



## Vocabularies of happiness

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore through interviews the vocabularies of happiness that interviewees invoke in face-to-face interactions to account for their happiness or lack thereof and, especially, for the (un)happiness of others. In other words, how do respondents present their own or others' happiness - be they close or distant acquaintances, or people in general, in an interview conversation? Also, what understanding of others do these accounts make visible? This work embraces a discursive psychological (DP) perspective, focusing on how different versions of happiness are being put together by respondents presenting themselves as competent and credible individuals, while at the same time positioning themselves in a moral order of happiness.*

### **Keywords**

*Happiness, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, vocabularies of motive*

### **Introduction**

The paper's aim is to explore the variety of vocabularies that interviewees use to talk about their happiness and, especially, the happiness or unhappiness of others. In other words, how do respondents know other people as being happy or unhappy, and what traits, situations or actions are invoked as signs of happiness?<sup>2</sup>

This paper embraces a discursive perspective, looking at how, through descriptions of one's own or others (un)happiness, speakers position themselves and manage issues such as agency and accountability. In this understanding, the accounts are

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not an expression of a fixed construction in the minds of individuals, but a culturally available resource on which individuals can draw to build different versions of the world and to achieve interactional goals such as undermining alternative or counter versions and managing blame and responsibility (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter & Edwards, 2001, 2005; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). Thus, drawing on Mills' concept of vocabularies of motives (Mills, 1940), the accounts of happiness can be seen as vocabularies of happiness that make appeal, in a discussion with one or more interlocutors, to personal or assumedly shared common knowledge about what it means and what it takes to be happy.

### **Vocabularies of motives and common knowledge**

From a discursive and broader constructionist approach, the social world is constructed and reproduced in and through discourse (Potter, 1996). According to Nikander (2006), what different discursive approaches have in common is "a strong social constructionist epistemology- the idea of language as much more than a mere mirror of the world and phenomena 'out-there', and the conviction that discourse is of central importance in constructing the ideas, social processes, and phenomena that make up our social world" (Nikander, 2006:1).

Therefore, the discursive perspective states that accounts understood as "forms of talk that provide descriptions, explanations or justifications of activities, people, events and so forth" (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2008: 242) does not reflect reality, but constitutes the reality-at-hand, whose version is formulated in accordance with interactional stakes such as self-positioning. As skilled negotiators of reality (Potter & Wetherell 1987:45), individuals use what they say to propose and, in turn, to undermine accounts constituting reality-in-the-making. In other words, individuals are seen as competent cultural members who have specific interactional purposes. What is said varies depending on the task-at-hand and while "the meaning changes as expressed, moment by moment changes the lived reality" (Rogers, 2003:209).

Following this line of thought, Potter and Hepburn (2008) propose an approach to commonsense knowledge by focusing attention on how different rhetorical moves are made to confirm or refute knowledge claims (Potter & Hepburn, 2008:22). Likewise, Edwards (1999) redefines the notion of common knowledge, rejecting the idea that there is a consensus regarding mental representations. Consensus is something that is done, displayed, and invoked, while being open to reformulation and challenged in and through discourse (Edwards, 1999, as cited in Potter and Hepburn, 2008:23). Therefore, commonsense knowledge is achieved and displayed through descriptions that are interactionally produced in talk (Potter & Hepburn, 2008:24).

Consequently, discursive psychologists are concerned with how individuals explain actions or characterize themselves and others, and how they manage these accounts in terms of argumentative work (Edwards & Potter, 2005). Therefore, attention is focused on how different descriptions are constructed by using commonsense terms referring to mental and personal traits. The rhetorical organization of descriptions means

choosing a version of reality and defending it against alternatives. Formulations are picked from socially and culturally available repertoires. These linguistic repertoires serve to mediate the “complex process of meaning and purpose negotiation” that occur in interaction (Rogers, 2003:209).

In this sense, *vocabularies of motives* (Mills, 1940) can be seen as one of the available culturally resources and rhetorical constructs individuals can rely on to make sense of contextual clues and communicate their version of events.

Vocabularies are a cultural resource sine they draw upon common sense reason and emerge in specific cultural contexts: “*motives vary in content and character with historical epochs and societal structures*” (Mills, 1940: 913). This means that in a particular social and cultural context emerge specific dominant vocabularies.

