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Kopano Ratele

Stellenbosch University, South Africa, kratele@sun.ac.za

Carmine Rustin

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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African-Centered Psychological Perspective on Happiness

Abstract

Happiness scholarship has gained prominence in a number of disciplines over the last few decades, including economics and psychology. In South Africa, we have observed an uptick in happiness studies, but also that these studies are mostly using quantitative methodologies. What is missing in nearly all these studies are conceptualizations of happiness from African-centered decolonial psychological perspectives. The main objective in this article is to approach happiness from an African-centered decolonial psychological perspective. The article draws on data from a qualitative study which investigated happiness and gender equality amongst South African women. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants. Eleven qualitative individual interviews were conducted with key informants and three focus groups with women who shared their everyday lived experiences of happiness. We draw only from the individual interviews. The interviews were subjected to an adapted, theoretically driven thematic analysis informed by African-centered decolonial psychological interpretations. Whilst we identified four key themes, we report and discuss only two of these, namely: happiness as inter-connectedness and happiness as maintaining a balanced life. The perspective we adopt in this article offers an opportunity to unpack how happiness is inter-connectedness and how happiness is a balanced life. In enmeshing decolonial African-centered perspectives and African feminist psychology, it was possible to not only produce a more situated analysis of women's happiness but also to center issues of gender and gender inequality within African-centered psychological thought. Potential directions for further contextual and transnational qualitative studies on happiness that incorporate African-centered decolonial perspectives are offered.

Keywords

African psychology, happiness, inter-connectedness, South Africa, women, well-being

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African-Centered Psychological Perspective on Happiness

Kopano Ratele¹ & Carmine Rustin²

¹Psychology Department, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

²Department of Women's and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Happiness scholarship has gained prominence in a number of disciplines over the last few decades, including economics and psychology. In South Africa, we have observed an uptick in happiness studies, but also that these studies are mostly using quantitative methodologies. What is missing in nearly all these studies are conceptualizations of happiness from African-centered decolonial psychological perspectives. The main objective in this article is to approach happiness from an African-centered decolonial psychological perspective. The article draws on data from a qualitative study which investigated happiness and gender equality amongst South African women. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants. Eleven qualitative individual interviews were conducted with key informants and three focus groups with women who shared their everyday lived experiences of happiness. We draw only from the individual interviews. The interviews were subjected to an adapted, theoretically driven thematic analysis informed by African-centered decolonial psychological interpretations. Whilst we identified four key themes, we report and discuss only two of these, namely: happiness as inter-connectedness and happiness as maintaining a balanced life. The perspective we adopt in this article offers an opportunity to unpack how happiness is inter-connectedness and how happiness is a balanced life. In enmeshing decolonial African-centered perspectives and African feminist psychology, it was possible to not only produce a more situated analysis of women's happiness but also to center issues of gender and gender inequality within African-centered psychological thought. Potential directions for further contextual and transnational qualitative studies on happiness that incorporate African-centered decolonial perspectives are offered.

Keywords: African psychology, happiness, inter-connectedness, South Africa, women, well-being

Introduction

From the late 1940s to mid-1990s, South Africa was associated with apartheid, and for nearly three centuries prior to the coming to power of the White nationalist government, with British and Dutch colonial rule (Dubow, 2014, Magubane, 1996). A key marker of the colonial and apartheid regimes was the classification of individuals and groups into a racial hierarchy, with Blacks/Africans at the bottom of the racial ladder, Coloureds and Asians/Indians in the middle, and Whites at the top (Union of South Africa, 1950). The apartheid racial classification system was determinative of people's life chances and well-being as it was tied to both public and private life, such as to the franchise, where people could live, be educated, or employed, who they could marry, and what their occupation could be.

