Apparently, this makes UK journalists feel more comfortable to talk about themselves and also helps making certain subjects less tense, as television presenter Saira Khan commented in the *Mirror* (18/3/2018) on the “sad news” about the UK’s fall in the WHR 2018: “Smiles behind... but laugh on”. But negative views on the British national character and lifestyle also appeared in some articles about happiness.

Journalist Max Davidson appeared to be quite desperate in a comment he made in the *Daily Mail* (28/8/2015): “Truly, happiness in Britain is an elusive thing”, as he reported that three studies emerged in less than 48 hours and “redefined” what makes Britons happy – including one that suggested British school children are “among the unhappiest in the world”.

Another interesting example of pessimism or maybe just low self-esteem, in this case relating to the WHR results more specifically, was published in the *Financial Times* (13/9/2013) revealing what some Britons think about themselves in comparison to those considered by the index as the happiest populations in the world:

“Oh, perfect: another study concludes that Scandinavia is wonderful. The Swedes, Norwegians and Danes are already known to be the best educated, most egalitarian and richest, not to mention the tallest and blondest. Now the [WHR]... rubs our noses in it by finding the five happiest countries to be Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands and Sweden. The rest of us – ignorant, unequal, poor, short and ugly – cannot help but feel our misery all the more.”

There is a sarcastic tone in the extract above, which means that the newspaper⁹ is criticising the happiness index itself. Still, the resentment in the reporter’s words indicate that the core issue of the comment can be also seen as a question of ego. For example, if the UK had had a better result in the ranking that year, perhaps the newspaper could have chosen a more sombre discourse and avoided certain physical and socio-economic comparisons which may sound like a humiliation for Britain itself. Author David Webster, in turn, showed

⁹ The text was published in a column signed by the anonymous *Financial Times*’ Lex team.

in the *Guardian* (30/10/2014) that commentators can be genuine, transparent and critical, even towards their fellow nationals, without losing control:

“Seeing ourselves as grumpy, miserable and cynical is a part of our cultural construction that many of us in the UK revel in. It is, in one sense, the way of our people. Moaning about the world (especially with a faintly nostalgic tone) is a staple of popular non-fiction.”

Interestingly, these narratives illustrate the idea that British people are happy being miserable, which means some writers made a positive self-representation out of a negative finding. “But it isn’t that we have this aspect to the myth of our national character”, Webster continued, “it’s the self-consciousness with which we possess it.” Indeed, authors such as Thomas and Antony (2015: 497) take eccentricity and self-deprecation as “inherently British values”, and Mills (2017) holds that self-deprecating humour is a characteristic of British identity – feeding into a cultural myth of being more ‘civil’ and ‘polite’ than nations such as the US that are seen as overly hyperbolic about their achievements.

Back to Webster’s article, acting almost as a therapist the writer sent a message to his fellow nationals: “Let’s embrace our grumpiness. We can’t help it – it’s the British way”, he admitted. “Our alleged predisposition for depression could be viewed more positively. For a start, cynicism is good for democracy” (*ibidem*). In the online version, this passage was slightly modified and the author appeared to be even more incisive as regards to his notion of Britishness: “It may start as a celebration of grumpiness, but perhaps we could argue that cynicism is good for democracy, and a feature of national character that we should nurture.” Webster’s comments appear to be more sombre than the previous ones collected

from the *Financial Times*. He encapsulates one of the characteristics observed in some commentators' discourse which suggests that Britons are proud of themselves no matter the issues and defects they are discussing – publicly – and this self-confidence even allows them to laugh at themselves. However, even though this discourse seems to be about British people laughing at themselves, it ultimately perpetuates a sense of national identity that is more discerning and self-reflexive than other allegedly 'happier' nations.

6.5. (De)constructing happiness

Some British journalists, along with critical theorists and opinion leaders in general, were bold enough to suggest that happiness is not limited to the standardised, mainstream notion people usually spread through and assimilate from public narratives including those created by the mass media. In line with this argument, some journalists and commentators tried to 'deconstruct' the preconception of happiness in order to elaborate on what people needed to know about it from a broader perspective – perhaps through a path which at least tried to seem 'free' of more rigid ideologies (if compared to the US and Indian samples) to a certain extent. Still, British journalists tended to portray the happiness index as lacking objectivity at the same time as they portrayed themselves as possessing it. Indeed, the discourse many writers constructed in the UK press is one that centralises notions of rationality and objectivity, and avoids superficial and romanticised approaches to the topic of happiness. In modern times, this has been the normative position of newspaper journalism in the broadsheets, whereas tabloids are seen to be more emotional (cf. Franklin *et al.* 2005).

To illustrate an almost 'anti-happiness' approach observed in some articles, there is an example in which the *Guardian* contributor Tim Dowling was emphatic: "Come on, this

is Britain – we don't like to be too happy" (21/3/2017). According to the writer, the 19th position in the WHR is "about right... Any higher and we might have been embarrassed" (*ibidem*). This passage reinforces the idea that eccentricity and self-deprecation are British characteristics (see Thomas & Antony 2015, also Mills 2017), and also shows how some British commentators were sceptical in relation to happiness science – despite the influence of UK-based scholars such as Richard Layard, who is considered pioneer in the systematic study of happiness.

It is rare to find articles in the UK broadsheets that highlight a naïve and almost foolish side of happiness normally represented in popular culture – which can suggest a positive group representation as Britons are normally portrayed as more intelligent or rational against the emotional US, for example. A sort of stereotypical image of "hollow happiness" – a term used by Segal (2017: 3) – was criticised by the *Guardian* (22/9/2016) even when it came to the famous Bhutan and its influence over the drive for happiness in the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as the newspaper referred to the Himalayan country as "India's annoyingly cheerful next-door neighbour".

Interestingly, British scepticism about 'hollow' happiness was reinforced (and maybe justified) by the religious notion that perhaps happiness isn't even possible in mundane, material life. In the conservative *Telegraph* (6/8/2014), novelist Andrew Martin suggested a certain disapproval of the superficial conceptualisation of happiness which appears to be diffused in modern societies and in this case indicates the writer's construction of unhappiness as superior:

“My scepticism might have been informed by a latent Christianity; happiness would follow in the afterlife... And there was something indecent about pursuing your own happiness. Or maybe it’s just that I’m suspicious of the word ‘happiness’. I equate it with a lack of intelligence.”

Martin has turned, then, to modern strategies (not necessarily to achieve happiness, but rather) to avoid unhappiness in the contemporary world. This attitude reveals the writer’s cautiousness and also his attempt to avoid frustrations usually caused by people’s high expectations to be/feel happy that are more likely to generate stress and disappointment (cf. Berlant 2011). In this way, the writer referred to psychological mechanisms he finds useful:

“If you know a good joke, don’t post it on Facebook. If it gets no likes, you’ll be miserable... If you must take a selfie, don’t look at it. Don’t Google your own name... You can’t avoid being graded, but you can avoid seeing the grades”
(*Telegraph*, 6/8/2014).

Advice such as the indicated above suggests a link to national imaginaries and a discourse in which the UK tries to distance itself from the materialism of nations such as the US. What Martin suggests is a need to lower expectations in order to avoid frustration. Getting some distance from reality and trying to be dry instead of too emotional can be considered an attitude opposed to that of chasing happiness at all costs which critical theorists have condemned (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Ehrenreich 2010ab). However, if the attitude proposed by Martin is a response against the happiness industry, other aspects of this particular discursive construction of happiness lie in contrast with critical happiness studies. Despite being critical of a political and social emphasis on happiness, these media discourses place the emphasis

on individuals finding ways to deal with suffering and unhappiness through developing personal resilience rather than recognising that structural factors might constrain possibilities for happiness.

Interestingly, though, suffering is framed here in quite a different way if compared to the perhaps less motivational and apparently more resilient discourses found in an article of the Indian sample, in which the writer not only ‘embraced’ suffering but also claimed that, if people really want to be happy, they “must love to suffer” (see pp. 186-187) – in line with counter-discourses of happiness in critical theory (e.g., Ahmed 2010).

According to the analysis of the UK newspapers, despite being transparent and admitting that they feel “miserable” at times, some commentators also suggest that, in the end, they are proud to be British. In order to illustrate this point, apparently related to rationality, I will give two remarkable examples in which writers have elaborated on debates regarding the deterministic influence of genetics over people’s happiness in the UK. In the *Guardian* (30/10/2014), David Webster reported that studies have shown happiness is related to genetic heritage and Britons seem to be predisposed for depression. But, given his sceptical view on these hypotheses, the commentator firmly defended his national group: “Leaving aside the science, there is something revealing about the delight taken in declaring this apparent genetic determinism... [But w]e don’t need gene science to tell us how much we take pleasure in our role.”

As Webster made these arguments, science correspondent Fiona Macrae shared a slightly different view on the matter in the *Daily Mail* (18/7/2014), as she apparently agreed with genetic theories of happiness – as long as they matched her own interests. Since

“Denmark regularly tops world happiness scales” and scientists even found that “[t]he key to happiness is having Danish DNA”, Macrae pointed out that Britons don’t need to be “too downhearted” at those revelations because “further evidence suggested that happiness can spread between continents in immigrant genes” and “[t]he genetic make-up of Britons is quite similar to that of the Danes.” Both writers seem to be valorising what it means to be British: *Daily Mail* perhaps in a more overt way, and the *Guardian* perhaps using sarcasm to reflect on genetic heritage. However, both examples show that writers can perpetuate a discourse that humans are intrinsically competitive, and therefore it is inevitable that particular nations want to win the ‘battle’.

In this context, both Webster and Macrae tried to defend their national group and take advantage from the most favourable perspective in each case. These examples are representative of the biopolitical role that the happiness debate can play within public discourses and, even if these narratives seem to contradict each other, they have other things in common. First, the attempt to positively represent the writers’ national group according to their own interests and views of the world. Second, neither article really challenges genetics as a discourse in any fundamental way. However, geneticisation of happiness is problematic and deterministic as it totally neglects any contribution of structural factors to unhappiness – undermining what the happiness indexes are trying to do. Indeed, genetics suggests that happiness cannot be changed by context and deflects responsibility away from any need to address structural change, as hinted at by the upper echelons of the happiness index being dominated by left leaning nations.

6.6. What if happiness is boring?

British boldness reached its climax, though, when the *Financial Times* columnist John Kay came up with the idea that happiness can actually mean something “boring”. In comparison to more predictable narratives more or less related to material or spiritual happiness (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), this unusual perspective proposed by Kay sounds quite liberating as it suggests that the apparent never-ending debate on happiness may seem tedious and even unnecessary for some individuals (cf. Joshanloo & Weijers 2014, also Ahmed 2010). In this way, his article also challenges a priori ideas, preconceptions and social myths about happiness.

In order to explain precisely what he means by happiness as “boring”, Kay focused on the environment people live in and pointed out that, considering different places in the world, “liveability does not equate to greatness and cities that top such [happiness] polls will never be global favourites” (*Financial Times*, 12/9/2015). Firstly, Kay criticises a survey conducted by *The Economist* group that equates liveability with speaking English, since eight out of its 10 top cities are located in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Then, he refers to another similar study, conducted by the American human resources company Mercer, which indicated that five out of 10 happiest cities actually speak German. Interestingly, the columnist’s point here is to suggest that studies involving subjective questions about the respondents’ feelings have always been conducted by socio-economic elites and through a Westernised, dominant-hegemonic framework (see Hall 1992) which is intimately related to the production of knowledge (Foucault 1980) and the creation of “neoliberal subjectivity” (Bowhser 2018a).

In this way, Kay pointed out that countries such as Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Canada are normally among the top nations in happiness rankings such as the WHR, but he claimed that “[t]here is another word besides happy that springs to mind when these countries are listed. That word is boring.” According to Kay, a number of factors that enter the assessment of liveability – such as security, hygiene and good public transport – “are necessary for fulfilling life, but they are not sufficient for it.” For Kay, the vibrancy of cities, which is “the product of spontaneous interactions”, is an important source of excitement and joy. Therefore, the columnist concluded that “boring is not enough” given that other places, which do not top happiness rankings, have “great historic interest” as well as “intellectual and economic vibrancy”.

“Liveability and happiness are complex concepts... Life in unhappy countries – Myanmar, Syria, Zimbabwe – is not boring, but much of the population desperately wishes it was... Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock” (*Financial Times*, 12/9/2015).

In the extract above, Kay brought an original perspective on happiness across cultures to the fore – although his narrative is based on cultural stereotypes. Still, this kind of debate stimulates a comparison between nations and their particular values and lifestyles: it considers the practical situation of each population and its difficulties, but also the capacity people have to transform reality in a positive way.

Kay also pointed out that life in certain less privileged countries may not be boring, whereas some of the ‘happiest’ countries on Earth were depicted by the writer as uninteresting places. A similar discursive formation was evoked by journalists in the *New York Times* (10/2/2013) when it came to higher reported happiness in ‘wealthy’ yet ‘boring’ western Long Island than in ‘vibrant’ Brooklyn (see page 151). Accordingly, journalist Paul Routledge suggested in the *Daily Mirror* (6/4/2012) that, while Nordic countries are “too boring”, Spain, France, Germany and Italy – old, cultured countries with a fantastic history and a unique way of life – don't even make it into the top 20”.

This debate has everything to do with the recurrent question explored in the present research related to the distinction between happiness and quality of life, which I will explore in more depth in the final conclusions. As Kay has argued, perhaps individuals living in the countries at the bottom of the happiness index can report they do not have good quality of life, but, on the other hand, people from the top countries in the list may well report that they are not happy at all. This reinforces, once more, how complex discussing happiness can be. This is truly a long discussion, but what counts the most, for now, is precisely the realisation through this analysis that mainstream media is able to promote this kind of ‘deep-talk’ – even if positive self-representation still runs through this discourse to some extent.

In addition to stimulating ontological questions on how different lifestyles can more or less contribute to people’s happiness, comparisons between places brought to the newspaper articles some insights on ‘boringness’ and ‘vibrancy’ as regards to a popular topic among Britons: the weather, which can help to understand how meteorological conditions perhaps influence people’s mood. Despite the fact that the WHR findings indicate that happiness appears to be most abundant a long way from the equator, commentators from the

UK often suggested that boringness was associated with bad weather, while good meteorological conditions are more inviting for having happy moments. Indeed, a blue sky and a beautiful day are frequently used as the ‘perfect’ scenery to suggest happiness in media and semiotic language. As a clear example of narratives which depict the summertime as an idealised ‘happy’ period, the *Guardian* (28/4/2015) once published that “[a]s the skies lighten and the days lengthen, many people feel a little brighter.”

Although writers in general tend to agree that the UK is not too privileged weather-wise, they didn’t avoid talking about good weather (even if abroad) and strategies to beat the ‘winter blues’. A social worker from Copenhagen, Knud Christensen, was quoted in the *Daily Mail* (18/3/2016) answering why Denmark was considered as the happiest country on Earth. “We have no worries. And if we do worry, it’s about the weather. Will it rain today, or remain gray or will it be cold?”, he said. Moreover, a travel article in the *Guardian* (25/1/2014) tried to sell Copenhagen as a “joyful city”, and freelance journalist Michael Booth asked Copenhageners what about their city that makes them happy. Unsurprisingly, at least one of the terms such as ‘sun’, ‘summer’, ‘summertime’, ‘summerhouses’, ‘sunsets’, ‘beach’ and ‘swimming pool’ were mentioned by eight out of 10 interviewees. Phrases such as “being close to water or trees” also appeared in the answers, as well as references to drinking wine, beer, hot chocolate and coffee.

Interestingly, examples such as these, depicting a positive atmosphere, came from somewhere else: Denmark, one of the happiest countries in the WHR. However, particular discursive formations tended to highlight similarities between ‘happy’ Denmark and the UK at some points in the national sample – a remarkable example of this, regarding genetics, appeared in the last section (6.5), and another one will be discussed now. Since the weather

is not the best for open air activities throughout the year both in the UK and Denmark, journalist Kate Langrish proposed in the *Sun* (19/4/2015) something which appears to be the alternative in both countries: “Embrace the cold”. For Langrish, the secret of being consistently the ‘happiest’ nation could be in the Danish concept of *hygge*: “fight off the darkness and embrace the shorter days by creating a warm, cosy glow inside the house and inviting loved ones over for food and drink”. Even the CEO of Denmark’s Happiness Research Institute, Meik Wiking, was quoted in the article, adding that “*hygge* is about atmosphere and connecting with family and friends”.