As rhetorical constructs motives “function to impose order upon sets of behaviors, circumstances, and events that would otherwise seem chaotic” (Hooper, 1991:802). Motives are displayed in speech by the imputation or ascription of psychological commonsense terms referring to “inner states”. By imputing motive to themselves and others, individuals activate culturally available ways of understanding the world and make sense of their own or others’ behavior in a situated context (Mills, 1940; Hooper 1993; Backman, 2011).

Moreover, through the vocabularies and the accounting practices they deploy speakers position themselves as moral actors (Baker and Johnson, 1998; Backman, 2011). The provision of vocabularies of motives implies the organization of talk in accordance with norms presumably shared by the speakers. Being able to produce a coherent version of reality taking into account the moral implications of what is being described constitutes an expression of social competence that is always on stake in an ongoing interaction.

Understanding accounts and ascriptions of motive as features of discourse, this article explores the various ways motives are ascribed in order to account for the (un)happiness of others or their own.

### **The status of interview data**

The status of interview data represents a major concern for discursive psychologists (Edwards, 2005; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). The interview situation is an unusual situation in the scenery of everyday life. For the respondent, the interview is a rare event that requires a series of specific rhetorical efforts and interactional work. Through their rhetorical work, respondents position themselves and construct their own version of the social world (Lee & Roth, 2004). Presenting themselves as competent and credible individuals and being able to produce a coherent version of events is always a stake in any conversation.

At the same time, respondents are “constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997:114), accounts being co-produced in the interview in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. On the one hand, the conversation is guided by the interviewer’s research interest and the schedule

of topics or questions he follows throughout the interview. As stressed by Potter and Hepburn (2005) “researchers can and do introduce issues of stake and interest explicitly in interviews” (Potter & Hepburn, 2005:16). Also, the interviewer’s questions and other contributions (such as restatements of what has been said) play an important role in producing these accounts. On the other hand, the interviewee’s talk is a response to the challenges the interviewer brings into the conversation throughout the prompted questions. Moreover, the questions posed make appeal to resources such as available stocks of knowledge.

Therefore, from a discursive perspective, the analysis of interview is concerned with the production of meanings in the interaction between interviewer and respondent.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on 10 semi-structured interviews with students from Bucharest. Their fields of study varied from the technical field to humanities. All my informants were students on the verge of graduation, a turning point in one’s life, when one worries about his future. From my point of view, this episode of their lives made them suitable for a conversation about happiness.

Some of them were acquaintances of mine while others complete strangers. Although I already knew some of the students, I had no prior conversation on the subject of happiness with either of them. Nevertheless, the relationship between me and my informants prior to the interview and the similarity of age and status shaped the interaction during the discussion.

My initial focus was satisfaction with one’s home country (Romania). After some trial interviews, I have noticed the discussions were heading towards the topic of individual happiness. Then, I decided to focus my attention towards the discursive construction of happiness.

After reviewing my previous interviews, I compiled a new interview schedule comprising themes such as: the description of others as being happy or unhappy, the definition of happiness, happiness as a topic of conversation, happiness as a criterion in interacting with others, the Romanians’ happiness. The rationale behind the research instrument was to elicit from my interlocutors some general formulations about happiness, starting from particular descriptions. Furthermore, when elaborating the interview schedule I had some assumptions of my own referring to the conceptualization of happiness and unhappiness as two opposite entities and the observability and assessment of (un)happiness (people assess the happiness of others based on external signs). These assumptions became issues of stake in the interviews.

Regarding the strategies employed in conducting the interviews, I tried to challenge the informants’ accounts according to my research interests. The questions regarding one’s own happiness were more difficult to ask because I felt informants were reluctant to speak about their own happiness. Also, looking back I have noticed I hardly challenged the informants’ accounts about their own happiness, although their accounts on this matter were evasive.

I analyzed the interviews through the lens of discursive psychology following the analytical method of discourse analysis. As highlighted by Nikander (2006), approaching a constructionist perspective on discourse analysis requires embracing certain analytical and interpretative guidelines (Nikander, 2006). In other words, discourse analysis is more than a method, it implies taking up a particular theoretical perspective of the social world. It relies on the assumption that language is a means of constructing and negotiating meanings in an interactional setting. Looking at how certain versions of reality are constructed through speakers accounts and how talk is rhetorically organized to support these accounts, the researcher can uncover the culturally available resources (e.g. dominant discourses) that speakers draw on to put together credible versions of reality.