While legal apartheid was dismantled in 1994 when South Africa held its first democratic multiracial franchise, to a large extent the country remains divided on the basis of racialized and economic fault lines. In 2022, the unemployment rate among people who were classified as racially Black or African under apartheid people was 36.8%, the highest of all race groups (Statistics South Africa, 2022a). In terms of gender/sex, the 35.1% unemployment rate for all women is slightly and consistently higher than that for men (at 32.9%; Statistics South Africa, 2022a). Unemployment remains the highest among African women at 39.1%, which is 4% higher than the national average unemployment rate for women as a whole (Statistics South Africa, 2022b).

Besides historical and lingering race and economic divisions and dynamics, violence is another prevalent problem in post-apartheid society. Of interest here is violence against women, including sexual violence and femicide. Research by the South African Medical Research Council on femicide has shown that three women are killed by their intimate partner daily in the country (Abrahams et al., 2022). Statistics South Africa (2022c) has reported that over a lifetime, one in five (or 20.5%) ever partnered women (18 years and older) have experienced physical violence by a partner while 6.2% have experienced sexual violence. The South African Police Services (n.d.) has stated that 46,214 cases of sexual offences (a broader category that includes rape, sexual assault, attempted sexual offences and contact sexual offences, for all genders) were reported for the 2021/2022 reporting period.

Against the backdrop of racialized economic divisions and levels of violence, it would not be surprising if the preponderance of women were unhappy. However, Rustin & Florence (2021), using the World Values Survey, have indicated that 76.4% of women in South Africa report that they are happy. This finding was unexpected; however, the authors contend that it is explicable by the history of race and class. They attribute the result to the fact that the majority of women in the sample were middle and upper-middle class. However, we still need more studies to understand how persons in a country like South Africa, with an unhappy history, contemporary racialized economic divisions, and violence, can be happy?

Since the circumstances of our (individual, relational, and collective) lives, such as whether we are employed or not, are tied to how happy or unhappy we are, the specific question this article examines is: how do women who live in countries characterised by high levels of gender and sexual violence construct happiness? We suspect that the question the article seeks to address will be of interest to researchers in countries who are similarly affected by violence who are interested in studies of happiness among women (and, perhaps, other groups). The specific purpose of the article is to report and discuss data pertaining to happiness among women in South Africa. Drawing from Ratele's (2019) African-centered decolonial psychological framing on how looking from a specific context shapes how we understand the ourselves, others and world at large, we approached the women's accounts of happiness while paying equal attention to the specific context of South Africa – a country that grapples with a troubled, racist and sexist history and contemporary political-economic conditions.

Defining Happiness

Happiness, which English dictionaries variously define as a state of well-being and contentment, pleasurable or satisfying experience, feeling of being pleased, aptness, felicity, good fortune, and joy (e.g., Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Collins Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.) is not as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. To make note of English is to indicate the crucial role of language, and therefore its carrier culture, in thinking and shaping knowledge about happiness. Culture, though, is not the only contributing and complicating factor to understanding and meanings of happiness. But whether we would derive similar pleasure and contentment from the same objects (or objects at all) or forms of

relating if we have grown up in a differently organised society is an enduringly interesting question to consider.

Individual happiness is associated by several factors, some of which we are yet to adequately understand within the context of African countries like South Africa with colonial-apartheid histories, White supremacy and racialised economic inequality (Clark et al., 2012). While as individuals we might take it for granted that we share the same idea of happiness, in fact our understanding of the nature and sources of happiness can differ from others' given that what people consider to be happiness varies according to culture, within societies (for example levels of positivity), and across time (Delle Fave et al, 2016; Krys et al., 2022; Oishi & Gilbert, 2016). In addition to culture and history, some of the factors associated with happiness include but are not limited to personality, socio-demographics, economy, levels of freedom, governance, and practicing gratitude.