The journalist, then, took the opportunity to make a suggestion (as well as an advertisement) which she believes can beat boringness in cold days: “So, next time you’re moaning about the weather, light that Jo Malone candle and invite the girls over for a large glass of gløgg (Danish mulled wine).” The journalist’s example of Denmark, here, has to do with the country’s reputation as a ‘happy’ country but also the similarities between habits and the weather in Denmark and the UK – which represent them ‘together’, inferring that there is a British way of enjoying the *hygge* experience and also a quite elitist way of experiencing happiness. The atmosphere created by Langrish’s narrative involving ‘private’ happiness, drinking with friends and using luxury products, also recalls the association between emotional and capitalist relationships discussed by Illouz (2007). Through an even more critical perspective, it can be also argued that, embedded in this kind of discursive construction, there is the writer’s intention to portray her country as close to the (arguably) ‘happiest’ one, as well as the underlying reasoning that privileged nations ‘deserve’ to be happy (cf. Littler 2013, 2018).

6.7. Mental health: fewer statistics, more motivation

Despite the attention usually given to mental health in the UK and the frequency with which journalists touched on the topic more widely, statistics on mental illnesses were less explored than expected, especially in the national context. According to the NHS Confederation (2016), one in four people experience mental health problems in the UK, and research has found that “a fifth of adults (20.6%) reported that they had thought of taking their own life at some point in their lives” in England (McManus *et al.* 2016). However, commentators in these newspapers also showed a particular interest in the mental well-being conditions of other populations such as in the US, India, and Scandinavian countries. It is worth mentioning that, in comparison to the other publications in the sample, the *Guardian* dedicated more space to the topic – featuring 63% of the appearances of the term ‘mental health’, for example – and shared some criticisms of how British government still fails at supporting vulnerable people with psychological conditions.

This form of criticism happened when Richard Layard was quoted, revealing that treating mental health issues from an early age is “clearly more important than intellectual achievement for happiness” (*Guardian*, 20/11/2012). However, the expert claimed that “[t]his is not a current focus in the educational system” as “we are cutting back on child mental health services... [and] struggling to develop support for a child’s emotional side”. According to journalist Randeep Ramesh, Layard’s observation accentuated “a political divide between those who favour growth at all costs and those who favour social stability and wellbeing” (*ibidem*), and his concerns showed that there is still a lot to do in terms of mental health in the UK.

Differently from Layard's critical tone, though, some commentators gave more emphasis to positive instead of negative news involving mental health. Indeed, in many cases newspapers prioritised the optimistic, motivational side of the topic which is normally related to practices such as positive psychology. Prioritising positive (or motivational) instead of negative news on the subject of happiness can be at least partly related to an optimistic attitude, but prejudice also plays a role in this case. Indeed, the mental health campaign Time to Change promoted the *Attitudes to Mental Illness* national survey (2015) which indicated that, even though there were improvements of 6% in attitude change between 2011 and 2014, 87% of the respondents said that people with mental illness still experience stigma and discrimination in the UK. Accordingly, the *Guardian* (14/5/2014) referred to the fact that psychological issues appear to be a taboo even in progressive democracies: "nine out of 10 people using mental health services in England report experiencing discrimination as a consequence, with much of that hostility coming from family and friends."

The 'bright side' of the topic, related to stimulating individuals' happiness, appeared more frequently in the *Telegraph* which paid significant attention to questions surrounding people's behaviour and lifestyle, which featured in 50% of the articles in which the term 'psychology' was referred to. Interestingly, some journalists took the opportunity to offer advice on how people should act in order to live well, such as smiling more, avoiding excessive comparisons to others, and always trying to take a step back in order to understand better their own problems from a distance. In a society in which people are expected to be (or at least appear to be) happy in order to be socially accepted, dealing with mental health issues still seemed to be considered more as a problematic that individuals need to overcome rather than a health problem that requires support to manage.

In the *Sun* (7/4/2012), features writer Helen Morrogh provided a ‘quick guide’ to happiness including tips such as eating well, exercising, listening to music, volunteering and – curiously – even pretending to be happy. In a sense, her narrative recalls a remarkable passage of the *WHR* (2015, p. 8) itself, when authors openly claim that “happiness and well-being are best regarded as skills that can be enhanced through training” – which clearly shows the study’s close relation to Foucault’s (2008) notion of biopower. Morrogh wrote in the tabloid: “If you’re not feeling it [happiness], you can trick your emotions into thinking you are. Feelings follow actions, so if you make yourself act happy, you’ll start to believe you are happy.” Such a discursive formation is very much in line with the social rules for happiness, condemned by critical theorists such as Ahmed (2010), Davies (2016) and Ehrenreich (2010ab), and shows that discourses constructed in broadsheets and tabloids can be quite different. Indeed, tabloids such as the *Sun* tended to perpetuate discourses that it is the individual’s responsibility to be happy, erasing structural factors and presenting happiness as an ideal state to aspire to.

Following a more motivational approach which relates to the positive practices advocated by the *Sun*, author Stephen Covey was also quoted in the *Telegraph* (14/10/2017):

“Ten per cent of life is going to happen to you no matter what: s---happens [sic]... The 90 per cent, which determines whether you have a good or bad life, is how you choose to respond to that 10 per cent”.

Based on encouraging messages such as this, in talking about mental health more specifically some commentators flirted with positive thinking and suggested that happiness has

everything to do with how people respond to life events and their capacity to really contribute to their own well-being. This suggests a subtle shift here, as the previous quotes seem to be challenging the idea that happiness should be valorised, in line with Ahmed's (2010) arguments, but then motivational messages suggest that happiness is all about individual grit and resilience – resonating with studies on “character education” (Bull & Allen 2008) and resilience as a central term in popular culture and a “psychological turn” or “regulatory ideal” within neoliberalism (Gill & Orgad 2018). Moreover, discursive formations more inclined to inculcate the way people should behave in order to be happy, as found in the UK sample, reinforce the biopolitical role of the happiness industry (see Davies 2016). Also, they reflect the association Purser (2019) makes between the culture of mindfulness and “capitalist spirituality”.

As journalist Boudicca Fox-Leonard suggested, Britons in particular need to think more positively: “That Brits are a nation of moaners... is why we're languishing at number 19 in the [WHR]” (*Telegraph*, 14/10/2017). Trying to explain the reasons for that tendency, psychologist Robert Holden pointed out that solitude, frequent comparison to others and excessive use of social media can contribute to people's unhappiness in the UK. With regards to the problems related to new technologies, Holden frames them as “one of the main impediments to modern-day happiness”, and points out that social media “isn't real” (*Telegraph*, 14/10/2017). This comment resonates with Pfaller's (2014) argument that trying to show off one's own happiness on social media may create “illusions without owners” or “without subject” (see page 24). However, some media texts suggested that not all age ranges of the population are equally victims of the modern lifestyles. For example, both the *Sun* (7/5/2015) and the *Telegraph* (25/7/2012) suggested that the more people live, the more they

are psychologically ready to lead a happy life – echoing perhaps a long-term based understanding of happiness as in Aristotle (1906 [350 BC]).

As regards to the ways through which people can boost their mental well-being, social and religious affairs editor for the *Telegraph* (3/2/2016), John Bingham, clearly associated life satisfaction with religion: “The faithful are blessed with greater happiness”, the article’s headline anticipated. However, based on figures provided by the ONS, the editor eventually suggested that some people are more likely to ‘benefit’ from faith: even though Hindus “topped the table”, he claimed that a “typical Briton” tends to be happier in the UK, whereas Christians, Sikhs, Jewish, Muslims, and agnostics lag behind. In this way, the conservative *Telegraph* has shown its view on the positive influence religion can have over Britons’ happiness, but especially creeds seen as stereotypically British. In order to reinforce this message, Bingham also gave voice to psychiatrist Paul McLaren, who argued that faith contributes to happiness because it works as a “protective factor” and “[w]ith it usually comes strong social support.”

With regards to statistics involving mental health issues in the UK, commentators were discreet, but the same was not true when it came to the notorious difficulties found in other countries. Indeed, in some cases commentators were more straightforward in terms of pointing out the problems observed abroad in comparison to a slightly more superficial outlook on the situation in the UK itself. Given its long features with more detailed analysis, the *Guardian* paid special attention to emblematic cases from abroad. For example, psychologists Daniel and Jason Freeman highlighted Denmark’s Achilles’ heel in order to minimise the situation in the UK: “Mental illness affects us all – even in the happiest country

on Earth”. They claimed that “38% of Danish women and 32% of Danish men will receive treatment for a mental disorder at some point during their lifetime” (*Guardian*, 14/5/2014).

The *Guardian* (25/8/2018) also drew attention to the problem of suicides among young people in Scandinavia. While the picture illustrating the article shows a young couple drinking and smoking in a party atmosphere, suggesting an ‘easy’ life, in the text the newspaper revealed: “Among those [living in Nordic countries]... who do not say that life is good, some of the largest numbers are among the young”, and “stress, loneliness and feeling under pressure to succeed may be playing a large part in their unhappiness.” The ‘happiest’ country in the WHR that year, Finland was referred to as the country in which suicide is “responsible for one-third of all deaths among 15-24 year olds”, whereas loneliness and the wrong use of social media have been mentioned as potential reasons for this high death-rate.

At the other end of the spectrum, with much lower levels of reported happiness in comparison to the privileged Nordic countries, India was also included in the list of ‘bad’ examples. As the *Guardian* (22/9/2016) pointed out, even though India’s National Crime Records Bureau estimated that over 130,000 people committed suicide in 2014, the country “only spends 0.06% of its health budget on mental health”. Moreover, the comparison made between the WHO data regarding the number of psychiatrists for every 343,000 people was shocking: one in India and 60 in the UK. In this way, instead of using statistics in order to decry the amount of funding in the NHS, for example, here the newspaper tried to positively represent the UK in comparison to India, but also by highlighting cases of suicide among young people in Finland – expressing criticism towards other nations from the top to the

bottom of the ranking, which seems to be done in order to sort of ‘neutralise’ or even mitigate the situation in the UK.

6.8. ‘Us’ versus ‘them’: competitiveness and social comparisons

“Every culture expresses everything differently”, south-east Asia correspondent Kate Hodal wrote in the *Guardian* (21/11/2012), reinforcing the subjectivity of experiencing happiness across cultures as discussed by authors such as Diener and Suh (2000), Rice and Steel (2004), and Selin and Davey (2012). “European love of siesta, or quality of life, is seen in Asian eyes to be laziness”, the journalist exemplified, and then concluded: “You can’t put one set of expectations that one group of people decides is ‘how one should live’ and apply it uniformly across the world.” In just a few sentences, Hodal summarised the importance of considering each social context and respecting different ways of living when analysing happiness – aligning with the notion of cultural relativism (see Oishi *et al.* 2013) and respecting ‘individualities’ (cf. Smart & Williams 2008), instead of standardising happiness in a utilitarian fashion (see Binkley 2014). However, by reading between the lines, it remains clear that certain commentators still tend to conceptualise happiness and interpret happiness rankings through a quite conventional, westernised, if not capitalist point of view.

When Switzerland figured as the ‘happiest’ country on Earth, for example, the *Guardian* (24/4/2015) presented a curious allusion in the very headline of an article: “Swiss reign supreme in world happiness ranks”. Both terms ‘reign’ and ‘supreme’ indicate an apparently legitimised power and prestige of the Helvetian people who have been depicted as if they lived in the land of milk and honey. Moreover, given that Switzerland is a federal

directorial republic, the journalist's choice of the symbolic verb 'reign' – denoting domination – indicated the representation of a hierarchically superior population which topped the happiness ranking. Indeed, being first in the WHR presupposes power and wealth, which is a privilege of a few countries around the globe, and this reinforces the idea of superiority that can be subtly related here to the British monarchy. Such narratives more or less implicitly reproduce Littler's (2013, 2018) association between meritocracy and structural advantage as some journalists tend to frame as 'legitimate' the sort of right or at least inclination wealthy nations have to appear at the very top of the happiness list. Also, this tendency creates "social consensus" (see Deacon *et al.* 2007) and naturalises the social myth (cf. Barthes 2009) that wealthy nations are 'happy'.

Indeed, some journalists highlighted positive aspects of society related to Scandinavian countries, denoting a sort of justification for their 'enviable' performances in the happiness index. Regarding Norway in particular, it was written in the *Sun* (21/3/2017) that achieving and maintaining its "high happiness" does not necessarily depend on the country's wealth, but rather on spending money wisely over time. Finland was also praised as the CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Denmark, Meik Wiking, claimed in the *Guardian* (14/3/2018) that, despite GDP per capita is lower in Finland in comparison to other Nordic countries and much lower than that of the US, the secret for being at the top of the happiness list is precisely that the "Finns are good at converting wealth into wellbeing" (quoted also in the *Sun*, 17/3/2018). This article illustrates how the more egalitarian *Guardian* congratulates Finnish welfare capitalism and socialist values in order to contrast with negative aspects of another country with which the UK is in more direct competition: the turbo-capitalist US (Luttwak 1999). The way the newspaper represented American

democrat Bernie Sanders as “just common sense” and “not viewed as progressive” in the eyes of the Scandinavians is clearly a sign of that distinction.

At the same time, when it came to the UK’s position in respect of certain ‘unexpected’ nations at the top of the ranking, some journalists were surprised. The *Daily Mail* (4/2/2012) claimed that, “[d]espite being one of the richest nations in the world, the UK has been ranked... behind much poorer countries” such as Costa Rica, “a country where average income levels are less than one quarter of those in the UK.” This narrative clearly reveals the commentator’s surprise as well as a discourse of superiority perhaps based not on happiness (which is supposed to be the matter in question) but rather on economic parameters that eventually create a sort of hierarchy between nations.

Historically speaking, though, as a global and colonial power the UK has been interacting with various peoples and cultures around the world for a long time. Even internally international interactions have been significant to the formation of a national identity also influenced by the number of immigrants who have moved to Britain over time. In this way, more progressive and egalitarian newspapers tended to depict the UK as a country that has been performing better in comparison to other industrialised societies in terms of immigration, as suggested by the *Observer* (8/4/2012). Indeed, British freelance journalist Cathy Strongman revealed that, despite its fame as a joyful city, Denmark’s capital is “very white”, and this is believed to contribute to the “lack of the cultural diversity and understanding that is such an important component in making London the great city it is” (*ibidem*). In this context, Strongman’s more egalitarian discourse is an example of positive self-representation as it depicts people living in multicultural London as more humane and

tolerant in comparison to those from the capital of the country which has been repeatedly celebrated as the happiest of the world.

Still talking about immigration, the *Guardian* highlighted the negative attitude attributed to Scandinavians by giving voice to ordinary people from Norway, then the top nation in the ranking. Interestingly, 75% of respondents mentioned at least one economic aspect which can contribute to life satisfaction, 50% of them directly referred to money or living costs in their answers, and some of them reported that Norway is “rich” and “safe” (*Guardian*, 22/3/2017). However, a third of the respondents admitted that not everything was rosy in Norway when it came to immigration: “The way our country treats asylum seekers... is an abomination”, an interviewee said, whereas another one added: “We could be more open and friendly to new people” (*ibidem*). Also in this case, critical narratives on other country’s hostility to immigrants can be seen as an indirect compliment at least on the openness to cultural diversity noticed especially in the British biggest cities.

Besides the frequent comparisons to other countries due to cultural heterogeneity, British journalists were able to explore stereotyping and collective identities, sometimes with sense of humour. By trying to explain the reasons why some countries appear at the top of the happiness ranking, even if jokily, feature writer Stuart Jeffries made a few assumptions about other populations in the *Guardian* (26/11/2014). For example: even though the Danes have been said to be genetically predisposed to happiness, their secret would be that they are accustomed to boringness; Australians, in turn, have been considered happy because they “get to watch free kangaroo boxing... while they drink beer and fire up their barbies”; another reason for greater happiness can be that Belgium produces “22kg of chocolate per inhabitant”; another joke was that “the average Dutch person drinks 76 litres of beer a year”,

while “Britons manage just 69” (*ibidem*). Interestingly, while the pictures illustrating the article seemed to make fun of other countries – e.g., by showing sheep in their natural habitat as “some typical New Zealanders” – the image representing the “typical Briton” was British runner Mo Farah winning a competition. When it came to the UK position in the happiness ranking, the writer pointed out that the country is number 22 in the list because “Britons could never admit to being less happy than the French (25) or Germans (26)” (*ibidem*).