From a discursive perspective, discourse is situated, action-oriented, and constructed (Potter & Edwards, 2001). It is situated in the sense that it is produced in a certain context, a certain sequence of interaction, without being marked by contextual determinism (idem :103). In addition, the discourse is rhetorically organized to reject possible alternative versions of reality. Throughout the interaction a negotiation of the version of reality being sustained takes place. Whether the answers provided are being challenged by the researcher or not, sustaining a particular version means rejecting other competing versions. In this sense, discourse analysis targets the rhetorical organization and the argumentative and moral dimension of talk: “talk and texts can be analyzed in terms of how they orient to or take into account the culturally available opposing argumentative positions” (Nikander, 2006:10). Thus, discourse analysis highlights the relationship between opposite argumentative positions: “Interviews are conceptualized as an arena for identifying and exploring participants’ interpretative practices rather than an instrument for accessing a veridical account of something that happened elsewhere, or a set of attitudes and beliefs” (Mischler, 1986; Potter & Mulkay, 1985 *apud* Potter, 1996:10).

In this discursive perspective talk is action-oriented, whereas people do things through discourse as justifying, explaining, making allegations, constructing factual descriptions and presenting themselves in different ways depending on the context (Potter & Edwards, 2001).

In this regard, *vocabularies of motive* (Mills,1940) represent one of the available resources individuals can rely on to construct their version of events in a particular social context.

Based on the idea that the different rules and generalizations of happiness that respondents invoke in and through discourse constitute shared *vocabularies of happiness* grounded in common sense argumentation, the paper aims to look at how different versions of happiness are being put together. More precisely, by *vocabularies of happiness* I refer to ways to "motivate" happiness, to find its reasons, connections - or lack of connections - with the external world or the inner life. In this sense, different traits, situations, behaviors are discursively presented as signs of happiness or unhappiness and the rules, prescriptions or advice interviewees invoke when describing the (un)happiness of others or their own constitute *vocabularies of happiness*.

Furthermore, the vocabularies used to talk about happiness encompass appraised or condemned ways of being (un)happy and emergent tensions regarding the elements conditioning happiness underlying a moral order of happiness. Advancing a coherent version of what happiness means, taking into account the moral implications of being happy or unhappy is an important stake throughout the interview interaction. Through the various versions of happiness they advance, the interviewees present themselves as being different from others, in terms of happiness. Therefore, the paper aims to answer the following questions:

First of all, what are the moral features of happiness embedded in discourse?

Secondly, how is the presence or absence of agency in relation to the happiness or unhappiness of others discursively argued? In other words, how accountable is a person for their own happiness or unhappiness? For example, is (un)happiness presented an outcome of how people live their own life, or does it occur independently of one's choices?

Thirdly, what ways of knowing others as being happy or unhappy do these vocabularies entail? What are the relationships between visible and hidden features of people?

## **The discursive construction of vocabularies of happiness in the interactional context of the interview**

### ***The moral order of happiness in the interview situation***

From a discursive approach, morality is an intrinsic feature of discourse accomplished in everyday social interaction. This implies focusing on how morality is performed in speech acts through the language used (e.g. evaluative words) and discursive practice of accounting, agency and blame attribution (Bergman, 1998; Backer & Johnson, 1998).

One of the main assumptions behind the discursive study of morality is that descriptions of people, events, situations carry moral meanings that are grounded in available cultural systems of meaning. This yields implications for the the analysis of interview data (Backer & Johnson, 1998; Baker, 2004).

As stressed by Silverman (2001), interviews are not true or false accounts of reality, but "displays of perspectives and moral forms" (Silverman, 2001:131) meaning that "by analyzing how people talk to one another, one is directly gaining access to a cultural universe and its content of moral assumptions" (Silverman, 2001:132).

In the same train of thought, Baker (2004) proposes the analysis of interview data by focusing on how different *categories* (Sacks, 1992, as cited in Baker) are invoked to build versions of a moral order. Thus, categories associated with actions and characteristics used in speech are "descriptions of how different categories of actors act, could or should behave" (Baker, 2004:174). Therefore, through the descriptions they formulate, speakers build a world inhabited by moral characters.

Different versions of happiness are put together through these categories (i.e. types of happiness or unhappiness, types of happy or unhappy people, types of people

open or opaque to evaluations of happiness) as well as rules about what true happiness should mean and how one should reach happiness. Hereby, different instances of happiness encompass prescriptions regarding the pursuit of happiness.

