

High as the Sky: Happiness in the US and India

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ABSTRACT

Understanding people from other countries is more important than ever because of rapid advances in technology that allow us to instantly communicate internationally. Metaphors are frequently used to describe emotions (e.g., “I’m on top of the world”). This study compares the frequency of the metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP in the United States and India. A total of 429 participants (214 from the United States, 215 from India) completed this study through Amazon’s crowd-sourcing platform, Mechanical Turk. In both countries, nearly all participants indicated that HAPPINESS IS UP ($\chi^2 > 100, p < .001$). There was no difference in the proportion of people indicating that HAPPINESS IS UP in the two countries ($p = .62$). This similarity is remarkable, given that these two countries are so different. However, it is premature to conclude that the metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP is universal. This research should be repeated in multiple countries and languages.

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors are an integral part of our daily lives, as they are used constantly in our communications with others. Metaphors allow us to better explain the experiences we are trying to convey by using another, more generalized experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Most metaphors used on a regular basis are spatialization metaphors, and are based on our perceptions of both space and direction – especially in relation to our own surroundings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Some examples of these spatialization metaphors include the following: HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN, GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN, CONSCIOUS IS UP, and UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN (Lakoff & Johnson). These types of metaphoric conceptualizations are not arbitrarily created; instead, they are deeply rooted in both our physical and cultural experiences (Lakoff & Johnson).

As communication between different countries and cultures becomes more commonplace, it is important to reconsider basic metaphorical constructs relating to emotion – such as happiness and sadness – in order to facilitate understanding. Technology has ushered in a relentless globalization of major corporations in recent years, which has only served to further strengthen the ties between India and the United States. This strengthening of ties means that written and spoken communication between these countries has also greatly increased. Although we often consider happiness within our own cultural context in the United States, it is important to assess the similarities and differences in the interpretation of happiness cross-culturally – especially in countries with which we have strong cultural, historical, and economic ties.

HAPPINESS IS UP is an example of a spatialization metaphor that seemingly translates across cultures (Hutchinson & Louwse, 2013). The purpose of this research is to determine if happiness is associated with up in both India and the United States. These countries are marked by vast differences in religion, culture, education, technology, and language, so it is important to analyze the similarity between the two cultures in regards to how they conceptualize emotions.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 429 individuals (172 females and 257 males) participated in

this study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 66 (mean 30.73, SD 9.31) and were from the United States (214 participants) and India (215 participants). We only included participants who indicated that they were very comfortable reading, writing, speaking, and listening to English.

Measures

As part of a larger study, participants indicated if feeling happiness was associated with up or down. Participants also completed a self-reported demographic questionnaire that asked participants to rank their familiarity with English and to identify their race, sex, age, first language, and their country of residence.

Procedures

Participants were recruited using MTurk. They received 35 cents for completing this 10-minute study.

Data Analysis

We used a chi-square test to determine if equal proportions of people indicated that happiness was up vs. down. We completed this analysis twice: once for participants from the United States and then again for participants from India. Next, we compared the proportion of people who indicated that feeling happiness was associated with up in the two countries, using the chi-square test of independence.

RESULTS

In India, significantly more than 50% of people indicated that feeling happiness was associated with up ($\chi^2(1) = 203.17, p < .001$) in India. In the United States, significantly more than 50% of people indicated that feeling happiness was associated with up ($\chi^2(1) = 210.02, p < .001$). There was no significant difference between the United States and India in the proportion of people who indicated that feeling happiness was associated with up (Fisher’s Exact Test, $p = .62$). See Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if feeling happiness was associated with up in both the United States and India. We found that the vast majority of people in both countries indicated that feeling happiness is associated with up. In the entire study, there were only four participants who indicated that feeling happiness was associated with down.

The commonality of associating the feeling of happiness with up in the United States and India might suggest that the metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP is universal (Naidu, 2009). It is premature to make this conclusion, however. When the English colonized many countries, they spread their language and their ideas. It could be that the similarity of the United

States and India is at least partially due to the shared cultural influences of England (Mashak, Pazhakh, & Hayati, 2012). Future research should examine the endorsement of HAPPINESS IS UP in a wider variety of countries and should evaluate this relationship in people’s native languages.

Another potential problem with the study is the use of Amazon MTurk. Although MTurk is frequently used for research, MTurk samples are not representative of the countries from which they are drawn (Curtis, Tran, Ibarra, Maxim, & Barchard, 2015). Therefore, while the samples in our study overwhelmingly associated feelings of happiness with up, we cannot conclude that this association would be as strong in all subgroups within the United States and India.

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