However, competitiveness can be counter-productive sometimes, especially in a cross-cultural environment and if the media discourse has less to do with patriotism (loving one’s country) and more with nationalism (assuming that one’s country is superior to others) (cf. Billig 2004). Political correspondent Paul Routledge, for instance, made it clear from the very headline of his remarkable article in the *Daily Mirror* (6/4/2012): “Stuff your ‘happy’ nations... GB’s best”. In a fiery reaction following the publication of the WHR’s first edition back in 2012, Routledge regretted that the pleasure one can experience with the “baffling beauty of an English spring” did not count for the study.

Perhaps given his prejudice based on the unequal distribution of wealth between countries and different parts of the world, Routledge expressed his surprise on the fact that the ‘underdeveloped’, “carefree Costa Ricans” were considered a happier nation (ranking 12th) than the economically and politically stronger Britons, who rated “only 18th” – in a clear materialistic, if not elitist and even ‘orientalist’, interpretation of national happiness. But Routledge’s prejudice and sense of superiority had no limits as he also claimed that the UK was “below Luxembourg (a made-up country), Belgium (ditto), Israel (all right if you’re not an Arab), the USA (ditto if not black) and Austria (the dull country).” “What sad gits we must seem to the UN Joy Inspectors”, he wrote. “I wonder if they spent their whole time in

dismal Darlington, or if they even came here at all.” Despite clearly being disappointed about the UK performance in the happiness index, Routledge claimed that he does not care about statistics since “they’re largely irrelevant, of interest only to overpaid UN pointy-heads” or “UN bean-counters”. Even though the writer claims that happiness research does not reflect and cannot determine people’s happiness, he still failed at undemocratically maintaining that his own is a “better way of life”.

However, media discourse was not solely oriented around competitiveness, and journalists also demonstrated that thinking collectively and realising each one’s qualities and fortunes can be more productive to people’s happiness in general. As a representative example of this more collective mentality, then director of *Action for Happiness*, Mark Williamson, wrote an emblematic sentence in the *Guardian* (20/3/2015): “The key to our happiness is connection, not competition”. In the article, the writer argued that

“[a]lthough Charles Darwin is normally associated with the ‘survival of the fittest’ theory, he also believed that our natural instinct was to care for others... But we have such a strong cultural narrative about the selfish side of humanity that we adopt systems and behaviours that undermine our natural co-operative tendencies.”

In the article, a discourse about ‘natural’ and innate behaviour still prevails above more structural factors although Williamson also touches on social ways of becoming more individualist. By speculating about the essence of human beings, he shared, though, a more tolerant discourse in comparison to other writers mentioned previously, and encapsulated wider criticism of the science of happiness, the tendency to relate it to the material world

and, even worse, the quantification and comparison of people's most inner feelings. Through a humanitarian discourse – echoing what Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) maintained with regards to the common good, for example – the writer also suggested that, from a more holistic perspective, the individualistic attitude or possessive-individualism as encouraged by neoliberalism is rather “counterproductive to our well-being.” However, through this narrative the writer also makes assumptions about national collective traits which homogenise and are stereotypical but advanced here to explain the WHR results – apparently an easier and often more amusing way to do that, even though the situation is of course more complex and covers over more serious structural issues like class and other inequalities.

6.9. Brexit: a favourable moment for happiness?

“A family is a kingdom and a kingdom is a family”, the *Daily Mail* (20/5/2018) claimed immediately after Prince Harry and Megan Markle's wedding – also to remind readers that, despite political divisions and disagreements about the future after Brexit, some people in the UK still care about unity and a national identity. In talking about ‘family’ and ‘kingdom’, the newspaper continued: “Both are places where authority is softened by familiarity, where love and ultimate loyalty bind people together despite any differences.” Almost as an attempt to defuse the tense situation in the country created since the 2016 referendum, this symbolic article demonstrates how the media take the opportunity from reporting a national event such as a royal wedding – an illustration of what Billig (2004) calls “banal nationalism” – to disseminate its own ideologies and bind people together: “a great public affirmation of enduring fidelity and constancy.”

Even though anti-monarchists and Remainers or pro-EU readers could have interpreted the facts in a different way, the *Daily Mail* tried to convince readers that peace is possible even during one of the most delicate moments of British politics. However, while the tone used by the *Daily Mail* is full of patriotism, the same cannot be said about certain narratives related to Brexit and the competitiveness which was stimulated by the divorce vote which changed the UK forever.

Brexit was undoubtedly the most popular topic in the British press during the years following the 2016 referendum, and it appeared even within some discussions about people's well-being in the UK. To be precise, the association between leaving the EU and happiness has become more frequent in newspapers over time, and the use of the term 'Brexit' increased significantly in the articles published in 2019. Until 2018, the year up to which the sample has been collected, the term 'Brexit' was associated with either 'WHR' or 'national happiness' in the *Guardian* (40%), *Telegraph* (20%), *Daily Mail* (20%), *Financial Times* (10%), and the *Sun* (10%). No references were made relating Brexit to the happiness index in the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* during that period, according to the Nexis database.

Interestingly, the term 'nationalism' was completely absent in association with either 'WHR' or 'national happiness' even after the 2016 referendum, which is a finding in itself and suggests that commentators were perhaps trying to avoid this polemical topic, or just the explicit terminology, within the happiness debate. Yet, although most journalists suggested that the exit from the EU could be related to economic risks, stress and higher levels of anxiety among Britons, others suggested that independence could actually contribute to increase people's satisfaction with life in the UK. Even though the country jumped from 23rd

in 2016 to 19th in 2018 in the WHR, what remains clear from the newspapers published in that period is that various statistics and different comments contradict each other.

The conservative *Telegraph* (14/10/2017), for example, suggested a positive link between Brexit and happiness by giving voice to psychologist Andy Cope. The specialist claimed that, despite the nightmare that Brexit may have become for some people, “[t]hree of the top five nations [in the WHR 2017] are Norway, Iceland and Switzerland, who are in Europe but not strictly in the EU”, and therefore “we can be happy and not in [the EU]”. As an example of a pessimistic view on the divorce, a few weeks after the vote the leftist *Guardian* (10/7/2016) pointed out that the OECD (see Economic Policy Paper N. 16) advised that “Brexit risked the UK economy’s ability to continue creating jobs”, and “[k]ey measures of national happiness stagnated in the latest figures from the [ONS]... among them people’s sense that what they do in life is worthwhile.”

In the same article, (broadly) pro-Labour *Guardian* pointed out that Brexit could particularly hit the working class, as “[i]n the uncertain times that lie ahead... it’s not the rich we should be worried out. The rich will always be OK” (*ibidem*). When it comes to the mood of the population as a whole, the *Telegraph* (16/1/2017) highlighted that the stress level has increased since the year in which the referendum took place: according to the ONS, 2016 was “the most anxiety-ridden [year] on record”. Accordingly, the *Daily Mail* (22/4/2017) pointed out that, as the ONS indicated, even though “levels of happiness have remained steady” across Britain, “England has become more anxious over the past two years of elections, referendums and constant political uncertainty”, and the country’s situation was “characterised by warnings of imminent economic collapse” (*ibidem*).

However, considering the better results the country had in the WHR after the referendum, and in line with the biopolitical attempt to create a positive atmosphere through public discourses, there were also commentators insisting that official statistics indicated that Brexit may have boosted people's happiness in the UK. For example, journalist Aoife Bannon wrote in the right-leaning the *Sun* (21/3/2017) that people in the UK "are becoming happier... despite economic uncertainty in the wake of Brexit". One year after the EU referendum, even the progressive *Observer* (12/11/2017) published: "the British became the happiest they have been since 2011, when the ONS began measuring wellbeing." Moreover, the newspaper insisted that, still according to the ONS, the British rated in 2017 a "practically Nordic 7.9 out of 10" when it comes to "feeling that what you do in life is worthwhile", and "more people reported feeling... very low anxiety."

Positive views on Brexit's immediate effects might have a reason. According to the *Observer* (12/11/2017), "[t]he case for more evictions, more food banks, more xenophobia and longer NHS waiting lists... coincided with the positive national moodswing", and, as the ONS speculated, "some of the increases in wellbeing ratings may be explained through the improvement in certain economic indicators within the UK", such as high employment and an improved GDP. "What is striking, in this confusion about possible causes [of an increasing life satisfaction], is the analysts' readiness to attribute the unexpectedly good mood to a cause as crude as money" (*ibidem*). The headline of the article begins with a provocative question: "Are we Brits really happier than ever or just going mad?" In talking about the excessive optimism ruling classes tend to show in order to back their own interests and ideologies, the publication linked the controversial obsession with positive thinking to the language used by conservative politicians when it came to Brexit:

“‘A triumph of optimism’, offers Rees-Mogg. Going ‘incredibly well’, lies David Davis. ‘I’m positive and optimistic’, babbles Theresa May. In a country that sets the satisfaction bar that low, maybe the new happiness findings are what you might expect: meaningless.”

As the scepticism towards the happiness debate is implicit in these discourses, it also remains clear that the perspective from which people cited in the text are looking at the relationship between Brexit and happiness is very much related to propaganda as a political strategy. With regards to the national sample as a whole, though, no direct references to nationalism, populism and protectionism appeared in the articles on happiness during these hard times. This is a relevant finding, but it does not mean that these topics were not dealt with in the British press – they were just not named explicitly.

In sum, what remains clear about the relationship between Brexit and the coverage of the WHR is that two broad tendencies show that journalists followed either a conservative and optimistic, or more critical and down-to-earth perspectives on the matter. On the one hand, the right-wing press had a much more upbeat tone about Brexit and happiness. Indeed, some writers embraced Brexit by reproducing discourses and practices which resonate with biopolitics, through a positive outlook on the country’s future, expecting, or at least suggesting, that greater happiness could come from the nationalist sentiment and stronger, independent institutions – even if, at the same time, happiness was framed in a more individualistic way at least on a micro level. On the other hand, other commentators clearly expressed their concerns with the difficulties, limitations and responsibilities that individuals tend to deal with in everyday life especially through hard times – which sounds like a more

comprehensive as well as collectivistic take on such a complex transformation society as a whole is going through.

6.10. The good, the bad and Bhutan

The term ‘Bhutan’ appeared in 38% of the articles collected from the British newspapers – predominantly in association with ‘national happiness’ (87%, also because of the Bhutanese GNH index) instead of ‘WHR’ (13%). Interestingly, Bhutan’s special attention to national happiness was seen by British commentators as both a good practice and a contradiction. Some newspapers suggested that the Himalayan country “remains best known for its ‘gross national happiness’ credo” which inspired Prime Minister David Cameron who, as “another pioneer”, decided to collate data on contentment since 2010 (*Guardian*, 24/4/2015). In talking about the UK sample, at the beginning of the sort of ‘happiness boom’ in the global media, which also coincided with the launch of the WHR, Bhutan was even depicted as a model country which “advised the... [UN] on the ‘new economy’ of happiness” (*Guardian*, 29/3/2012).

Bhutan’s holistic approach to well-being was opposed to the principles of the American economic system which, according to economist Jeffrey Sachs, eventually promotes among individuals “a profound sense of alienation from the natural world and from each other” (*ibidem*). Moreover, the newspaper referred to the Bhutanese notion of happiness as something that “has nothing to do with the common use of that word to denote an ephemeral, passing mood”, but actually “comes from living life in full harmony with the natural world, with our communities and fellow beings, and with our culture and spiritual

heritage.” As travel writer Andrew Eames described, life in Bhutan is different from that in modern societies and it has its own pace: “Even outside the monasteries, spirituality was ever-present. The landscape itself was forever at prayer” (*Financial Times*, 19/4/2014).

In the same way, the *Sun* (18/4/2016) suggested that, in the country where GNH is measured, people’s lifestyle seems to depend mainly on the questions of the *soul* instead of the *body*, and therefore “[l]iving in happy Bhutan is smiles better than having lots of money”. Accordingly, the *Guardian* (22/9/2016) highlighted that “[t]he tiny Buddhist nation prizes the mental and spiritual wellbeing of its citizens over material growth, and the results are impressive.” In talking about the attention given to environmental protection in Bhutan, one of the pillars of GNH, the *Telegraph* (24/11/2012) pointed out that, “[i]n keeping with the Buddhist idea that humans and nature form a symbiotic relationship, 72 per cent of the country is forested, and it is in their constitution that 60 per cent always will be.” In comparison to Bhutan, the *Guardian* (4/12/2015) claimed that Luxembourg – Europe’s “richest country” – “generates four times more CO2 emissions... despite having a smaller population”, creating an environment friendly and anti-materialistic narrative.

Similarly to what has been observed in a number of newspapers from both India and the US, Bhutan was also depicted as a ‘happy’ nation in the UK at times. Writer Andrew Davidson claimed in the *Guardian* (5/9/2013) that “[h]appiness can also be a place” and it “is the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan”. Also, then editor of the *Guardian Travel* supplement (25/5/2013), Gemma Bowes, described her unique experience in the “mystical kingdom” as a “fairytale”. The *Observer* (2/12/2012), in turn, published that Bhutan “has gained an almost mythical status as a real-life Shangri-La”, but the newspaper didn’t hide some negative aspects of the Bhutanese society such as poverty, violence and inflation.

At the same time, journalists also criticised the way in which the Himalayan country increased its GNH index rating. Correspondent Alan Beattie revealed some negative aspects of both pre- and post-democratisation periods in Bhutan. Beattie claimed that Bhutan was “a dictatorship that expelled one-sixth of the population who happened to be the wrong ethnicity (Nepali) and the wrong religion (Hindu)” (*Financial Times*, 5/2/2016), a process which was referred to in another article as a “classic case of ethnic cleansing” (*Financial Times*, 24/12/2016). The journalist criticised the government for its biopolitical attempt to determine what was going to make people happy in Bhutan, and advised that “we should be careful about governments who tell us what makes us happy, rather than helping us earn the money so we can do what we want” (*Financial Times*, 5/2/2016). Moreover, since the country became a democracy, Beattie pointed out that “it ditched GNH and focused on economic growth, like any other country” (*ibidem*). Beattie’s liberal discourse is evident as he writes that the adoption of the holistic concept of GNH instead of GDP “got it all sorts of gushing praise from well-meaning people around the world who are sniffy about western materialism”, even though those people “might have felt differently if they’d actually lived there” – which calls into question people’s actual life satisfaction in Bhutan.

In order to show the ‘real’ face of Bhutan, correspondent in Thimphu, Victor Mallet, gave voice to a local shopkeeper who revealed what could actually increase their life satisfaction: “If I had a bigger house and a lot of things, of course I’d be happy” (*Financial Times*, 4/12/2013). This evidence was used by the reporter to highlight Bhutanese people’s inclination to economic liberalism today. Indeed, in some cases commentators pointed out that modernity and globalisation have contributed to a radical change in the society which used to be isolated. As journalist Jo Confino has argued in the *Guardian* (29/8/2014), “[a]s

young people reject farming and the economy remains shaky, the traditional emphasis on spirituality may be under threat.” In this context, the writer questions whether “Bhutan becomes another victim of globalisation or continues to be a beacon of hope to other nations”, and expresses concern with the future of the country as a democracy which needs to adapt to the rest of the world. The use of the term “victim”, here, frames globalisation as something negative and sounds like a critique of perhaps a ‘Westernisation’ of the country.

A similar reasoning was identified in a discursive formation in which the *Observer* (2/12/2012) gave voice to a representative of the Bhutanese youth, who was an example of how Western influence is already being noticed even among those who express some concern with the possibility of losing their own identity in contemporary Bhutan:

“All say they are proud to be Bhutanese. They want to be forest rangers, environmental scientists and doctors. At the same time they want to travel the world, listen to Korean pop music and watch *Rambo*. ‘I want to be able to go out and see the world but then I want to come home to Bhutan and for it to be the same,’ says Kunzang Jamso, a 15-year-old whose traditional dress is offset with a hint of a boyband haircut. ‘I think we must keep the outside from coming here too much because we might lose our culture, and if you don’t have that then how do you know who you are?’”

But according to journalist Jo Confino, cultural hybridisation is inevitable at this point: “Making money for the sake of accumulating wealth is on the rise in Bhutan” (*Guardian*, 29/8/2014). When it came to the influence of Western lifestyles over Bhutanese culture and religion, the writer added that “Buddhism is already starting to lose its core

essence for many young urban people”, and quoted an interviewee who claimed: “We are told that owning more stuff will make them happy, but we are not being shown the suffering this addiction has caused in the West” (*ibidem*).