On the one hand, the issue is raised by various assessments regarding the positive connotation of happiness, the universality of the desire to be happy, or assigning blame for unhappiness. Such statements underline the moral dimension of happiness:

‘everyone defines happiness in his own terms...what is certain is that most people mean by happiness...I understand...they associate happiness with something positive...a positive connotation...not...to be happy is good...it's bad to be unhappy...this is known by everyone...’(M)

‘...everyone wants to be happy...but not everyone succeeds’ (C)

‘...some (of those unhappy) are indulging in this idea ...which is wrong’ (B)

On the other hand, different versions of happiness are implicitly built by the moral rules and prescriptions implied by different instances of happiness. Some of the main instances of happiness presented in the analyzed interviews are: happiness as content (happiness is rooted in the willingness to be satisfied, to be at peace with oneself), happiness as achievement (happiness is due to reaching a goal or fulfilling a dream and presents itself in the form of personal successes and achievements), happiness as personal victory (the satisfaction of overcoming life's hardships), happiness as novelty (new experiences are the source of happiness).

The vocabularies deployed to talk about happiness uncover emergent tensions regarding the elements conditioning happiness underling a moral order of happiness.

One defining dimension in proposing a moral order of happiness and positioning oneself and others in it is the relationship between money and happiness. When talking about financial security as a factor conditioning happiness or which contributes to achieving happiness, the respondent either emphasizes the rejection of the implicit alternative version that ‘*money can buy happiness*’ - as a form of superficial happiness, or, aware of this connotation, he justifies himself:

**[Extract 1]** Q: Throughout time have you ever talked about happiness with your friends or acquaintances?

A: Mh ...

Q: Or it came up in conversation?

A: In one way or another...

Q: In what way?

A: With my roommate for example...I was talking about the health system in Romania... he will be doctor, and I will be a pharmacist...and we were thinking about how life will be in a few months when we will be done with college and we will be on our own...how will it be then? ...and the future looked gloomy at least because of the money...especially in his case: he will be a doctor and he will have a very low wage...and thus we got into more discussions including happiness...and we were thinking: What does happiness mean? It doesn't mean money, but money makes you happy...Even if it sounds superficial, it is

not!... Money can't buy you happiness...but money brings you happiness...we have to admit to ourselves that money does not only allow you to buy different stuff, money allows you to do things that makes you happy, to have some experience along with your friends...to travel, for example... different experiences bring those people closer...it is a special thing...you enjoy life more and then you are automatically happier (D)

Interestingly, this extra effort of accounting for one's view on happiness is not made when informants invoke other factors that might condition happiness such as family, personal fulfillment and friends. This elaborate sequence about the link between money and happiness indicates that the respondent treats the position he expressed as an accountable matter in relation to commonsense assumptions. His position in regard to this matter is constructed gradually by refuting commonsense views (e.g. '*money can't buy you happiness*'), precluding accusations ('*even if it sounds superficial, it is not*') and enlisting the recipient's reluctant agreement ('*we have to admit to ourselves*'). By associating money with better interpersonal experiences, not only material goods, he states money's mediated effect on happiness.

In this regard, the answers are not simple accounts of reality, but an implicit debate, a form of accounting (Baker, 2004). This particular way of putting into question the money-happiness relationship, can be seen as a "cultural competence" (idem), reflecting a shared knowledge on the issue. The cultural competence comes into play by acknowledging the existence of a common shared view that can be summarized in the form: "money doesn't bring happiness". In this understating, money is something belonging to the material realm, whereas happiness is assumed to belong to a rather spiritual order. The view that there is a link between money and happiness constitutes an emergent tension that has to be appeased by rejecting alternative versions.

Another defining dimension in proposing a moral order of happiness is the opposition between illusory and true happiness. By invoking this distinction, interviewees present themselves as being different from others in terms of happiness. Thus, illusory happiness belongs to others, to those who deceive themselves that they are happy, those who do not know what makes them happy or confuse happiness with temporary states, fleeting emotions (joy) or superficial feelings. Knowing what makes you happy is a claimed competence and the absence of such a competence constitutes a cause of unhappiness:

'...depends if you knew what goal to choose, if the thing you've set yourself to do it was a good thing for you' (D).

In the extract below the respondent addresses the issue of defining happiness:

**[Extract 2]** Q: Do you think that happiness is evaluated at the past tense...? You said ...that you draw a line and count the results...