Happiness researchers, who are mainly informed by hegemonic Euro-American-centric worldviews, values, and epistemologies about the meaning of well-being of individuals and social groups, distinguish between two kinds of happiness: hedonic and eudaimonic happiness (Kashdan et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic happiness refers to "enjoyment, pleasure, satisfaction and comfort" (Wissing, 2014a, p. 7), what Diener (1984) has referred to as subjective well-being. "Happiness" is thus often used interchangeably with "subjective well-being." Hedonic happiness is comprised of two components: a cognitive part (the rational aspect of well-being or what is seen as life satisfaction) and an affective part (moods and emotions) (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Tov, 2018). The second type of happiness, eudaimonia, which is closely associated with psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), focuses on things like meaning, flourishing, purpose, growth, expression of potential, and striving (Proctor & Tweed, 2016; Ryff, 2018). An extensive amount of research has been produced on the back of this distinction and meanings of happiness, yet the use of Euro-American-centric definitions of happiness as global standards has been to the underdevelopment of, for instance, contextually-sound African research and theory on the meanings and values of well-being (however, see for example Cook et al., 2022; Sulemana, 2015; Wissing, 2014a; Wissing & Temane, 2008).

A criticism of happiness as conceptualized above is that it is often restricted to *subjective* well-being (Rustin & Shefer, 2022). It is primarily about the individual subjectivity. Happiness is, however, not merely an internally produced state with clearly-defined boundaries. It is just as much, if not more so, an intersubjective phenomenon; a relational state, dependent on what is happening within a context. If the world around us is unhappy (in the sense of being troubled or wretched, such as was the case in racist colonies and is the case in violent societies), the likelihood of experiencing pleasure is decreased, or happiness turns out to be a more involved phenomenon. Segal (2017) has argued for an understanding of happiness that extends beyond the subjective to include efforts to change the "larger world that so firmly impedes possibilities for greater joy in the lives of so many" (p. 26). Our understanding of happiness and happiness projects should not merely expand to include pleasurable lives or even meaning for many more *individuals* but instead for *collective* joy, ties to one another, and a happy world.

The strongest criticism of definitions of happiness is that they are not merely restrictive but may be epistemically unjust, for they neglect what decolonial thought refers to as "coloniality" (Mignolo, 2017; Quijano, 2007). Regarded as the dark side of Euro-American modernity by decolonial thinkers and having shaped modern globalized Euro-American worldviews about human beings and consequently human well-being, "coloniality" refers to an enduring power relations, rationality, habits, and ways of being in the world associated with Euro-American global domination installed via the colonization of the New World and enslavement of Africans (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Of particular relevance is that coloniality has naturalised ways of thinking, feeling, and knowledge about happiness which take non-

African knowledge, tools and ways of being as the hegemonic standard (Adams et al., 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

While happiness scholarship has gained prominence in a number of disciplines over the last few decades, including in economics and psychology (Argyle, 2013; Bookwalter, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Powdthavee, 2007), relatively few of these empirical studies foreground qualitative methodologies. They also centre Euro-American interpretations of happiness. This is likely because of the fact that most scholars are schooled in hegemonic Euro-American-centric philosophies, epistemologies, and theories.

In South Africa, we have observed an uptick in happiness studies, but also that these studies are mostly using quantitative methodologies (Botha & Booysen, 2014; Greyling et al., 2020; Kollamparambil, 2020). Ironically, even in South Africa, the conceptualizations of the research questions and explanations of the findings are rooted in Western epistemological and cultural thought (Kollamparambil, 2020). At the same time, this leaning to the West is not entirely surprising given the racist history of the country and the persisting colonial structuring of society. What is missing from happiness research, therefore, are conceptualizations of happiness and explanations of our findings from African-centered decolonial psychological perspectives, a gap which this article seeks to address.

Toward African-Centred Psychological Work on Happiness

African-centered psychology, according to Ratele (2019), is psychology that is informed by the vision of seeing the world from Africa. Influenced by the works of several African and African-diasporic thinkers, within and beyond the psy-disciplines (e.g., Du Bois, 2015; Fanon, 2008; Mama, 2002; Manganyi, 2019; Wa Thiong'o, 1992), this psychology shifts the locus of world-knowledge and self-knowledge. At the same time, there is not much work on happiness that is grounded in Africa-centered psychological perspective.