As the example above has shown, some commentators depicted Bhutan as a victim of globalisation and suggested that people living there appear to be fascinated by mass culture since the country opened its doors to the world. At the same time, these people were also framed as naïve because some of them are unaware of the negative aspects of the combination of quite different cultures. Indeed, this discursive construction of tensions between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ values, and what Bhutan was, is and will be, is recurrent in the narratives involving the Himalayan country which is also seen as a reference in ‘happiness’. Interestingly, though, this sort of ‘victimisation’ – also attributed to and widely discussed by Indian journalists in Chapter 5, with regards to India’s economic liberalisation and a postcolonial context – actually stood out in relation to the case of Bhutan, an apparently neutral country, and therefore not framed through a particular orientalist perspective when it came to the UK sample.

6.11. Money, apparently more useful than harmful

As happened with the previous samples, ‘money’ was a popular term in the British press as well – it appeared in 36% of the articles, while ‘economic growth’ in 12%. To be precise, ‘money’ was associated more directly with ‘national happiness’ (75%) than ‘WHR’ (25%). In speaking of newspapers separately, the key term appeared even more frequently in the critical *Guardian* (37%) than in the economic *Financial Times* (30%), for example. The

Guardian also contained more references to ‘economic growth’ with 42% of the appearances of this term when it came to debates on ‘national happiness’. Writers took for granted that money was crucial for happiness at times, but, in many cases, journalists were sceptical about this link, especially those working for broadsheet newspapers or the ‘quality press’, and tended to compare pros and cons related to material happiness. Broadly speaking, criticisms towards the excessive importance given to the role of money in the achievement of happiness dominated in articles on economics and well-being indexes, but economic factors were still considered, directly or indirectly, as fundamental to a high quality of life.

Indeed, despite more egalitarian discourses on how people can contribute to happiness through alternative ways instead of just earning and accumulating money, some significant examples suggested that money is still seen as key when it comes to increasing people’s happiness in the UK. As the *Daily Mail* (16/1/2012) reported just a few months before the launch of the WHR’s first edition, a study published by the Institute of Economic Affairs found that “money is the most important factor when measuring happiness.” Moreover, research indicated that “the greater the amount we have, the more contented we feel”, and therefore “[n]o country is rich enough to have hit a satiation point, if such a point exists” (*ibidem*) – contradicting the Easterlin paradox (Easterlin 1974) and echoing certain SWB theories which indicate that wealthy nations tend to be also the happiest (Veenhoven 1999, 2012).

In the *Financial Times* (6/2/2016), economic journalist Alan Beattie even touched on elements such as vanity and competitiveness which are normally part of a neoliberal lifestyle: “[m]ost studies show is that folk get happier as they get richer”, and “it seems that having a lot of money relative to others also cheers people up”. But the tendency to agree on

the importance of money in the achievement of happiness has not been a phenomenon observed always within tabloids and a specialised, economic newspaper. Based on statistics provided by the ONS, even the *Guardian* (25/7/2012) has once published: “Do you live on the Western Isles, Orkney or Shetland? Work as a doctor or a lawyer? Are you married... in good health and a homeowner? If so, you may be one of the happiest people in Britain.” This narrative in the opening sentences of a news article, based on an official study, can contribute to the normalisation of certain material parameters which are usually related to people’s quality of life.

Some media texts have shown, though, both sides of money in relation to happiness in a very democratic way. Looking specifically at examples provided by commentators in order to demystify the primacy of money, counter-narratives usually resonate with the Easterlin Paradox which suggests that money is important but only up to a point (Easterlin 1974). The *Guardian* (2/4/2012) published that, even though “living standards and job security matter to people and take away stress”, in talking about the US in particular, the wealthiest nation of the world “has not got happier as living standards have risen”. Indeed, the newspaper claimed that “[b]eyond a certain point, when people have enough to eat, a roof over their head and a stable job working with good colleagues, it is other factors that come into play.”

Director of *Action for Happiness*, Mark Williamson, was quoted in the *Telegraph* (10/10/2015) on the secret of being happy: “The reason why some people in poor countries are able to live happy lives is because they have so many other things that matter more: strong family and personal relationships, a sense of purpose, connection to a community, often faith.” However, Williamson eventually suggested that, despite money’s limitations,

people still need it in order to be satisfied with life: “on the whole, if you live in a poor country you’re much less likely to be happy and have high well-being than if you live in a rich country”. On the other hand, social problems in ‘privileged’ countries are not less serious. In the article titled “Why a richer society isn’t making us happy”, the *Telegraph* (17/10/2013) mentioned a research which found that “people experienced the pain of losing money more intensely than the joys of earning more” – suggesting that uncertainty, individualism and competitiveness do not contribute to better living in contemporary societies.

When it came to the role of material factors in the measurement of happiness, some commentators depicted the WHR as a more sensible alternative to GDP, for example – even if the WHR itself considers GDP data. By claiming that “monetary measures fail to capture inequalities beyond material standards of living”, data journalist Caelainn Barr indicated, in the *Guardian* (26/4/2017), the WHR as an alternative to financial inequality indexes because such a ranking can “put people’s access to opportunities and sense of well-being at the forefront, and encourage countries to guide their public policies towards making their citizens happier, rather than just increasing GDP”.

Indeed, in comparison to other studies which focus on material well-being alone (such as GDP), the WHR can offer a wider analysis of people’s satisfaction with life by taking social aspects such as freedom, generosity and social support into consideration – but, interestingly, those ‘alternative’ variables did not become major themes in the sample. At the same time, as was also noticed in the US and India, the problem is that sometimes even progressive and egalitarian newspapers such as the *Guardian* tend to assume that the UN’s index is a comprehensive study about the happiness of nations, without necessarily

indicating issues and limitations related to the ambitious proposal to ‘measure’ such a complex variable and its biopolitical role related to policymaking and the ‘management’ of populations.

The fact that the WHR tends to consider people’s quality of life as a whole – and not just economic growth and wealth distribution as it happens with financial inequality indexes such as the Gini index – does not necessarily mean that the results provided by the report are representative of the whole world population and its subjectivities. Therefore, in the UK some commentators also failed to re-think certain a priori ideas about happiness in contemporary societies, or question what the WHR really meant by ‘happiness’ in contrast with ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘quality of life’, from a more critical perspective. Even those who tried to do so, perhaps did not go as far as theorists such as Ahmed (2010), Brown (2015) and Davies (2016) might have wanted because they failed to fundamentally question what it means to be happy and engage in critical reflection about the value given to happiness ideology in the contemporary moment.

6.12. Giving meaning to happiness studies

Considering pros and cons of trying to measure ‘happiness’, commentators also showed oppositional views in the UK press throughout the whole time period of the sample. The approval of this measurement was evident on certain occasions such as in the interview with economist Richard Layard for the economic newspaper *Financial Times* (13/9/2014). By answering the questions proposed by writer Annie Maccoby Berglöf, the British “happiness tsar” suggested that, before the development of happiness as a science, economics tended to

ignore people's "inner lives" and everything seemed to be focused on "increasing purchasing power". Publishing an exclusive conversation with the scholar – which highlighted the benefits of studying happiness, although trying to detach the 'new' science's rationale from material well-being – could be seen as a way of diffusing the importance that some opinion leaders give to SWB research in contemporary societies.

However, commentators often criticised the ambitious attempt to quantify mood – even if the legitimisation of the practice was taken for granted at times, especially in more superficial articles. In this way, broadsheet newspapers in particular showed different views on the matter through pragmatic discussions which tended to stimulate in-depth reflection about fundamental questions related to the quantification of happiness. An article published in the *Guardian* (20/5/2015) tried to summarise the problematics of happiness indexes by opposing different points of view endorsed by experts in the field. The discussion became interesting precisely because it revealed the diversity of opinion on the topic, sometimes in the same text as the following example will show. The *Guardian*'s Marcus Browne started the article by pointing out that opinions usually differ when it comes to a complex, subjective topic such as happiness:

“What are we talking about when we talk about happiness? For some it's a fleeting, ephemeral state contingent on circumstance and resistant to a singular definition; for others it's a phenomenon that can be observed, measured and distilled into numbers, metrics and, ultimately, policy.”

In this passage, Browne did not even consider happiness as a long-term project as proposed by Aristotle (1906 [350 BC]) and proposed other ways of thinking about it – both

tendentiously related to the notion of material happiness. Then, the writer offered many different opinions endorsed by experts in the field. Economist Richard Layard joined the discussion by suggesting that what really matters in people's lives is the way they contribute to happiness and enjoyment of life. Economist and behavioural scientist Andrew Oswald pointed out, in turn, that there is "a lot of agreement about how to measure human happiness... in universities all over the world" today, but the task is complex and cannot be too exact nor automatic. On a more sceptical note, psychotherapist Phillippa Perry offered a pragmatic view on what can make people happy: "It's the quality of our relationships, it's how well connected we are to each other, how deep our bonds are and also how well connected we are to our earth, our ideas and each other" (*Guardian*, 20/5/2015).

In this context, political economist and theorist William Davies also shared his views and went straight to the point which many other critical theorists consider as one of the problematics of quantifying and ranking SWB: "Are we going to move into a society where data about mood can be used to settle all sorts of political, aesthetic, cultural disputes?", he wondered. In line with theories of social control (Dean 2010), Davies suggested that, while the "management adoption" of well-being and happiness tries to speak a sort of "ethical language", "this measurement, these wearable devices, things like sentiment analysis in the workplace, are being used in a more manipulative way" (*Guardian*, 20/5/2015) – a topic which certainly deserved more discussion in the sample as a whole given that, as Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017: 110) have argued, "institutionalised patterns of knowledge" are able to "govern the formation of subjectivity". Following this reasoning, historian of ideas Hannah Dawson also claimed:

“I’m especially suspicious when it’s politicians and economists driving us towards [the measurement of happiness]... Historically, governments have wanted to keep their people happy precisely as a means of social control... I think that there’s a very short step... from surveys to a kind of punitive surveillance” (*Guardian*, 20/5/2015).

The questions proposed by both Davies and Dawson in this remarkable article are intimately related to what critical theorists such as Beer (2017) have elaborated on in relation to the quantification of the self, and Foucault (1980) on the power/knowledge nexus, since happiness rankings such as the WHR can be seen as a way of creating ‘knowledge’ which eventually leads to both labelling and influencing people’s behaviour and mood according to the criteria and interests of elites and dominant cultures. In line with the urgency and practicality of what Foucault foregrounds and denounces with regards to society and unbalanced power relations as a philosopher, writer, and lecturer, the mainstream media still count on similar contribution from such critics and thinkers today. Indeed, Dawson took the opportunity to send a pragmatic message directly to the ruling class:

“I want politicians and economists to focus on things that I know will basically increase the wellbeing of people such as equality or working conditions... I do not want them to spend their time wondering about the impossible question of how I’m feeling right now” (*Guardian*, 20/5/2015).

In a previous article, titled “Is happiness worth measuring?”, the *Guardian* (23/4/2015) had already given a voice to William Davies, who, similarly to Dawson,

considered some implications of manipulating public opinion with regards to people's well-being, and suggested what should be done in order to make the study of happiness useful:

“Happiness measurement comes in many varieties, some frightening, others motivated by sincere concern for the public good... We need to accept that people often have reasons to feel happy or unhappy, and that those reasons are as important as the feelings themselves. Recognising this would lead us to focus on institutions that grant people a voice that is heard, both as individuals and as groups, and less on the vagaries of sensation and sentiment.”

As the passage shows, in addition to Davies' important contribution with the book *The Happiness Industry* (2016), the debate on happiness research gained even more strength through his comments in the UK sample, including crucial points he added to the discussion such as the democratic role of institutions – a clear counter-discourse with regards to the individualistic tendency of transferring from structures to the individual the responsibility of finding happiness. In fact, by following Davies' reasoning, readers are more likely to realise that, in the end, a study such as the WHR is grounded in a specific set of social and cultural expectations about what happiness 'is' and 'means', and goes on to reproduce these expectations.

In another remarkable article, the *Guardian* (23/6/2017) criticised the fact that the WHR “correlates closely with a list of the world's wealthiest nations”, whereas the *Global Emotions Report* (GER), for example, was led by Paraguay which was actually 70th in the WHR and “one of the poorer countries in terms of GDP”. As a counter-narrative in relation to the dominant neoliberal view, the GER focused on the “presence of strong social and

family networks”, a factor which apparently contributes to Latin American countries getting better results in the alternative index (*ibidem*). Of course, happiness like any other object of study can be analysed through many different perspectives, and this is a sign of researchers’ creativity, curiosity, but also interests. The ways scholars represent happiness, even ‘scientifically’, presupposes their own view of the world. In the end, as writer Tim Dowling argued, “[h]appiness is relative, which means the statistics can be pressed into service by anybody wanting to prove anything” – reinforcing the role of happiness indexes in the subjective production of ‘knowledge’ – “including those who would suggest that spending money to improve people’s lives isn’t worth the bother” (*Guardian*, 4/11/2015).

But the WHR was not the only index criticised by journalists and commentators. It is worth mentioning that an article signed by the *Financial Times*’ Lex team¹⁰ suggested that Bhutan’s famous GNH is as questionable as the other indicators of its kind. The group pointed out that the problem with GNH “is that it may not be any more useful as a political, economic and social tool than GDP”, and since personal happiness is “elusive”, “[t]he pursuit of happiness on a national level is likely be harder still” (*Financial Times*, 13/9/2013). In the same newspaper, journalist David Pilling went further and even suggested that GDP is still the most reliable variable available today. He admitted that GDP has become a “ubiquitous term” (or a “global obsession”, in the article’s online version), and let economist Diane Coyle add that “GDP is a made-up entity”, an “artificial construct” and an “artefact of the age of mass production” (*Financial Times*, 5/7/2014). Despite considering GDP as “amoral”, Pilling finally concluded that “[i]ts great virtue, however, remains that it is a single, concrete number. For the time being, we may be stuck with it” (*ibidem*).

¹⁰ An anonymous group of critical columnists working for the newspaper.

Methodological questions apart, when it came to the measurement of happiness in the UK, criticisms were usually directed to former Prime Minister David Cameron – especially at (but not limited to) the beginning of the time period of my sample, following the launch of the WHR, because the politician was in charge from 2010 to 2016 – who officially introduced the study of people’s well-being in the country during his first year of government. Economic journalist Alan Beattie wondered: “Does anyone take this stuff seriously? David Cameron does, or did... it was the UK prime minister who declared that the ONS would be sent on a quest for the elixir of wellbeing” (*Financial Times*, 6/2/2016). However, commentators in general showed a certain disapproval in terms of the amount of money invested by the government for the study of happiness. Reporter Mario Ledwith wrote in the *Daily Mail* (4/2/2012) that Cameron’s “controversial £2million survey” was “costly and unnecessary”. In a follow-up story, the *Guardian* (1/12/2017) has also been pragmatic on Cameron’s policies: “No point trying to work out how to measure national happiness while austere policies mean some people can’t pay the rent.”

Invariably, as regards to the controversial effectiveness of the government’s policies and its obsession for boosting national happiness, there were also references to the opposite effects they may cause. “National happiness campaigns, such as that adopted by the [Cameron] Government at a cost of millions of pounds, are likely to make people unhappier”, the *Telegraph* (12/9/2012) published. “Critics claimed that the £2million cost of the well-being survey... was a waste” (*ibidem*). In this way, it can be noticed that, even though a number of ordinary articles just contributed to spreading the word on the new, apparently flamboyant idea of measuring ‘happiness’, some commentators tried to show that the money invested in happiness research could have been spent to provide for the population’s most basic needs. This narrative encapsulates what more politicised and

engaged commentators usually suggested in the British press: happiness research means nothing if it doesn't have a clear, positive impact on people's lives. Interestingly, in this case they are critiquing the way happiness is measured but not the actual premise of the WHR.

6.13. Conclusion

Even though Prime Minister David Cameron started to measure national happiness ahead of the launch of the WHR and Britain's "happiness tsar", economist Richard Layard, has claimed for years that measuring happiness is a useful tool for policymaking and international comparisons (Layard 2012), when it came to the UK press – apart from more superficial articles normally published in tabloids – broadsheet newspapers in particular tended to frame it as (at least) a controversial practice. Indeed, a number of commentators criticised both methodological and political questions related to the quantification of 'happiness', in line with influential critical theorists' arguments. Although some opinions shared by journalists and commentators seemed to take for granted that the happiness index was an authoritative study which reflected reality instead of just constructing a version of it, the UK press played a crucial role in the happiness debate precisely because of the ability to discuss implications and reverberations of the attempt to measure the 'immeasurable' by contesting quantification practices. Yet, even though more critical articles evoked 'objective' scientific discourse and offered a particular construction of rationality which recurrently suggested that happiness cannot be measured, critique was expressed in quite normative ways at times – thus perpetuating the formation of standardised, neoliberal subjectivities.