A: Not quite....You can feel cheerful at a moment in time and believe (that you are happy)...and yet you can draw a line...and you can discover that you have no reason (for being happy)...if we were to look at happiness as more than a



feeling of the moment, as a sum of achievements to say...a serious way of looking at oneself...not necessarily...if one feels good means he's happy...tomorrow he feels bad means he's unhappy...it would rather be a fleeting mood, it would not be something serious...I think of a way of being happy...a feeling...I would not say a feeling, rather it is something...referring to the life that a man had had, and he has evaluated his life and came out with plus...not minus...At least this is how I understand things...Even if less good things had happened lately in one's life, if you draw a line and overall comes out with plus it means he is happy...I do not think happiness refers to a state of moment...I would say (about someone in this situation) that he's in a good mood or feeling well. He's feeling well at that point in time but not necessarily...this would not necessarily last. It is possible that a day, a week afterwards he will be very sad because other things came along...some less great things gathered up...and he's not good...that's it...(M)

Following a line of questioning concerning the assessment of happiness, the interviewee establishes her definition of happiness by defeniding it against alternatives versions and securing the recipient's agreement: *'At least this is how I understand things'*. Her definition of hapiness encompass a distinction between illusory happiness in the form of ephemeral states and true happiness- an assessment of one's own live, *'a serious way of looking at oneself'*. In this way, the interviewee positions herself as a competent actor who knows what happiness means, and as different from those who fall into the trap of mistaking happiness with a temporary state, those who do not know how to be happy, or who are not able to capture the true meaning of happiness.

### ***Agency in explaining (un)happiness***

One of my research focus was the way informants assign responsibility in the pursuit of happiness. In other words, is unhappiness presented as a result of how a person lives her own life? Is it a consequence of the external world or a consequence of a stable personal trait?

Edwards and Potter (2005) argue that intentionality and agency are managed through discourse without necessarily being labeled as such. Instead, such matters are solved through descriptions of people, objects, events, context (Edwards & Potter, 2005:242). Thus, the attribution of intentionality or agency is made indirectly through the agent - external reality relationship (Edwards, 2005: 267).

Accounts of other's (un)happiness are organized in order to negotiate agency and responsibility. Assigning merit and guilt in the success or failure to find happiness constitutes a salient feature in the interviews that can be related to a cultural imperative positing that everyone wants to be happy.

Moreover, respondents discursively argue for the presence or absence of agency when talking about the happiness of other people in order to clarify moral responsibility. Knowing what makes you happy and how to be happy is a presented as a competence that yields moral implications. For example, different descriptions of unhappiness uncover the way blame is allocated to morally condemn unhappy people.

On the one hand, happiness appears in informants' discourses as being caused both by one's own efforts and also as a result of personal traits or dispositions. On the other hand, unhappiness is presented mainly as a dispositional personal trait, and also associated with lack of agency and influence on the outside world. Thus, others' happiness is rhetorically presented both as a personal disposition, and as a response to the external world. The following extract capture the agent - external reality relationship:

[Extract 3] Q: How would you describe a happy man? Let's say in terms of what he looks like, what he does...?

A: It does not necessarily have to be a scheme...there is a certain pattern which fits each one of us, but there are people who cannot be happy "by manufacture". And, I suppose, that unhappiness is their state of...their usual mood...and then ... I couldn't say that there is a pattern ... instead I could think of myself ... What would mean for me to be happy: to get along well with myself...to be pleased with myself, to feel that I haven't made many compromises... and that on the whole things are good.

Q: You said that some people cannot be happy...you mean...are they responsible for..?

A: No. I do not think that they are responsible for it...I think it happens that they have an inappropriate way of being...wrongheaded...unhappy with themselves...that's what characterizes them...and if you are unhappy with yourself all the time and you think that things that will prevent you from becoming happier will happen...

Looking at [Extract 3], one sees how unhappiness is defined as being embedded in personal traits. This way of defying unhappiness as consequence of a personal disposition to be grumbling and pessimistic is an example of lack of agency.

Asked to provide a general description of a "happy man", the respondent rejects the interviewer's invitation and reframes the question stating the variability of happiness (*"there is a certain pattern which fits each one of us"*) and providing a personal definition of happiness. At the same time, she brings into discussion a category of unhappy people as an exception to the variability of happiness (*"but there are people who cannot be happy "by manufacture". And, I suppose, that unhappiness is their inner state of...their usual mood"*). Through the follow-up question the interviewer ask for further explanations regarding those who "cannot be happy" and introduce the issue of responsibility as an issue of relevance in the pursuit of happiness.