It needs noting that there are competing definitions of what African-centered psychology exists (see Mkhize, 2021; Nwoye, 2015, 2017; Ratele, 2017a, 2017b). Alongside the disagreement, though, consensus exists that not all psychology conducted in Africa places Africans and their natural, material, and cultural circumstances at the center (Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2017, 2022; Ratele, 2019). That implies that while all of psychology in Africa is, nominally speaking, African psychology. "African-centered psychology" specifically refers to knowledge informed by African realities into what human lives think, feel, and do that takes their natural and social environments, as well as the historical and contemporary forces that gave or give shape to these environments, as constitutive of their cognitions, emotions, and actions.

Not unlike other areas of scholarship, African psychology, in the broad nominal sense as well as in the strict epistemic sense, is characterised by disagreement as much as consensus (Adjei, 2019; Baloyi, 2021; Long, 2016; Makhubela, 2016; Moll, 2002; Nsamenang, 2007; Oppong, 2016). As a loose collective of researchers, we are characterized by discord against each other. Equally important, individual researchers may even show internal contradictions in their views, for we prefer different theoretical traditions, ideas and theorists (preferences that include, because of our colonial histories and education, traditions, ideas and theories from the global North). All the same, the key debate in African-centered psychology appears to be between the ideas represented by Augustine Nwoye, the Nigerian scholar based in South Africa, and those represented by (co-author of this article) Kopano Ratele, the South African scholar. The major point of contention is between Nwoye's disciplinarian view of African-centered psychology (see Nwoye, 2017) and Ratele's situationism (see Ratele, 2017c). We draw from the latter in how we consider an African-centered psychology of happiness. Because methods within the qualitative research paradigm offer greater opportunity and agility when

trying to get “under the skin,” it is very amenable to and potentially enriching to an African-centered psychological perspective on happiness; that is, the Africa-centering psychologist who employs qualitative methods, be it critical, creative, constructionist, indigenous, or participatory, is enabled to delve into how happiness is conceptualised by the researched.

In his framework, Ratele (2017a, 2019) has argued that African-centered psychology is not one coherent entity but plural ways of situating the research and researched. He has divided these into four orientations: (i) Euro-American-centric psychology in Africa orientation; (ii) psychological African studies orientation; (iii) critical African psychological orientation; and (iv) cultural African psychological orientation (Ratele, 2017a, 2019). It is from the latter two orientations which we draw. It may be necessary to underline that while African-centered psychological perspectives are about understanding the lives of Africans, they are at the same time also interested in understanding the lives of all people from the onto-epistemological viewpoint of Africa. African-centered psychological perspectives shift the angle from which we look at people’s lives, placing the lives of Africans at the center of global knowledge, and refusing the frameworks and values imposed by hegemonic Euro-American-centric psychology.

Important elements of these African psychological orientations are their transdisciplinarity and decolonial vision. Africa-centering psychologists have questioned disciplinary incarceration of thought regarding the problems generated by coloniality and the narrowing of space in considering the people’s lives in formerly colonised societies in African and other parts of the world (Ratele & Malherbe, 2022; Ratele et al, 2021). In other words, as coloniality is a totalising ideology affecting much of people’s lives, an issue that traverses boundaries, it makes little sense to study the problems connected with it within narrow colonial disciplines.

In addition to resistance to disciplinary decadence (Gordon, 2014), these orientations are also informed by a decolonial attitude. For decades, psychology in Africa was supportive of colonialism and apartheid. Even after the end of apartheid law and the advent of multiracial democracy in 1994, where expectations were that psychology would be at the forefront of decolonising minds, only a very small part of psychologists are explicitly working toward a decolonial psychology. A decolonial attitude in psychology means not leaving the colonial knowledge-power relations and social conditions the way they have been structured by colonial discipline. Informed by a decolonial vision, African psychological orientations offer the opportunity to materialise what has been called psychology *otherwise* (and more broadly, knowledge otherwise; Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Pickren, 2021). Knowledge otherwise is ultimately knowledge that is not disciplined into the orderly borders of colonial academy and instead draws and involves people from different knowledge traditions, including people outside of academic disciplines. This broadening of thought is useful in trying to understand happiness in context.