By engaging with the analysis of the UK sample, however, one cannot end up without being stimulated to adopt a more critical perspective on the ways happiness is normally negotiated within the media discourse. Some journalists – especially those writing for the *Guardian* and the *Observer* – tended to be quite sceptical towards the study of happiness and, almost in a post-structuralist act, tried to deconstruct a priori ideas related to a standard happiness as it appears in popular culture. They dissected experts' discourses, denied preconceptions, 'played' with the object of study itself and broke free from certain social chains, promoting a sort of revolution in the journalistic coverage of happiness which, instead of being assumed as people's ultimate goal, was even considered to be 'boring' at some points. Combining elements such as freedom and rationalism while discussing such a complex topic (or topics) was fostered by the personal, subjective framing of the media discourse. Even though it is not possible to know journalists' identity nor what they really think about the topics in question, they had the possibility to contextualise ideologies especially in a number of long-form works (40%), columns (20%) and editorials (4% of the national sample, as shown in Table 3.2): sometimes just reproducing certain usual understandings (as in many articles where happiness was taken as a general theme) but also, and most importantly, creating alternative or counter-narratives which challenged normalised ideas of happiness (through parallel themes discussed in separate subheadings, which tended to problematise happiness within media discourse).

Despite some direct and indirect assumptions that money is not everything but still plays a role in people's quality of life, for example, commentators apparently wanted their texts to help liberate readers from certain prejudices related to (un)happiness, pleasure, and stereotypical identity-markers and attitudes associated with the British themselves. Although discourses of 'nature' did not emerge as a major theme, they appeared at times suggesting

an anti-materialistic discourse and showing that being in contact with nature (instead of getting lost in the stressful routine of big cities, for example) can be a sort of solution to improve people's well-being. Genetics and psychological predispositions to happiness (the latter were normally explored in lifestyle articles, the second more frequent main theme in the national sample), in turn, were given more column-space than the influence of structural and environmental elements over people's moods and behaviours.

However, the question of "public happiness" (cf. Hirschman 1982, Arendt 1990) and the role of structure and institutions are extremely relevant for a democratic happiness debate, and therefore should have been given even more attention in the sample as a whole (including the other national contexts I analysed). This finding seems to resonate with the fact that Foucault's critiques of the institutions that journalism "directly relies" on may have contributed to his work being underexploited in journalism studies (Andrejevic 2008: 605) – perhaps something similar happens with journalists working in the mainstream media. In the *Guardian*, though, political and sociological theorist William Davies highlighted the democratic role of institutions as something opposed to the biopolitical responsibility attributed to individuals for their own happiness, which is eventually also linked to their socio-economic status and material conditions.

If there could have been more articles dedicated to such key discussions, the same cannot be said about social comparisons. Challenging Layard's (2011) view that comparing oneself to others can be damaging to happiness – even though the scholar himself contradicts his own position in a sense, by firmly advocating the study and measurement of national happiness which are practically based on comparisons – journalists dedicated significant space to comparing peoples and lifestyles across national contexts. This tendency – as

naturally stimulated by the science of happiness itself – made some writers look at other national groups around the globe, and, despite stereotypes of habitual British discretion, they also paid significant attention to their own country and fellow nationals especially in terms of personality, identity, and ways of living. Contradicting some relatively discreet but recurrent signs of a superiority complex, some writers suggested that Britons have a tendency to be depressed and that they can settle for being ‘miserable’ – although some authors related these characteristics to eccentricity and self-deprecating humour (see Thomas & Antony 2015, also Mills 2017). Apart from references to pleasant elements and situations, sometimes related to other arguably ‘happy’ countries such as Denmark (even if to highlight similarities with those countries), the newspapers as a whole did not insist in romanticising discourses of happiness in the UK.

Indeed, more down-to-earth views were common in the British press, and problematising some weaknesses of the British did not seem to be a taboo for commentators who did that openly – even if trying to suggest that, in the end, they are self-confident and proud of themselves anyway. Many journalists wanted to show strength of character, scepticism towards happiness science, and certain narratives denoted that, in opposition to the happiness industry’s principles, apparently some journalists do not even care about being happy. However, this might well suggest a defensive stance, especially if one considers that, conversely, there were also countless pieces of advice on how to avoid sadness and frustration within the texts – especially in tabloids and psychology related articles in the *Telegraph*, for example. Indeed, some journalists discussed the topic in a quite motivational tone, echoing the biopolitical promotion of positive mentality and subjectivities, which contrasted with other writers’ rationality and scepticism towards ‘happiness’.

However, even more sceptical journalists started by saying that the British are “miserable”, but they often ended up with an attempt of positive self-representation, following a similar reasoning as more optimistic writers. Representative examples related to genetics revealed that in the *Guardian* and *Daily Mail* – either by saying that genetics doesn’t matter if it’s not interesting for Britons, or hoping that Britons are genetically close to the happiest population in the world as genetics has apparently indicated. These different perspectives on the same object of discussion can illustrate how discursive mechanisms can be used in order to take advantage of situations and contexts, being it through a critical and more independent discourse (as shown in the broadsheet newspaper) or a more optimistic and emotional one (as in the tabloid), but with a common aspect that is positive self-representation.

By reflecting on dominant discourses within these texts, it can be noticed that the newspapers’ positions regarding people’s happiness also change according to the context. In the national scenario, newspapers tended to divide the country between *north* and *south*, as well as *urban* and *rural* areas, in terms of culture and lifestyle. However, despite clear suggestions that people living in the countryside seem to be happier than those in big cities, the south of Britain was normally depicted as more well-off than the north – which denotes an implicit notion of success and prosperity related to the richest areas of the country, as well as wealthy nations around the world. Such discourse is very much in line with an individualistic and competitive mentality which tends to be naturalised through narratives promoted in neoliberal societies and by mainstream happiness studies itself.

But the tone changed slightly when it came to particular nations which are (or were) symbols of resistance to capitalism such as ‘happy’ Bhutan. Even though its acclaimed GNH

drew the attention of a number of journalists from all newspapers in the sample, the Himalayan country was also framed in particular ways at times, which can be encapsulated as the opposite positions of being ‘cruel’ and ‘naïve’. For example: Bhutan was depicted as cruel because of racism and anti-democratic immigration policies, perhaps as a way of criticising ‘Otherness’ in the liberal *Financial Times*; whereas the country was also depicted as naïve for being influenced by globalisation since it became a democracy, as in the leftist *Guardian*. In this last case, material assumptions that money can still buy happiness somehow then gave room to concerns with the negative influence of dominant cultures and cultural homogenisation. Even ordinary people were quoted in some articles in order to show that, despite the alternative ways of boosting people’s happiness in Bhutan, in practice the population already has quite ‘material’ interests, and the combination of such different cultures can be a threat to the country’s traditions. These oppositional constructions show, therefore, that discourses of ‘Otherness’ can also say a lot about oneself, including one’s ideologies and intentions (see Said 1978, Hall 2009). Interestingly, even though the British Empire was one of the greatest colonisers in history and still benefits from this, nowadays the UK press produces narratives which reveal concerns with the negative influence that globalisation and Westernisation may exert over Bhutan.

But although concerns with cultural standardisation as a way of threatening people’s happiness appeared in the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, they were relatively underexplored in the sample as a whole. When the novelist Andrew Martin touched on the question in the *Telegraph* (6/8/2014), for example, globalisation was even stereotypically framed as the reason why Northern people now seem to be as happy as the Southern, in England. Many journalists compared Britain to other nations, though, and according to a quite conventional, dominant perspective which clearly links to Foucault’s (1980, 2002) reflections on

unbalanced power relations. While Swiss were said to “reign supreme” as the happiest nation in the WHR – perhaps as a reflection of the association between meritocracy and plutocracy (see Littler 2018) – it rather came as a surprise to some commentators that countries such as Costa Rica, Mexico and Puerto Rico ranked better than the UK in the global list – denoting British journalists’ prejudices and preconceptions with regards to happiness and particular social values and lifestyles, which can eventually create social myths (cf. Deacon *et al.* 2007, also Barthes 2009). The way commentators sewed together facts and discourses, according to both personal and the newspapers’ ideologies, very much contributed to the heterogeneity of ideas and narratives within the media texts, but also reveals political aspects of media discourse and some publications’ attempt to improve the image of the national group and ‘protect’ certain popular and ideologically-friendly countries.

Broadly speaking, along with competitiveness, positive self-representation was found in many places within the national sample. For instance, Londoners were represented as much tolerant towards cultural differences and immigration in comparison to people from top countries in the WHR such as Denmark and Norway. But, again, the narrative changed when the Nordic countries were compared not to Britain, but to the US. If the commentator’s intention is to contrast Scandinavian welfare with American consumer-capitalism, then the Nordic countries tend to be positioned as much closer to the UK, and therefore represented in a quite positive way in this case. On the other hand, the US was heavily criticised because of its individualistic values: despite of its high GDP, negative aspects of society such as depression, substance abuse and economic inequality were highlighted as some of the possible reasons why the wealthiest country in the world was not the happiest – according to the WHR, of course.

The previous examples of social comparisons led to another discursive formation noticed among the writers: paying significant attention to negative aspects normally attributed to other societies, which is certainly more comfortable than going into deep discussions about one's own problems. Even when commentators praised certain nations, sometimes their intention can be suggesting that their own country is doing similarly well, whereas in other situations they rather tried to improve their own image precisely by pointing out the others' weaknesses, consciously or unconsciously. In doing research and reporting facts, comparisons can be useful in order to situate oneself in relation to others and perhaps get a more comprehensive perception of the matter, but dividing and labelling 'us' and 'them' is also used to construct national identities and imaginaries.

As long as commentators respect cultural differences and, most importantly, do not assume that their culture is superior in relation to others, making comparisons can be considered as a normal practice in the construction of national identity through media discourse. The point here is how comparisons are being made: some narratives show the commentators' commitment to the common good, whereas others clearly denote an arrogant, sometimes nationalist attitude. While some writers promote equality with a more collectivistic view by pointing out that "[t]he key to our happiness is connection, not competition" (*Guardian*, 20/3/2015), others eventually stimulate discourses of superiority by claiming that "GB's best" because it has a "better way of life" (*Daily Mirror*, 6/4/2012) – in line with reactionary notions of 'meritocracy'.

The popularity or unpopularity of political terms within the media texts can tell something about these problematics too. Although Brexit has been an important political moment which stimulated discussions about nationalism and national identity in the UK, the

term ‘nationalism’ did not appear in the articles at all after the EU referendum in 2016 – perhaps suggesting avoidance of the polemical subject in association with happiness. As regards to Brexit, opinions diverged and statistics contradicted each other: at the same time some figures and news suggested an optimistic atmosphere from the ‘leave’ perspective, others highlighted the risks and uncertainties which emerged in a historical moment for the country. While conservatives and nationalists focused on potential economic advantages such as an increasing GDP, Labour and pro-EU voices insisted that Brexit caused heavy losses which would negatively impact people’s everyday life at least in a short term.

Yet, the UK has improved its performance in the WHR after the EU referendum, and had never come so close to the top 10 as they did by occupying the 13th position in 2020. Given the uncertainties of the historical moment, though, the *Observer* doubted: “Are we Brits really happier than ever or just going mad?” (12/11/2017). Taking this headline as a cue, it is worth mentioning that the coverage of topics related to mental well-being deserves special attention in the case of Britain – as Brexit could not have solved all mental health issues in the country after all. Even though some commentators elaborated on the need for individuals to foster more resilience (see Gill & Orgad 2018) as well as the ways psychology can contribute to happiness, official numbers were relatively overshadowed by discussions about issues reported from other countries such as those in Scandinavia, the US and India. It seems that, even in a developed, progressive democracy such as Britain, newspapers avoided highlighting statistics which could indicate their struggle in this context. In fact, there was reference to research suggesting that mental health issues are seen as a taboo since it can still generate discrimination and hostility in the UK. Moreover, drawing attention to serious problems in other countries which occupy quite different positions in the happiness ranking appeared to be an attempt to demystify the delicate topic of mental well-being and

show that it can be a concern everywhere. Again, this tendency can also be related to a positive (or perhaps less negative) self-representation through media discourse.

In talking about mental health journalists tended to focus on people's lifestyle and attitudes towards life, which brought a sort of motivational tone to some articles. On the one hand, solitude, comparison to others and the negative influences of new technologies such as social media were considered as damaging to people's happiness, as tendencies related to individualism. On the other hand, maturity, stability and faith have been included in the list of factors which can rather contribute to a positive mindset. When it came to religion in particular – which did not emerge as a major theme, perhaps because of the cautiousness related to secularisation and freedom of belief in the UK – the *Telegraph* (3/2/2016) was tendentious by suggesting that, based on statistics provided by the ONS, “the faithful are blessed with greater happiness”, and the “typical Briton” is more likely to be happy in the UK – instead of Muslims, Jewish and Sikhs, for example. Indeed, sometimes discourses which tried to boost British self-esteem seemed to contrast with the tendency to say that it is okay to be “miserable”.

These examples illustrate the contradiction noticed in media discourse through which many commentators tended to show their scepticism or even disapproval to the attempt to measure or even chase happiness, but at the same time also accepted influences from happiness studies and kept representing certain social and national groups as happier than others – and even revealing an implicit sympathy for happy, elite nations, as long as it did not diminish the happiness of Britons in some way. It seems that journalists try to construct an ‘objective’, rational discourse about the quantification of happiness by suggesting that the practice is controversial and even counterproductive, but then they cannot resist the

temptation of using happiness surveys and rankings in order to make comparisons (if not proper judgements) between cultural identities, attitudes and lifestyles which are sometimes implicitly treated as more or less favourable to happiness. Something similar also happens in the academic literature: contrasting with subjectivist scholars such as Veenhoven (1999), Eid and Larsen (2008) and Diener (1984), economist Richard Layard holds that wealth and happiness are not necessarily linked. However, Layard himself is one of the co-authors of the WHR, a study which suggests precisely the opposite since wealthy countries are normally at the top of the list.

Choosing Layard as the avatar of the contradiction within the happiness debate is also a reminder that, despite the fact that many commentators and opinion leaders heavily criticised the happiness industry, there is also still controversy regarding the ways newspapers interpret and represent the happiness ranking in the UK. What remains clear from the analysis, though, is that if the media wants to promote a comprehensive and more radical discussion of happiness – in line with Segal’s (2017) arguments, for example, and not just focused on numbers and quality of life – it is important to keep looking at political in addition to economic aspects of the topic, as well as the impact it can have in terms of social and collective change. In this sense, UK broadsheets in particular were expected to give even more attention to questions regarding *structures* instead of *individuals* in terms of the responsibility to promote happiness – differently from the psychological and motivational approaches to the topic observed in many articles in the national sample.

How have British newspapers tried to boost the effectiveness of the happiness debate in practice, then? Experts sceptical of the field suggest that the whole apparatus created surrounding happiness and its measurement is very much related to the dominant classes

who eventually try to manipulate the population according to their own criteria and interests – echoing Foucault’s (1980) power/knowledge nexus and his criticisms of unbalanced power relations, which I related to radically different social actors such as ‘elite’ and ‘peripheric’ nations when it comes to mainstream happiness studies. Indeed, as authors Hannah Dawson and William Davies argued in the *Guardian*, instead of just quantifying people’s moods, ruling classes should focus on increasing well-being in terms of equality and working conditions (20/5/2015) as well as making sure people’s voice gets heard through happiness reports (23/4/2015). According to most commentators cited in this chapter, if happiness research does not really change reality for the better it risks being just speculation or even propaganda for those who invest in surveys which basically corroborate that some privileged people are happier than others – a trap British journalists themselves fell into at times.

Once again, such observations lead to the realisation that the creation of ‘subjectivity’ – a key concept in doing a Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (see Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2017) – is at the basis of the happiness debate, and it is informed by social and national contexts through language and discourse. Subjectivity starts from the moment in which researchers decide the criteria used to quantify people’s feelings; then, respondents to the surveys add their dose of subjectivity by reporting impressions as regards to their own moods; the happiness report then give a shape to the collected data; and finally also journalists interpret the report’s findings according to their own views which, in turn, will be ‘consumed’ by the readership. As this debate is subjective in every sense, both happiness research findings and media texts about them reflect that tendency. But what if one compares different happiness indexes, then? As it has been mentioned in the UK press, Norway topped the WHR in 2017, whereas the GER was led by Paraguay in the same year. Even though they are two separate reports, how could they have so different results if the

object of study is essentially the same? This, along with many other questions within this main topic, is a matter of perspective – which eventually undermines the role of science in the study of a rather discursively constructed theme such as happiness.