To this new challenge, the interviewee goes on portraying unhappy people using references to personality traits (*"an inappropriate way of being...wrongheaded...unhappy with themselves... that's what characterizes them"*). They are not held responsible for their unhappiness since it just "happens" that they have an "inappropriate way of being" that impede reaching happiness. Furthermore, the words used to characterize this particular category of unhappy people are strong evaluative ones (e.g. *'inappropriate', 'wrongheaded'*) underlying the moral implications of happiness.

Also, in the extract below [Extract 4], the respondent describes a happy person in terms of personality traits commonly associated with extroversion (cheerful, sociable).

This description is also produced in response to the interviewer's questions that strongly suggest that there is such a thing as a "happy man" and that he/she might be observably different from others (presumably unhappy):

**[Extract 4]** Q: How do you think is a happy man different to others?

A: Well...I repeat myself...I have said...I believe that a happy person is a cheerful person...I do not know ...sociable....

Q: Why do you think ...why do you think some people are happy, sociable?

A: Well depends on the personality of each of us...and over time...on the lifelong experience...(A)

Her answer (*'Well...I repeat myself... I have said'*) suggests a reluctance to answer the question. Also, she is changing the focus from how a happy person differs from others to how a happy person is. To a new question concerning the description of a happy person as a sociable one, the respondent formulates a person's happiness as a consequence of her/his personality which in turn is grounded in the *'lifelong experience'*.

Another important aspect of the meaning of happiness invoked in the discourse is the contradiction between the objective conditions of happiness (to have it all) and subjective happiness (to be happy). This contradiction appeared as an emergent tension within the interview situation, no specific questions being asked on the matter. Thus, on this issue, the talk is action oriented towards solving the tension generated by the inadequacy between the objective conditions and the feeling of happiness. Happiness is defined not as a rational response to the objective reality: *'...you can be happy even if you have nothing'* (B), *'...there are situations when people have little but they know how to make the best of it, and they can feel good... they can feel just fine... they can consider themselves happy'* (M), but as an individual competence to know to be happy and to be pleased and at peace with oneself. Happiness as being content with what one has is the discursive solution to this contradiction. Take the following extract:

**[Extract 5]** Q: Regarding those who are unhappy do you think that they have difficulties in overcoming unfortunate moments in their lives?

A: I think it's all about optimism...a natural optimism... it's not a forced one and it's related to one's nature...if a person has a lot of things and nevertheless, he is still unhappy because he only sees the bad stuff, because it's in his nature, let's say, I don't know, then it's hard to be happy, because one can have many accomplishments and still focus on the negative side of life. On the other hand, there are situations when people have little but they know how to make the best of it, and they can feel good...they can feel just fine...and they can consider themselves happy. It depends on how they value what happens to them, how they relate to it (M)

In this manner, unhappiness is defined as moral incompetence, the inability to defeat the personal disposition (one's nature) which constitutes an obstacle in the way of happiness. Thus, unhappiness is defined not as a direct result of how a person lives his

own life, but as the consequence of not being able to produce happiness, and the failure to overcome a natural disposition to be unhappy.

A third aspect of happiness as a moral competence appears when happiness is presented as a result of one's own means: happiness is something that requires effort, not something that simply happens. You must want to be happy and do something about it, in order to be happy:

**[Extract 6] Q:** Is professional success a crucial element for a successful life?

A: Not necessarily, it depends...there are people who are mothers by definition and they feel good about being mothers. Then the fact that they have many children or well educated children defines them...there are other people who have succeeded at same time to make progress and to maintain a family...maintain...managed to start a family, but professionalism was on the first place, maybe less (persons)...do not know...there are people who have sacrificed family to professional (goals) but I couldn't say that they are happy...at least the majority of my acquaintances suffer a lot if their family life isn't good even if they have other things...so it is not necessarily...professional success is not a condition...**it rather depends on how...what thoughts you have, what bothers you, what issues you have and how you think of solving them, how you deal with challenges, overcome obstacles...how prepared are you too see the best, not the worst... to overcome all** (M)

In contrast, unhappiness also occurs as a consequence of the external forces:

**[Extract 7] Q:** Where do you think this discrepancy between the strategy (to be happy) and the implementation of it, or living (according to the strategy) comes from?

A: There are many things in a person's life that one cannot control and many times it feels...it feels...that the higher you reach, the harder you'll fall. You feel you immerse yourself, overwhelmed by a problem that you did not expect... there are many unfortunate events in our lives and, in general, we are not prepared for failure...and failure makes havoc in one's life (M)

Earlier in the interview, the interviewee suggested there are people who have such a strategy to be happy, a plan to reach certain goals, but they fail to be happy. Pursuing the line of questioning, I challenge the respondent to formulate an explanation for this "discrepancy". In response, the interviewee emphasizes the lack of control one has on the events in one's life and portrays unhappy people as victims of misfortune, unprepared for failure, people to whom unpleasant and unexpected things "happen".