Methodology

The article revisits data generated in a feminist qualitative study which investigated happiness and gender equality amongst South African women. African-centred feminist qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for this study as the research was concerned with situating the knowledges of women and understanding and explaining the phenomenon being studied within the socio-economic and cultural context (Crabtree & Miller, 2022; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Qualitative methodologies were also deemed well-suited given the concern with soundly-grounded, ontologically and epistemologically just knowledge-building which is understood to mean the giving privilege to the lived experiences of and meaning-making the participants as key components (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

In qualitative research, a key criterion in sampling is the potential richness of the data in relation to the research question (Crabtree & Miller, 2022). In other words, the researcher will consider whether the data collected will richly inform the research question and therefore the participants sampled are key (Crabtree & Miller, 2022). This criterion informed the sampling of the participants in this study. A second key criterion which informed the number of participants selected pertains to sufficiency and quality (Crabtree & Miller, 2022).

Convenience sampling was thus employed to recruit participants. Eleven qualitative individual interviews were conducted with key informants and three focus groups with women who shared their everyday lived experiences of happiness. For this article, we will only draw on the data generated in the interviews with the key informants.

The eleven key informants were recruited because of their scholarship (academics, researchers), activism (work in non-governmental organisations, unions) and policy-work (either through non-governmental organisation or organisations set to monitor government's gender related work) pertaining to gender justice matters. These key informants were located in academia, a non-governmental organisation, a Constitutional body set up to monitor the gender-related activities of government, and a teachers' union. Nine of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Cape Town and surrounds. Two were done virtually. All interviews were conducted by the second author. One interview was conducted with each of the eleven key informants. All participants had postgraduate qualifications. The table below provides the demographical data of the key informants. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Table 1

Key informants (qualitative individual interviews)

Name*	Race	Class	Age	Highest level of schooling	Place of interview
Zinzi	African	Middle class	38	Ph.D.	Online/Virtual (Facetime)
Florence	Coloured	Middle class	41	Ph.D.	Hotel lounge
Hannah	White	Upper middle class	54	Post doc	Restaurant
Amy	White	Upper middle class	57	Ph.D.	Participant's office
Susan	White	Middle class	46	Under-graduate degree	Participant's office
Sandra	Coloured/African	Working class	53	B.Mus.Ed	Participant's home
Palesa	African	Not indicated	Not indicated	Ph.D.	Participant's office

Mandy	White	Middle class	44	Post-graduate degree	Participant's home
Candice	Coloured (Black)	Middle class	53	Ph.D.	2 nd author's home
Grace	African	Upper middle class	41	Master's Degree	Participant's office
Kefilwe ^[1]					Online/Virtual (Facetime)

* Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants.

^[1] Did not return the demographics form.

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of the Western Cape (14/10/21). The principles of transparency, respect for the participants, informed consent and voluntary participation of participants, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of participants guided the study.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data emanating from the focus groups as well as the individual interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to facilitate the analysis of the data. The researchers made use of a transcriber to transcribe most, but not all of the interviews. The second author transcribed some of the interviews as well as checked all the transcriptions for accuracy by listening to all recordings and checking them against the transcribed interviews.

The interviews were subjected to an adapted, theoretically driven thematic analysis informed by African-centered decolonial psychological interpretations. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thinking on thematic analysis. This was embedded within Ratele and colleagues' (Malherbe et al, 2021; Ratele, 2019; Ratele & Malherbe, 2022; Ratele et al, 2021) work on African-centered decolonial psychology which was threaded with African psychological feminist thought (Boonzaier & Niekerk, 2019; Kessi, & Boonzaier, 2018; Ratele et al, 2020; Segalo & Kiguwa, 2015). As was suggested earlier, because of the qualitative nature of the data, African-centered decolonial feminist psychological orientation enabled us to closely delve into the backstory of the accounts of the study participants (in this case, accounts of happiness by women) while paying equal attention to the historical and contemporary political, economic, and cultural context which shape their accounting.