Indeed, everything seems to be fluid in the happiness debate. The comparison between those different happiness indexes in the *Guardian* (23/6/2017) has shown the uncertainty caused by multiple subjectivities within discourses of happiness. In this sense, the methods adopted by researchers working in the field have often been put into question, in addition to their practical aims. While even the acclaimed GNH was contested at some points because happiness is said to be “elusive” in the end (*Financial Times*, 14/9/2013), the sometimes demonised GDP – widely referred to as a limited monetary measure – was also depicted as a more reliable variable at times precisely because it is “a single, concrete number” (*Financial Times*, 5/7/2014). Indeed, some journalists treated information as something static which can be simply and almost automatically retransmitted through more ‘concrete’ data and facts as they assumed the WHR findings could be. At the same time, as most examples have shown throughout this chapter, a number of commentators promoted more nuanced, in-depth reflections about happiness. These examples are the evidence that, even though not everyone seems to be interested in engaging in more sustained critical reflection upon the cultural meaning of happiness, at least not in the same way, the UK sample shows how a heterogeneous range of perspectives can contribute to the discursive construction of happiness and creation of different subjectivities through media discourse.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this study, I have selected distinct but yet interrelated sets of newspapers in order to illustrate the ways that happiness has been represented in specific segments of the global media. My work has been developed, thus, as a collage of (more or less) similar discourses that perpetuate particular ideologies. Each text, writer and publication has contributed to the discursive construction of happiness and, eventually, also the naturalisation of what can be “considered to be true and valuable” (van Der Bom & Mills 2015: 184) through media discourse in a Foucauldian sense. In talking about global, commercial media (as the source of my data) and economic superpowers (as the main actors playing an active role in the analysed cultural contexts), in general journalists in my sample eventually participated in the “uneven” and “unequal” creation and perpetuation of “neoliberal subjectivity” (Bowsher 2018: 515-516). My analysis thus feeds into wider debates about whether happiness, which is conventionally understood as subjective and culturally-specific, can be quantified and opened up as a new area of biopolitical intervention.

Similarities and differences have been identified between newspapers and specific contexts from which data has been collected for this analysis, and the richness and nuance evident in the articles – in terms of framing both the central and other relevant topics which emerged from my cross-cultural and longitudinal analysis – clearly shows the difficulty of establishing a clear definition of what happiness itself is and means. Indeed, the aim of the thesis has not been to offer a rigid definition of happiness itself but to instead trace the construction of specific discourses of national happiness and interrogate the meanings, norms and values reinforced by these discourses in particular social and cultural contexts.

Inevitably, by gathering and juxtaposing personal, collective, institutional and, most importantly, not neutral discourses on the subject – since no perspective is ‘innocent’ and language is a means of social construction and domination (see Machin & Mayr 2012, also Machin & van Leeuwen 2007) – my data analysis generated a substantial range of articles which indicated perceptions and patterns that I wanted to highlight and contrast. My experience as a journalist certainly helped in this task. On the one hand, the articles seemed to speak to an apparently never-ending series of debates related to existential questions about people’s happiness and well-being that have existed since antiquity. However, on the other hand, what I aimed to illustrate and discuss in this thesis were the ways writers in the mainstream media from specific socio-cultural backgrounds shared particular ideologies on the happiness debate, usually associated with the “problematization” of happiness (Frawley 2015) which reflected elements of the zeitgeist of the beginning of the 21st century.

My sample was designed to bring different points of view on the subject to the fore. Looking specifically at the US, India and the UK was also a way of increasing ‘objectivity’ by avoiding, for example, a focus on my home country – Brazil – and being consistent in terms of the language, interpretation and contextualisation of my data (see Kahneman 1999, also Wierzbicka 2004, 1999). Culturally and historically speaking, the selected nations relate to each other due to colonial (and postcolonial) histories, but they are quite heterogeneous both when it comes to lifestyles and in relation to each nation’s performance in the happiness ranking over time. Even though the three countries are considered economic superpowers (all of them appear in the top-5 in number of millionaires according to the *Hurun Global Rich List 2020*), my longitudinal analysis of the WHR indicates that India has consistently ranked very low in the happiness index, while the other two countries have better results.

However, the UK has improved its levels of SWB quite significantly over the last few years, whereas the US has fallen in the happiness list at the end of my sample period.

In speaking of English-language texts from the mainstream media, the data collected from those distinct socio-cultural contexts very much communicated with each other – and confirming these affinities is a finding in itself. Neoliberalism as a socio-economic system, individualism as a common attitude, especially in advanced capitalist societies, and globalisation as a process involving those countries have contributed, to some extent, to a standardisation of public discourses about happiness. These discourses, however, are also shaped by specific news values and the coverage of such a complex and usually controversial topic in the media, which reflect some particularities, nuances, certain tendencies and events related to specific time periods and each national sample.

Still, similar sources and actors have been used across newspapers and countries throughout the whole time period of my sample. For example: a) comparisons were frequently made between the WHR and other indexes such as the economic GDP and the alternative GNH; b) the US as the country of freedom and prosperity, Scandinavian countries as the happiest in the WHR, and Bhutan as a particular example of ‘happy nation’ (most of the time) were also common references to be both challenged and praised by journalists; and c) authors of the UN’s study, such as Richard Layard, John Helliwell and Jeffrey Sachs, were frequently quoted (and not particularly contested) in the US, India and UK. Yet, each national context analysed in this thesis has provided a unique contribution to the discursive construction of happiness and the creation, perpetuation but also contestation of “neoliberal subjectivity” (see Bowsher 2018a, also Foucault 2008, Brown 2015) more broadly.

While some core themes were explored (although more or less differently) in all national settings – such as the relationship between happiness and wealth, the controversial attempt to measure ‘happiness’, and the representative case of Bhutan’s GNH (points I discuss in further depth below) – other topics became more evident within specific moments and cultural contexts, or were framed in particular ways across newspapers and nations. Broadly speaking, even though other relevant, parallel themes emerged from my data, debates on the measurement of happiness and its implications were a constant. Critiques of materialism and individualism also appeared in many places throughout the sample regardless of the year, but while the US journalists tended to eventually follow a notion of happiness that foregrounded material, socio-economic conditions – e.g., by trying to be more factual than emotional and focusing on parallel, more ‘concrete’ themes emerging from the happiness debate – newspapers in India discussed happiness as a philosophical concept more often and recurrently took a transcendent perspective on the subject by relating it to religion and spiritual growth. The UK press, in turn, revealed a particular concern with rationality – stemming from Enlightenment thought – and tended to be sceptical about happiness by claiming that it cannot be measured.

These more explicit patterns within media discourse contrasted, though, with less obvious narrative constructions that brought contradictions and tensions to the discussion in which happiness and its quantification were negotiated in my sample. Sometimes American journalists tried to positively represent the US by endorsing, for example, the pursuit of material happiness as an integral part of banal US nationalism, even though this form of happiness is in fact increasingly unattainable (see Berlant 2011); or even discourses of the ‘Anthropocene’ without highlighting the country’s role in the ‘Capitalocene’ (see Moore 2017) when it came to environmental debates (considering that the US was removed from

the Paris climate agreement in 2017); and positive narratives of immigration (that appeared especially when it became a special theme discussed in the WHR 2018), as long as they were convenient to the US economy.

In India, the focus on a spiritual path towards happiness was, in fact, overshadowed by self-criticism, pessimism regarding new lifestyles and economic inequality, as well as nostalgia for the ‘old golden days’ before the country’s economic liberalisation – despite some nationalist expectations of Indian citizens’ “patriotic duty” to demonstrate happiness (or high levels of SWB) at all costs, especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected. On the other hand, British rationality, pride and competitiveness, as found in dominant discourses, contrasted with narratives which echoed positive psychology – heavily criticised and normally attributed to the emotional US (cf. Ehrenreich 2010ab) – in more subjective and motivational discourses identified in some UK newspapers, which suggested the writers’ intention to promote happiness by fostering psychological resilience in its readership. Interestingly, despite the polemics caused by Brexit and its immediate implications, for example, this practice continued after the 2016 referendum.

As this overview illustrates, engaging with key parallel topics that recurred in articles about national happiness was as significant as exploring happiness and its quantification in my discussion. Indeed, these relevant, evolving debates across different contexts and years enhanced my perception of the images that the media created of each national group included in the sample, or the ways journalists imagined and represented those communities – paraphrasing Anderson (2006) – through particular understandings of happiness and well-being.

7.1. The tendency to ‘reify’ happiness

As argued in the introduction and literature review, drawing on Segal (2017), Ahmed (2010) and Ehrenreich (2010ab) happiness as a subjective concept should not necessarily have to follow particular social or cultural impositions and standards. Indeed, my intention in comparing how happiness is depicted across and within different cultural contexts is not to homogenise or suggest fixed, static cultures or to relativise, but to demonstrate how newspapers draw on perceptions of national cultures to make comparisons and negotiate the construction of subjectivities through language and discourse.

However, perhaps because in written discourses in the public sphere talking about material aspects of happiness seems to be more concrete and plausible than discussing people’s inner feelings, there is a tendency – not only among journalists but also scholars and professionals working in mainstream happiness studies – to interchange ‘happiness’ with ‘life satisfaction’ (cf. Almeder 2000, Haybron 2013) or even ‘well-being’ and ‘flourishing’ (cf. Wright 2013). This tendency reveals an attempt to reify and sometimes even commercialise happiness, by establishing more concrete, immediate, and perhaps ‘easier’ ways of achieving it – instead of considering happiness as an idea and admitting that it can instead be a social construction. In fact, in the language used in my media sample, happiness is (more or less implicitly) related to neoliberal ideologies which are largely disseminated by dominant cultures and support a huge industry or industries powered by people’s hope for individual happiness. As Frawley (2018: 34) has argued, for example, this attitude tends to maintain the status quo and convince that the capitalist economic system is “natural” or “unchangeable”, with a clear preference for a “minimalist state” (see Binkley

2014), which Bowsher (2018: 86) links to the biopolitical production of subjectivities “that are turned towards particular strategic ends” in neoliberal societies.

In this context, even though some journalists tend to suggest that money does not buy happiness, many of them still share narratives which directly or indirectly presuppose that happiness is eventually related to material aspects of life. But those journalists are not the only actors responsible for the naturalisation of such a view, as individualistic conceptions of happiness are intimately related to what Davies (2016) calls the “happiness industry” more broadly. Mainstream happiness studies itself is a discipline which very much relies on socio-economic aspects of societies (cf. Hill *et al.* 2020) and also considers objective standards – often related to the myth of a ‘perfect’ life which is usually firmly associated with prosperity in popular imaginary – in addition to subjective perceptions that people report in surveys about experienced ‘happiness’, translated by scholars as scientific data which intend to provide a picture of reality. But even the WHR – a study that claims to be an alternative to merely economic measures such as GDP – is heavily focused on people’s quality of life instead of happiness itself, and the report indicates, year by year, that most of the ‘happiest’ nations of the world are also the wealthiest. Indeed, since the launch of the WHR in 2012 newspaper readers would have become accustomed to insistent headlines stating that either Switzerland, Denmark, Norway or Finland were the ‘happiest nation’ of the world.

Due to the results of the WHR being repeated with this emphasis in the media, these strong claims contribute to the naturalisation of the myth that wealthy, powerful nations are more likely to be ‘happy’ than the poor ones – as indicated by the WHR itself. This practice is clearly contrasted, though, by critical theories such as Littler’s (2013, 2018) revisited

notion of meritocracy which points out that political and economic power and privileges cannot automatically serve as a justification for the usual elite nations' better performance in the 'happiness' index – which reinforces the association the author makes between meritocracy and plutocracy. Indeed, the fact that the happiness ranking intends to be seen as a scientific study does not secure its authoritativeness and reliability, at least not in every way.

In line with the rationale behind the WHR and mainstream happiness studies more broadly, scholars in the field tend to endorse a utilitarian (for a critique see Binkley 2014), and sometimes almost materialistic approach to the subject (as in Veenhoven 2010). For example, instead of focusing on happiness as an “activity of the soul” (Aristotle 1906 [350 BC]), scholars in mainstream happiness studies tend to directly or indirectly associate it with pleasure (see Epicurus 2005 [305 BC]). As Haybron (2013) has argued, though, even Aristotle considered happiness as well-being in a sense, since his understanding of it involved social values and objective standards (cf. Kraut 1979, Kahneman 1999, Kashdan *et al.* 2008). But although these concepts do have a relationship they should not be entirely conflated as occurs with indexes. Even though SWB and happiness are not synonymous (Ryff *et al.* 2002), the WHR portrays these concepts as interchangeable due to being informed by SWB which focuses on immediate experience and pleasure (Ryan & Deci 2001), or life satisfaction (McMahon 2004). In this way, despite the fact that standards of happiness do not seem to fit all individuals (Smart & Williams 2008 [1973]), the utilitarian approach (see Mill 1979, Bentham 1988) still influences happiness studies and the well-being agenda today (Wright 2014).

A typical example of how well-being is routinely conflated with happiness is sociologist Ruut Veenhoven's speech at a TEDx talk given in Utrecht (17/4/2014): the scholar takes happiness as life satisfaction which is what "most people want", he argues, and "only a few weird philosophers say they don't like that". In fact, in one of his publications Veenhoven (2010: 627) holds that "common philosophical qualms about the [greater happiness] principle are not very realistic". As this kind of mentality has been naturalised in popular culture (cf. Ahmed 2010, Davies 2016, Segal 2017), the mainstream media also show an inclination to assume that happiness is something 'touchable' (instead of perhaps 'imagined'), and therefore possible to translate into metrics, questionnaires and algorithms as proposed by the science of happiness itself. This tendency illustrates happiness studies' relationship with social control: people are said to be democratically asked about their feelings in surveys, but they are actually being 'biopolitically' managed as neoliberal subjects (see Bowsher 2018a, also Foucault 2008) as well as informed about what they 'need' and oriented about how they can achieve 'happiness' according to culturally-specific values and parameters – which links to the notion of happiness as a social norm (Ehrenreich 2010ab), usually associated with neoliberalism and consumerism (McMahon 2006, 2008).

7.2. Exploring material happiness

As expected because of the choice to collect data by searching the terms 'World Happiness Report' and 'national happiness', the attempt to quantify 'happiness' was a significant frame in all national contexts included in the sample. Indeed, a third of the documents collected focused on well-being indexes and the measurement of happiness more broadly. Broadly speaking, the WHR and other alternative measures such as Bhutan's GNH were usually

referred to as more comprehensive or less limited than purely economic indicators such as the GDP. On the other hand, the GDP was portrayed as a more ‘concrete’ number at times. However, alternative variables adopted by the WHR, such as generosity, freedom and social support, did not appear as major themes in the newspapers, whereas significant attention was paid to the apparently naturalised relationship between happiness, wealth and quality of life – resonating with the aforementioned tendency to interchange ‘happiness’ with ‘well-being’ and ‘life satisfaction’.

Indeed, money, success and power were directly or indirectly among the most popular frames elaborated by the journalists throughout the sample period. In speaking of the US data, even though American journalists clearly discussed the limitation of GDP – especially in more left-leaning publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – and made references to the Easterlin paradox (see Easterlin 1974) in order to challenge the primacy of money in the context of “turbo-charged” capitalism (Luttwak 1999), many articles suggested that it is difficult to dissociate well-being from money in a declared neoliberal, competitive society. Other clear examples of the link between money and well-being were references in some articles to an increasing suicide rate during periods of economic crisis – very much in line with findings that relate well-being and wealth, commonly shared by happiness research (e.g., Veenhoven 1999, Eid & Larsen 2008). Sometimes American journalists appeared to place more importance on prosperity and success than happiness itself, as noticed, for example, when the *Wall Street Journal* attributed the tendency that people are arguably made to act ambitiously in life to natural selection. Still echoing the materialistic view identified with the notion of individual happiness, the *Washington Post* pointed out that income and life satisfaction are “closely

correlated”, and some commentators maintained that GDP is a rather more “reliable” indicator if compared to happiness data.

In India, even though many journalists’ narratives about happiness and money were often anti-materialistic and more egalitarian – including sharp criticisms of economic inequality in the country and the mental health issues that the excess of money can potentially cause – a materialistic view appeared more or less explicitly at times. For example, a materialist view of happiness was printed in the highest circulated English-language newspaper in the country (ABC 2019), the *Times of India*: a remarkable article contrasted different opinions on the topic and openly endorsed an individualistic view according to which life satisfaction was directly proportional to wealth, whereas a more holistic, egalitarian counterview was framed as opposed to that backed by the newspaper. Borrowing McChesney’s (2000) terms, in this case the newspaper’s individualistic view was portrayed as *natural*, whereas the more collectivist counterview was framed as *marginal* and positioned against the dominant neoliberal mode of production – reflecting India’s modernisation and changing lifestyles as a consequence of globalisation.