Therefore, through interview conversations that elicit accounts of one's own and others' happiness, participants define (true) happiness as a moral competence, and unhappiness as moral incompetence. At the same time, the moral universe of happiness also includes incompetent ways of being happy.

### ***Observability of happiness***

How can one claim knowledge of others' happiness or unhappiness? The accounts of happiness invoked in the conducted interviews can be captured by two dominant *vocabularies*. These *vocabularies* outline the question of public versus private in the immediate knowledge of others. When describing the happiness of others, respondents use different *vocabularies* to discuss the relationship between visible and hidden features of people. Thus, happiness is presented as a public feature, as well as a hidden feature, even as a dissimulated one. Mainly the two *vocabularies* emphasize the distinction between being able to tell if one is truly happy or not.

In the first *vocabulary*, happiness is referred to as an unobservable feature, as something personal, intimate, hidden that cannot be easily known, while in the second *vocabulary* happiness is seen mainly as an observable feature, that can be assessed on the basis of external signs and universal criteria for happiness. Although they constitute different, even opposing *vocabularies* of knowing others as being happy or unhappy, the two *vocabularies* of happiness can coexist, different versions of happiness being encountered in the same interview. Nevertheless, these accounts are mostly prompted by the interviewer's questions guided by research interests.

1) Unobservable happiness: this *vocabulary* underlines the discrepancy between appearance and essence and the conditions impeding on observing happiness. Both one's own and others' happiness is presented as opaque to evaluations of happiness. For example, in the extract below respondent cannot assess the happiness of people whom she does not know well or who are secretous:

**[Extract 8]** Q: Mh...are there people close to you about whom you can not trully say whether they are happy or not?

A: Yes ...mh...

Q: People about whom you have no idea whether they are happy or not?

A: There are some people that I haven't got to know them very well or who have a hidden part that they'll never make it public and I cannot really know their true desires and intentions... Therefore I cannot decide whether they are happy or not...you know...even if they are close friends, it seems like I don't really know them very well (S)

Also, another respondent considers that you cannot know, on the basis of external signs, if a person is truly happy:

**[Extract 9]** Q: What about other people? Have you ever heard in different conversations people talking about others as being happy or unhappy?

A: Yes...my grandmother talking to my aunts...when they sit and chat...they are talking about one or another...what have they been doing...but they do not use the term happy...but they are talking about people who got married and are good and...I do not know...what house they have...and they believe that person is happy...but this may not be true...

Q: Why it may not be true?

A: You cannot know if one's happy only based on the fact they have a house, a car... perhaps you have money but you have other problems...I do not know...health problems...other issues...and you can be unhappy because of health problems...My liver hurts...I'm unhappy! And my grandmother has no way of knowing this thing...from the outside you can believe that a person is happy, but if you get to know him better, interact more, you can find out some details...and you realize: Hey, he's not quite as I thought... maybe he's miserable (A)

The following extract [**Extract 10**] emphasizes the distance between public (what one shows) and hidden features (how one really is):

[**Extract 10**] Q: Do you think others consider you a happy person?

A: From what I reveal... yes... they consider me happy.

Q: What do you reveal?

A: I always reveal a side of me... a wild one... to say so... always making pranks, telling jokes, seeking fun stuff to do... seeking fun stuff to do... and a more darker side, to call it... that I don't show and many don't know of it.

Q: What is this dark side? What do you mean?

A: I think about the day-to-day problems when I am home alone... I get stressed because of it... and that doesn't bring happiness... that's about it (B)

Therefore happiness as an unobservable feature refers to misleading external signs of happiness.

This conceptualization emphasizes the subjective criteria versus the socially agreed upon criteria for happiness, and is closely related to the ability to tell if one is truly happy or not.

2) Observable happiness: happiness is seen as something socially mediated and as a public trait. The interviewees explore the idea of subjective criteria for happiness and being truly happy in contrast with the external signs (e.g 'smiling' or signs of welfare) and universal criteria for happiness (e.g success, family, friends).

In the extract below the respondent addresses the issue of assessing the happiness of others, mostly prompted by interviewer's question:

[**Extract11**] Q: Do you think that happiness can be assessed according to a list?