The symbolic examples mentioned above demonstrate that, despite the critical tone towards standards of happiness expressed in my sample (especially in so-called ‘quality press’), money and power were still represented as advantages according to some key narratives diffused across the countries – reflecting a capitalist, if not neoliberal, perspective which is not absent from mainstream media and commercial newspapers. Essentially, the difference between materialistic and anti-materialistic discourses was that claims against the primacy of money were normally more explicit in the former, whereas assumptions that money is still important to people’s happiness tended to be more implicit within the latter.

7.3. Critiques of ‘happiness’

What my data illustrates, however, is that a number of journalists are not easily convinced about the usefulness of ranking the ‘happiness’ of nations – although the subject may well interest readers and ultimately become topical in the newspapers especially with the publication of the WHR every year. In this way, these professionals repeatedly reiterate their scepticism: the WHR is a “Western concept” (*Hindustan Times*, 21/3/2017); measuring happiness is a “waste of money” (*Washington Post*, 4/4/2012); and such manipulative practice is a “tool of social control” (*Guardian*, 23/4/2015). Many of the articles touched on in previous chapters have contested the notion of measuring ‘happiness’ in ways that help to unpack key issues and rethink a priori ideas about happiness, providing more critical coverage of the happiness ranking especially in the ‘quality press’. The critical stance taken by those articles in my sample perhaps resonates with the tendency that, as Graber (2010: 76) has argued, journalists are “more liberal than the general population” and have “a keener sense of social responsibility”.

As a response to the phenomenon of so-called “happiness industry”, critical theorists heavily criticise the attempt to measure the ‘immeasurable’ (e.g., Ahmed 2010, Ehrenreich 2010ab, Davies 2016). Resonating with the view that society itself can create obstacles to happiness, as discussed by Berlant (2011) and Segal (2017), this sort of countercultural movement also reverberated in many articles throughout the sample. Due to the subjective connotations of happiness as a theme and the freedom journalists have when writing columns, editorials and opinion pieces in particular – as they are given space to elaborate on

weighty topics in more depth – more complex and negotiated discussions related to the controversial measurement (and perhaps achievement) of happiness stood out against the more superficial news focused on the countries' positions in the global ranking.

Following Entman's (1993) instructions on frame analysis, it remained clear that counter-narratives challenged mainstream notions of happiness in many ways. For example, some US news stories pointed out that money is not everything even in the first economy of the world; Indian newspapers associated happiness with spiritual growth; and journalists in the UK tried to deconstruct standards of happiness. However, at other points writers from all national contexts included in this analysis, fell into the trap of taking for granted that the WHR was a comprehensive study about the happiness of nations – a simplistic, negligent attitude which becomes serious if we consider that media discourse constructs “truth claims” through language, settings and sources (Rose 2001), and therefore may naturalise certain concepts and representations of reality (Newbold *et al.* 2002) as if they were really faithful depiction of the world (Allan 2010).

In this way, despite some journalists being critical, overall, discussions of happiness tended to reinforce normative values. On the one hand, countries such as China and South Korea were routinely compared to the US in terms of social support, for example, suggesting that people should think more collectively in the ‘West’. Indeed, even though narratives were constructed to highlight concerns with modernisation in the ‘East’, journalists also reinforced, in a sense, the distinction between ‘individualistic’ and perhaps more ‘collectivist’ ways of thinking. On the other hand, time and time again newspapers seemed to be setting up Others as being responsible for “hollow happiness” (Segal 2017) and their responsibility as being to debunk it. But what would they say about being hollow by judging

people's ways of living, sometimes through a quite hostile and orientalist discourse? It is worth mentioning here that my own critiques of the role played by dominant ideologies in the discursive construction of happiness is fundamentally related to the norms they create and the massive influence and control they exert over people – normally related to hegemonic economic motivations – and not necessarily the ways people end up experiencing moments of happiness in everyday life.

The point is that, in a neoliberal context in which many newspapers are in fact commercial products (Bignell 2002), news values are subject to those dominant ideologies which produce dominant or preferred meanings (Hall 1999) and privilege powerful groups (Hall 1973) – for instance Western dominant culture (Hall 1992) – and, more specifically, may lead to journalists taking the WHR as a study that *reflects* reality rather than just *representing* it in particular ways. This situation contributes, thus, to the standardisation of happiness as something which, in this context, apparently depends on dominant rules and parameters. This is why I argue and illustrate with many examples in this thesis that mainstream happiness studies, the WHR in particular and its coverage are intimately related to the Foucauldian insights into the formation of a “neoliberal subjectivity” through discourse and the creation of knowledge (see Bowsher 2018ab, Andrejevic 2008, Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2017, also Foucault 1972, 1980). I refer to a hegemonic process which is both conducted and naturalised by dominant cultures that manage and control populations through the use of language, power and influence.

7.4. Whose responsibility is happiness?

Drawing upon Brown's (2015: 129-130) insight into the difficulty of collectivising governance in neoliberal societies, given the tendency to isolate both different unities and responsibilities which should be rather combined and work together, this issue itself eventually undermines the attempt to promote or at least stimulate a sort of 'collective happiness'. When it comes to media discourse, although more critical journalists suggested that the responsibility for happiness should be 'collective', others tended to attribute it to the individual. In the US, the form of happiness promoted through media discourse was more or less explicitly related to freedom, economic goals and the reduced participation of the state in welfare. In the UK, the topic was sometimes constructed with a motivational tone, which contradicted the drier and more rational approach that was often adopted among British commentators in my sample. Indeed, following discourses related to positive psychology and self-help usually presupposes that there is a specific way or 'recipe' for happiness – in a manner that contrasted with more critical UK discourses about the quantification of happiness.

But turning the focus from a mainly economic perspective (in the US) to an apparently more 'humane' attempt to suggest reasons for acting and behaving in particular ways in order to boost happiness (in the UK) may have to do with a sort of paternalistic attitude endorsed by the state. This happened, for example, when journalists in the UK highlighted the social support offered by National Health Service (NHS) as if the state were available and caring about citizens – which indicates the biopolitical role of such discourses. Advising on socially expected behaviours and teaching readers to avoid negative events and to predict or anticipate frustrations constructs a narrative that orients audiences to be

prepared mentally for obstacles in life, in order to minimise suffering. This attitude of some journalists clearly illustrates the process through which discourse shapes society and vice-versa (see Richardson 2007), even when it comes to a complex, negotiated topic such as happiness.

Despite the popularity of positive psychology in the US (Ehrenreich 2010ab), this motivational approach identified in the UK press was not as evident in the American newspapers. However, in the most powerful economy of the world, which has frequently been criticised in the academic literature because of the excess of freedom, individualism and economic inequality (see Luttwak 1999), people's obsession with happiness was referred to in the *New York Times* as a "characteristically American struggle". While the goal of leading a 'happy' life seems to be largely normalised through public discourse, some writers blamed the state for not actively contributing to people's happiness – the high cost of an essential service such as healthcare was often used to illustrate the shortcomings of US society, reinforcing that the responsibility transferred from structures to the individual can reach such a basic level of welfare in competitive, marketised societies like the US.

In India, though, stimulating people's happiness through media discourse revealed a further element, or at least more explicitly than in the other contexts: a nationalist attitude identified with the ruling classes, which reverberated in the newspapers. In line with the era of populism and post-truth (see McIntyre 2018), through this nationalist practice reflected in some media texts readers were invited to demonstrate their happiness and report higher levels of SWB at all costs as a civic duty – another way in which biopower was manifested. In contrast with this distinctive discourse, though, other narratives highlighted that national problems such as economic inequality and the associated mental health issues would prevent

India from boosting collective happiness and having a better performance at happiness rankings even if the parameters were established by Indians themselves, and not the dominant ‘West’.

These findings contrasted with the widely diffused representation of religion and spirituality as an apparent legitimate path towards a more “morally valid” spiritual happiness – if compared to material happiness (cf. Kashdan *et al.* 2008: 219) – that was a prominent discourse throughout the Indian sample. These anti-materialistic and transcendental elements – which appeared even in the specialised *Economic Times* – reinforced many journalists’ position against the WHR: a tool created by the powerful ‘West’ and whose use of the term ‘happiness’ was considered as inappropriate in an Indian context. In fact, it was claimed in the *Pioneer* that the UN study should be rather named “World Content Report”, echoing the linguistic problems arising due to the complexity of the term ‘happiness’ discussed by Wierzbicka (1999, 2004). It is worth mentioning that the complexity involving the term ‘happiness’ was discussed in the WHR itself (2012, p. 11), as the authors admitted that its use may lead to “confusion” but it still “attracts attention more quickly”. Conversely, Bhutan’s GNH was normally represented in Indian newspapers as a more reliable study with more adequate parameters – a framing which reflects a geopolitical bias as India is apparently interested in maintaining a good relationship with the (to draw on common terminology) “tiny Buddhist”, non-threatening neighbouring country.

But even if top-down political influence appears to have contributed to the fact that some Indian journalists preferred not to engage in polemics over national issues – a mechanism used to obscure socio-economic conditions by suggesting that everything is under control in the country – many writers could not ignore social problems that seem to

be among the reasons why India was heavily criticised in terms of national happiness. Indeed, sadness, pessimism and nostalgia – normally linked to tradition and perceived when writers looked back to better days before economic liberalisation – were key themes in the Indian sample, as well as sharp self-criticism that sometimes overshadowed the critiques of the WHR (as an unfair “Western concept”) and India’s antagonistic attitude in the postcolonial relationship with the ‘West’.

In practice, some Indian journalists claimed that their national group was not as altruistic and collective-minded as in the popular imaginary. Indeed, references to the Indian educational system portrayed it as inclined to an individualistic lifestyle in the present day, and the *Times of India* even claimed that children are not taught important values and virtues such as love, care and sharing anymore. These findings show, however, that, although journalists are acknowledging social problems within Indian society, they are still associating them with ‘westernisation’ – even though this time the focus is not on ‘westernised’ values which shape the measurement of happiness but rather on the fact that increased individualism and materialism (encouraged by globalisation) appears to have impacted negatively upon happiness itself. Interestingly, social support among Indians was framed as a social myth by some commentators, whereas money and power – similar to narratives in the US and UK press – were framed as practical advantages for those living in contemporary India.

In line with this critical approach, journalists in America took advantage of having greater freedom of speech in relation to India and did not spare the image of their political leader. For instance, reflecting the way that the US has fallen in the happiness ranking since President Donald Trump was elected in 2016, a contributor with the *Washington Post* clearly

stated that the politician failed at making America “happier again”. Taking a step further in relation to the US and Indian press, some journalists in the UK proposed a need to rethink the central topic from its basis and deconstruct standards of happiness, which brought a sense of liberation from the ‘rules’ of happiness in more critical articles. Those writers contested, for example, happiness as a social norm and the duty to be happy which has been naturalised in neoliberal societies (see Ahmed 2010). Indeed, by challenging happiness ‘rules’ and questioning the happiness industry more explicitly, journalists shared more liberating narratives which were intimately related to contesting the status quo and reinforcing the role of counter-discourses of happiness within the mainstream media. The frames journalists used to signify objectivity and rationality – which were identified especially in ‘quality press’ and reflected scepticism towards the science of happiness, often represented as naïve, limited and unreliable – contrasted more emotional views usually noticed in tabloids, for example.

Although, when beginning this project, I expected the media would place even more emphasis on debates related to rising individualism and the state’s tendency to hold people accountable for their own happiness, more critical journalists still offered key examples of counter-discourse which indicated a ‘structural’ responsibility for happiness. In India, the creation of a ministry (or departments) of happiness, aimed at making people “genuinely happy”, became a very popular topic in the press, but, in fact, its policies, practical initiatives and impact were not fully explored in follow-up stories. The *Indian Express* even pointed out that, if the focus of such policy is on “training people to positively impact the life of others”, then it seems to be just “an attempt to bring about behavioural change in people, not behavioural changes within government”.

Accordingly, in the UK political and sociological theorist William Davies framed the quantification of happiness as a “manipulative” practice in the *Guardian* – similarly to the reference in his book to the “powerful techniques of mass behavioural manipulation” practiced by the happiness industry (Davies 2016: 275). In the article, he mentioned “institutions” as structures which should “grant people a voice that is heard” – clearly a more egalitarian perspective which seems to be committed to the promotion of people’s well-being, instead of just encouraging them to chase happiness on their own. In this way, narratives such as those shared by Davies encapsulate a shift from the status quo of a society of control and communicative capitalism (Dean 2010), or surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) – which echoes Foucault’s (1980) critiques of biopolitics and the power/knowledge nexus – to what Segal (2017) proposes for a society in which happiness is thought of and, most importantly, experienced as something ‘collective’.

But this critical spirit noticed in some publications was replaced by more subjective discourses at times, revealing, for example, the contradiction of some writers’ resentment because their national group did not get better results in the widely criticised and discredited happiness ranking. Such contradiction illustrates that, despite the objective and rational tone of some journalists especially in the ‘quality press’, happiness as a subjective topic can still contribute to the diffusion of personal and culturally contingent opinions in the media, which actually relates to the writers’ and newspapers’ interests, intentions and ideologies at a certain time and given particular news values (cf. Frawley 2015). As I say, with regards to the coverage of the WHR, even though many reports were critical of each country’s way of life (and so the status quo), most of the articles analysed were still critical of trying to measure happiness because journalists think it is pointless (and often then supported the status quo). This finding resonates, thus, with Duncan’s (2020: 88-89) suggestion that,

instead of contesting the status quo, the new science of happiness is very much focused on changing people's behaviour in order to make them assimilate the neoliberal way of living and, therefore, become more economically productive.

7.5. National identity and self-representation

Throughout my sample it was evident that journalists took advantage of certain elements and circumstances offered by the happiness debate in order to create a better image of their national group – reflecting the high competitiveness which some key authors relate to the neoliberal way of living (e.g., Foucault 2008, Bowsher 2018a, Binkley 2014, Dardot & Laval 2014). This has been shown, for example, in the discussion related to genetics in the UK press: if genetics research did not help discursive constructions of happiness among Britons, it was considered irrelevant; but when genetics was able to favour the perception of Britons' own happiness, then it was considered as a valid factor. But in addition to the images that writers usually created of their own cultures and countries, the representation of relationships with and comparisons to other nations and populations also helped to construct some traits of each group's collective identities and ways of living, as well as elements related to news values and the nuances of the coverage of the WHR in each national context.

As my analysis has shown, opinions about the quantification of happiness varied and contradicted each other not only across newspapers and countries but also within texts of single writers. Even though special sub-themes appeared in each national sample, also according to particular moments and events considered in my longitudinal analysis (e.g., the immigration debate in Trump's US; nationalism in India under Modi's government; Brexit

after the EU referendum in the UK), controversies related to the measurement of happiness, its developments and implications stood out as a central theme in a third of the entire sample. Interestingly, these debates were also used by journalists in the discursive construction of happiness but also cultural and national identities. Some journalists criticised the WHR but also complained about how their country ranked; at the same time, other commentators appeared to take the WHR's rationale for granted but eventually expressed disapproval of specific questions which perhaps threatened or damaged the public image of their national group – as described in many cases of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk 1991) and issues related to “banal nationalism” (Billig 2004).

These discursive practices identified within media discourse reveal some of the strategies used by journalists to disseminate ideologies related to each national/cultural context. Since autoanalysis and the differentiation between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, or intra- and inter-groups (see Parekh 1994, Woodward 1997), have long been part of the discursive process of constructing and representing collective identities, key elements such as defensiveness and competitiveness also appeared in journalistic discourse related to national happiness. Indeed, national identity as a sense of belonging (Connor 1978) to a certain ‘culture’ (understood as in Mead 1937, cited in Just & Monaghan 1999: 47) and the modern concept of ‘nation’ – a sovereign political community (Anderson 2006) and a man-made construction which conveys a “symbolic force” aimed at self-protection (Bhabha 2001: 359) – stimulated comparisons between different cultures and lifestyles which were often contrasted and labelled by journalists and commentators according to the results provided by the WHR and its particular happiness hierarchy.