A: Well, anyway, I believe that you judge people based on your own rules, your own beliefs...and confront them with your happiness filter and if they came out on the other side it means that they are happy...if not, they are not, simplified... but I don't know if you say that people are happy just because they say they are... I mean you judge them too, right? I think that's it... If someone were to come to me and tell me he is very happy and I would ask him why and he would explain to me, maybe I could explain back to him that he is not really that happy... being happy must correspond with others' ideas of happiness. You know... an idea, I don't know... if an universal or widely accepted one... you know... that happiness is the two points or lines which they must be reached... (S)

The respondent argues that happiness must be in accordance with socially agreed upon criteria (being happy must correspond with others' ideas of happiness) and also the subjective criteria of the person making the assessment ('*you judge people based on your own rules, your own beliefs...and confront them with your own happiness filter*'). In order to render her account credible, the respondent makes appeal to a meaning presumably shared by both speakers through the use of discourse markers 'you know' and 'right'.

In [Extract 12] the interviewee explores the idea of knowing others as being happy based on external signs:

[Extract 12] Q: What makes you say she's happy, that friend of yours? What is it about her..?

A: Mh....This friend of mine she's a student...and she is very pleased with the faculty she is studying, has good grades and I know she is happy because I see her rejoice over the high grades, she also has a scholarship and recently has got into a relationship that makes her happy also...uh... **she is a very cheerful person and that's why...I don't know...maybe I just see her as being happy**  
(A)

The respondent provides a brief description of a friend who she believes to be happy. The description is constructed by observable facts (good grades, scholarship, happy relationship) and a reference to personality trait (a very cheerful person). Her account is rhetorically organized so as to suggest that the description provided is objectively presented. Acknowledging that her assessment, based on a personal impression, may not be correct ('I don't know... maybe I just see her as being happy') she distance herself from what is being said and presents herself as an disinterested narrator (Potter, 1996).

Therefore, this vocabulary refers to how a person is evaluated by others as being happy or unhappy based on some culturally shared criteria, or the criteria of the person making the assessment.

## Conclusions

This paper explores how different versions of happiness are assembled in the context of the interview situation. The paper's conceptual starting point is that the different rules and generalizations of happiness formulated in the interview encounter can be understood as *vocabularies of happiness*. These *vocabularies* outline a moral order of happiness that allows respondents to present themselves as competent persons. In this sense, interviewee's accounts uncover appraised or condemned ways of being (un)happy and emergent tensions regarding the elements conditioning happiness that are grounded in available cultural systems of meaning.

A first moral feature of discourse is highlighted by the relationship between money and happiness and the opposition between illusory and true happiness. Regarding the relationship between money and happiness, respondents position themselves as different from others, in terms of happiness, by rejecting the implicit

alternative version that money can buy happiness - as a form of superficial happiness which is in contradiction with the spiritual dimension of happiness. By bringing into question the opposition between illusory and true happiness, respondents position themselves as competent actors who distinguish true from deceiving happiness, as different from those who mistake happiness for an ephemeral state or superficial experience.

The presence or absence of agency relating to the happiness or unhappiness of others is discursively managed in order to clarify moral responsibility. On the one hand, happiness appears in informants' discourses as being caused both by one's own efforts and as a result of personal traits or disposition (optimism). On the other hand, unhappiness is presented mainly as a personal trait or disposition (pessimism), but also associated with the influence of the outside world and therefore resulting from a lack of agency. Thus, unhappiness is blamed on its bearer when talking about the failure to overcome a natural inclination towards gloom, along with the lack of competence to know what makes one happy and to distinguish happiness from ephemeral states.

Regarding the various ways of knowing others'(un)happiness, we can observe in interviews two dominant *vocabularies*. In the first vocabulary, happiness is referred to as an unobservable feature, as something personal, intimate, hidden that cannot be easily known, while in the second vocabulary happiness is seen mainly as an observable feature, that can be assessed on the basis of external signs and universal criteria for happiness. Happiness as an unobservable feature underlines the discrepancy between appearance and essence and the conditions impeding on observing the happiness of others. Happiness as an observable feature appears when speaking about happiness as something visible, something decided by reference to common-knowledge criteria – which can include 'smiling', or signs of welfare, for example. Therefore, interview encounters are occasions in which the interviewer and the respondent jointly bring forward a moral order of happiness, in which several forms of moral competence of being truly or falsely happy, or unhappy, are presented to account for their own or others' happiness.

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