The representation of Bhutan in each national context was illustrative of how journalists positioned themselves in relation to the ‘Other’ – with the Himalayan country sometimes portrayed as a collectivist and also regularly as a happy country. However, highlighting racial segregation and negatively representing Bhutan in the news was also a defensive attitude in terms of, for example, positioning the US more favourably in public opinion. Even though some Indian writers also pointed out issues related to the Bhutanese dictatorship in the past, it is clear that, overall, Indian newspapers contributed, in turn, to the creation of Bhutan’s image as a ‘happy’ nation due to geopolitical relations with the neighbouring, non-threatening country. In the UK press, Bhutan was not referred to as a fairy tale and writers also remembered its anti-democratic dictatorship. However, the focus was rather on the Western influence as something harmful to the Buddhist country’s traditions, and Bhutan was even represented as a victim of globalisation (more specifically in the *Guardian*), which indicates heterogeneity in so-called ‘collectivistic’ societies (cf. Kitayama *et al.* 2000) and reminds that globalisation can unite but also divide people (Bauman 1998). Indeed, these different representations of Bhutan show the ways in which the same topic can be framed differently according to specific contexts, revealing particular values and ideologies of journalists in each national group.

Elements of nationalism were relatively more explicit in Indian newspapers, e.g. through the representation of spirituality, or more specifically Hinduism as the ‘right’ path towards happiness, in addition to the importance given to demonstrating happiness as a “patriotic duty” (a clear example of biopolitics). In the US press, a nationalist attitude was normally expressed through elements related to the ‘American dream’ and the pursuit of happiness – a right legitimised even in the country’s Declaration of Independence – and certain signs of egocentrism. The insistence on positive self-representation and some traits

of a superiority complex could also be related to a (mostly veiled) nationalist attitude in the UK newspapers. The ways journalists in those countries framed ‘immigration’ also illustrated some differences: while the topic was contextualised more as an economic than a cultural problem in the US (reinforcing a material perspective on key topics), British writers tended to highlight that the UK is more flexible in terms of immigration, and compared multicultural London to other places such as the “very white” Copenhagen, as claimed in the *Observer*. Elsewhere in the UK sample, though, discursive formations rather suggested a cultural proximity in relation to ‘happy’ Denmark, e.g. through similarities between both countries in terms of the weather, lifestyle and even genetics. In the Indian press, although not particularly related to immigration but to social comparisons more broadly, hostility towards Muslim majority countries was evident.

In a less obvious way of positively representing their national group, some British journalists chose to be transparent about negative aspects of their national character, but still insisted in a positive self-representation out of negative findings: being “miserable” as a self-deprecating discourse (see Thomas & Antony 2015, Mills 2017) that does not prevent Britons from being happy can illustrate this narrative. Indeed, the attempt to show the best version of oneself within the happiness debate reinforces the idea of competitiveness. The point is that sometimes writers were competitive in a joking way – even if stereotyping other people with sense of humour demonstrates signs of “banal nationalism” (Billig 2004) – but journalists were also sometimes a more overtly arrogant especially towards countries that they consider as less privileged, poorer or those governed by oppressive political regimes, and therefore not expected to rank high in the WHR. Indeed, these countries were often marginalised and caused surprise when they managed to overcome particular journalists’ nation in the happiness ranking – an attitude which Littler (2013, 2018) would have linked

to the influence plutocracy has over ‘meritocracy’. On the other hand, political and economic partners seemed to be ‘justified’ in reaching a higher position in the list. In some cases, powerful, wealthy, friendly or at least non-threatening countries were even praised for topping the list, as shown in the UK coverage when Switzerland came first.

Interestingly, though, the relationship with other wealthy nations changed according to different situations created in the news stories. For example, Scandinavian countries were represented in the UK as more equal and responsible if compared to the US – usually associated with issues such as obesity, substance abuse, depression, and inequality – but the same Scandinavian countries were mentioned as negative examples in terms of mental health issues if compared to the UK itself. Indeed, instead of going deeper into national statistics and difficulties related to mental well-being, British journalists tended to focus on Nordic countries and India with regards to problems in this field – apparently to break the mental health taboo in contemporary societies by showing that people from the top to the bottom of the happiness list need to deal with those problems.

Accordingly, some journalists in India pointed out that the ‘happiest’ countries in the list are not immune to psychological problems – a question which was not particularly explored in the US press where mental health did not become a major topic. Thus, the point of intersection of such discourses was that, even though self-criticism was identified in the three national contexts, the majority of the journalists tried to take advantage of certain ‘facts’ or even create discourses which eventually suggested positive self-representations. Sometimes this happened at the expense of other populations, portrayed as disadvantaged or even inferior in a sense – which echoed orientalist narratives at times and the political and economic merits of privileged nations even if implicitly.

7.6. Challenging ‘happiness’ (and other myths)

Although the three national samples contributed to the problematisation of happiness in my discussion, the British press offered interesting material with regards to the sort of ‘deconstruction’ of standard notions of happiness. Indeed, the apex of the UK coverage of the WHR links back to the idea that mainstream happiness research tends to propagate “myth” or “social consensus” (Barthes 2009) that legitimises tradition or “social myth” (Deacon *et al.* 2007). For instance, privileged economies are eventually represented in the mainstream media as more likely to be ‘happy’ because they have more resources, and therefore better material conditions which can arguably boost people’s quality of life – this tendency was identified in all national contexts I analysed, including the UK. However, a contributor for the specialised *Financial Times* expressed the idea that this sort of happiness, normally linked to wealthy nations, can instead be seen as “boring”. This argument was supported by the fact that happiness rankings may have everything to do with quality of life, but, even though quality of life does play a role in people’s happiness, it is not interchangeable with happiness itself and it does not necessarily relate to other elements (which the writer associated with happiness) such as vibrancy, spontaneity and excitement.

As an economic newspaper, the *Financial Times* might have also criticised the tendency to label ‘boring’ nations as ‘happy’ because – as suggested by the comparison between Italy and Switzerland, for example – more ‘vibrant’ cultures tend to be also more appealing in popular culture, as well as more dynamic and profitable when it comes to commercial purposes (e.g., in terms of cultural products, fashion industry, and tourism).

Still, I would also agree with this point of view that contests standards of happiness: leading a happy life may require basic material conditions, but ‘happiness’ does not necessarily equate with either ‘quality of life’, ‘life satisfaction’ or ‘well-being’. In fact, happiness can be experienced by cultural or national groups in many ways (cf. Diener & Suh 2000, Rice & Steele 2004, Selin & Davey 2012), and, as some journalists pointed out, not everyone is happy in so-called ‘happy’ nations, as well as not everyone is sad in countries that do not top the happiness ranking. In this context, contesting happiness as a social norm by claiming that it can be ‘boring’ challenges the status quo in a similar way to authors such as Joshanloo and Weijers (2014), who discussed cases of aversion to happiness due to different ‘cultural’ views, and Ahmed’s (2010) argument that happiness imprisons, whereas unhappiness sets free.

These arguments illustrate the context in which the myth that dominant nations – as influential actors in the world order – are naturalised as the happiest or at least happier than other, usually less privileged countries. Categorising this particular construction of happiness as a ‘myth’ does not necessarily mean that all aspects related to such assumptions are absolutely refutable – as I say, some basic material conditions appear to be needed if one wants to live well. However, the discursive construction of wealth and power as key elements or even the means of achieving happiness is problematic in reinforcing a particular set of hegemonic socio-economic values which, despite some journalists’ critical approach, mainstream media as a whole still tends to ignore. Indeed, a number of commentators endorsed a dominant ideology through which questions about happiness and who are the happiest nations were answered according to a Western, neoliberal viewpoint. In line with Foucault’s (1980) power/knowledge nexus, it remains clear, though, that the WHR is a study elaborated and conducted by the United Nations, through which this sort of hegemonic myth

related to material happiness is produced and constantly reinforced, year by year, as the happiness ranking is headed by and serves as a biopolitical tool that supports the neoliberal socio-economic agenda of Western, industrialised societies – although usually topped by nations that have more extensive social welfare programmes, thus legitimising a degree of state intervention.

Both the influence of neoliberal ideologies and the inclination to a material understanding of happiness have been identified in my case studies. From a semiotic point of view, though, the findings that the happiness index propagates do not neatly correlate to the images of happiness that capitalism tends to create in popular imaginary: instead of vibrant and exciting places where people are imagined as being cheerful, relaxed and enjoying the good weather, for example, most of the happiest nations in the UN study are not enviable tourist destinations and were even considered ‘boring’ by journalists. This argument links to some recurring descriptions noticed in the sample, according to which sunny days, blue skies and being in contact with nature were associated with happy moments and places – images that do not seem to be typical of the countries praised in the WHR. More visual and pleasurable references to the weather, being in contact with nature and having a better life away from the big cities appeared in the UK newspapers; other than that, considerations were made on environmentalism and sustainability, more explicitly in the US (especially in the *New York Times* which expressed concerns with living in a “finite planet”) and sometimes in the Indian press (mostly related to good practices developed in Bhutan).

As my data illustrated, in addition to the link between happiness and wealth, other social myths were equally contradictory and complex but are nevertheless underlying the coverage of the WHR and national happiness. For example, besides narratives of self-

Orientalism (see Said 2003), used in order to counter hegemonic Western notions of individual happiness, a number of Indian journalists reinforced the idea that India is a spiritual nation. This particular representation was, however, overshadowed by less romanticised discourses which highlighted some difficulties that the population needs to deal with in everyday life – e.g., social support was claimed to be a social myth in apparently more realistic narratives. In talking about ‘altruism’, this time in the US, newspapers portrayed immigration as positive (as long as it is convenient to the US, though), promoting the idealisation of the ‘American dream’ in a country which is, in fact, tough at protecting its borders and economy at all costs. With regards to foreign affairs, by claiming that the UN had to intervene in order to solve diplomatic issues and disputes between Bhutan and Nepal, journalists indirectly reinforced the myth that the US, or the ‘West’ more broadly, is responsible for keeping peace around the world by emphasising the US’s role in the UN.

In conclusion, even though the discourses about happiness were very different across my sample, each nation’s dominant discourse contested aspects of the survey that seemed to clash with particular national values while embracing those that complemented these values. But there did still seem to be scope for critique of the survey as and when it fitted with particular media outlets’ news values, e.g. when the findings complemented commentators’ critiques of inequality as with more critical articles. Although newspapers critically interrogated some of the assumptions behind happiness rankings – particularly their emphasis on the individual and ongoing inclusion of GDP – this ultimately served to feed into specific national imaginaries and values. In this sense, there is perhaps a broad tendency for discussion of national happiness to conform with particular national imaginaries, but discussion of the indexes has also given space for a degree of critique of dominant socio-economic relations due to the WHR’s emphasis on moving beyond a pure focus on economic

well-being. Particularly in the UK, the critique of materialism is coupled with a more fine-grained analysis of other, less obviously problematic, issues to do with the act of measuring happiness itself and the ideology underpinning such attempts at quantification.

My analysis confirms the importance of more critical studies of happiness that are suspicious of its link with well-being culture that is neoliberal in nature. A key finding from my empirical work is that newspapers often share this stance in ways that complement (rather than oppose) critical approaches. This is perhaps surprising since I have analysed publications from the mainstream media, but criticisms in the newspapers often have a hidden agenda. In fact, journalists often use the critiques of happiness indexes in order to criticise other nations and ways of living, and therefore reinforce particular national communities and imaginaries. For instance, even though newspaper articles might share similar critiques to work in critical happiness studies (about the quantification of happiness, for instance), these criticisms tend to reinforce rather than contest social norms related to individualism and materialism.

The way these criticisms and national imaginaries are constructed often feed into the problems that I identified about the risk of happiness measurement homogenising particular national/cultural identities (cf. Lu & Gilmour 2004, Diener & Suh 2000) – e.g., by drawing sharp distinctions between collectivist/individualist cultures, as normalised by scholars such as Eid and Larsen (2008). These discourses are often quite homogenous: by pointing to *other* national contexts to show that different forms of happiness are possible they ironically often homogenise difference *within* that context. It is worth reiterating, thus, that any study such as my own can fall into a similar trap, which is why I have sought to examine similarities and differences within and across specific contexts. Indeed, my aim is to critically analyse

media discourse, making the problematic aspects involved in making the news and its interpretations more evident, and hopefully contribute to a more considered journalism.

7.7. Beyond the ‘happiness race’?

More recently, an unprecedented topic has been included in the media’s coverage of the happiness debate: the coronavirus pandemic. Besides scientific speculations about the origin of the virus, cultural prejudice and tensions between the US and China, the global health crisis changed the pace of the world in 2020 and made many people stop and think about meaning in their lives. According to my research on the Nexis database, not all newspapers in the sample related the pandemic to the WHR and national happiness at the beginning of the crisis, but some media texts did illustrate the reverberations of new lifestyles and the ways journalists reacted to these changes, which could provide further elements to the analysis of media discourse on happiness and well-being in a different historical moment.

In some cases, quarantine and social isolation were romanticised, as in the *New York Post*: “People are cherishing more time with their families during coronavirus pandemic” (9/7/2020). Indeed, some references to the pandemic suggested an attempt to see the positive side of such an unprecedented crisis in recent times. The *New York Times* has been dispirited about the publication of the WHR 2020: “It might seem an odd time to release a report ranking which countries are happiest” (20/3/2020). But journalists eventually provided a more positive view on the long-term effects of the crisis: “America will almost certainly emerge from the coronavirus pandemic as a different society”, and mentioned that research has found “the experience has already changed what we believe we owe our neighbours and

how much economic inequality we find acceptable” (*New York Times*, 19/4/2020). Also in an optimistic tone, the *Indian Express* pointed out that “there seems to be a silver lining in all this” (22/3/2020). A similar perspective was taken by the *Economic Times* which claimed that “[s]elfish people are seldom happy, whereas those who are giving and caring, always extending themselves, are usually of a happy disposition” (27/5/2020), reinforcing the importance of social support especially in such a difficult moment.

Perhaps taken from the atmosphere of solidarity during the onset of the pandemic, the *Guardian* changed its usual critical tone and made a softer claim about the happiness report: it “has long shown that co-operation and social support are fundamental to happiness” (20/3/2020). When it came to possible legacies of the global health crisis, the newspaper claimed that the pandemic made “something essential” become more tangible: “there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the world, but only ‘us’”, and Richard Layard’s hopeful words were also quoted: this experience “will encourage a move from an atomised society to a much more caring one” (*ibidem*).

But the crisis also brought concerns about the economic situation of the countries and pointed out that material difficulties can negatively influence people’s well-being for a long time. Interviewed by the *Guardian*, a millionaire talked about ambition and anxiety during the pandemic and concluded that “[h]aving money is not happiness, but not having money is sadness and destroys lives” (22/6/2020). Accordingly, other publications in the English-language media focused on the economic perspective of the pandemic. The *Economist* clearly showed a pessimistic and quite materialistic view by publishing that “[t]he virus’s human toll is... vast in terms of deaths and dollars”, and Covid-19 will allow economists to probe that economic hardship leads to “emotional woe” (11/7/2020).

Following a similar reasoning, *Forbes* related happiness to money by citing a study which found that, in the US, reported happiness has decreased in all areas during the pandemic except with regards to the government, which “may have to do with the government payouts during the lockdown” (25/6/2020). Despite the crisis of the American government – intensified by the health crisis itself but also other major social problems which have become topical in the contemporary moment, such as racism and racial inequality in the US – the fact of offering money to the population apparently spared the image of the government at least according to the study published by *Forbes*’s blog.

Interestingly, as I illustrated through many other relevant themes that emerged from the happiness debate in my sample, reverberations on the coronavirus crisis reinforced the tensions between social/collective, spiritual/transcendent and material/individualistic happiness according to different frames and contexts *across* but also *within* cultures and nations. Indeed, even though authoritative studies such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggest that people’s view of the world can be influenced or even determined by the very language one speaks (Piller 2011), and Wierzbicka (2004, 1999) points out that languages define happiness differently, culture’s influence on happiness is debatable, and this finding in itself highlights the subjectivity, heterogeneity and complexity of such a multifaceted topic related to the quantification of ‘happiness’.

Overall, therefore, my interpretation of the media texts collected for this conclusion, as well as the information provided by happiness studies, scientific and academic data, official statistics, and public opinion has an intersection point: neither apparently ‘objective’ nor subjective understandings of happiness and its ‘measurement’ are free of ideology,

especially if they are filtered by journalists and eventually become discursive representations of reality. However, there is still heterogeneity among discourses of happiness (and unhappiness) in the media: while some narratives may blur or even limit people's perception of possibilities of happiness (or simply living well), others are more likely to stimulate reflection and perhaps awareness of questions related to the goals and meaning of life.

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