As decolonial scholars are sceptical about what positivist science calls rigour (Abo-Zena et al., 2022), critical reflexivity was an important methodological tool regarding the trustworthiness of the research (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Recognizing our positionalities as a middle-class African man and Black woman engaging with material generated in interviews with African, Coloured, and White well-educated women, we continually critically reflected on both the data and our interpretations throughout the research process. We took seriously our own positions as researchers and the potential impact of that positionality on the analysis.

Findings

In the individual interviews, participants were asked to define happiness, whether they are happy, and what happiness means to them. From the data, we identified four themes: (1)

happiness as inter-connectedness (which includes being connected to other individuals as well as broader society), (2) happiness as maintaining a balanced life, (3) happiness as achievement, and (4) happiness as positive emotion (specifically joy). Given our particular interest to look at why women would be happy in unhappy conditions (Rustin & Florence, 2021) and to use and develop an African-centered work on happiness, we restricted ourselves to the first two themes which we also compare and contrast to each other.

Happiness as Inter-Connectedness

Mandy, a White, middle class 44-year-old with a postgraduate degree and key informant, is one of the participants who shared a view of happiness that is neither hedonic or eudaimonic. Mandy's race, being White in South Africa, makes her responses interesting, but we suspect that it is her feminist consciousness and awareness of others' life conditions that enables her to think of happiness in the way she does. Mandy had in fact expressed a problem with the study's focus on happiness. The most striking thing in the interview with her is how she spoke of happiness as diminishing the suffering of others. She refers to this *diminishing of suffering* as contentment. However, we interpret her use of contentment as conceptually different from the manner in which contentment is used at the beginning in the definitions of happiness (e.g., Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For Mandy, contentment is derived from connecting to *others*, specifically their pain, making the world better for them, as much as tempering her own suffering.

.... And then I think well what matters for me about how people in the world and myself included feel, like – okay what – and then I get to the issue of suffering, like the less suffering the better. That for me maybe a measure of contentment is the lessening of the extent to which one suffers. [...] So for me part of the work is to try and see how we can minimize that suffering both for ourselves and in relation to others and so it is a way – you know I'll buy the idea of happiness if it's about that, if it's about the diminishment of suffering, ja (Mandy).

The prominence Mandy allocates to contentment as the lessening of the suffering of others and not just her own, supports the argument, from an African-centered decolonial psychological stance, that connection to others is a key value in some cultural milieu. We believe this notion of helping to reduce the suffering of others as an act that gives happiness to some people is another direction for research into happiness.

It was not only Mandy who referred to being-in-relation to others. Other participants also spoke about their well-being in relation to others through improving the lives of others, contributing to and involvement in the lives of others in order to make a difference for the better. These notions do not seem to fall within the dominant constructions of happiness as either hedonic or eudaimonic subjectivity. One of these other participants was Sandra, a 53-year-old "Coloured/African" woman from a working-class background with a bachelor of music in education degree. The way Sandra identified herself is worth noting - although all racialized and ethnic identities in a post-colonial context such as South Africa are worth paying closer attention to than we are allocating to them. Sandra indicated that whilst she was Coloured in terms of South Africa's apartheid legislative race classification, which are still used in the post-apartheid state in official statistics, she identified as African. Sandra said:

Happiness to me also means that yes I need to feel good about myself, but also need to feel good about what I'm doing to better and improve the lives of others

because in the end it will make me happy, that's the type of person I am. My happiness is like throwing a stone in the river and it has spread out, one light has to light up the world, then I'm internally happy.

For Sandra, happiness entails feeling good about herself. But like Mandy and others in the study, Sandra highlights how happiness is imbricated with the well-being of others.

Happiness as Maintaining a Balanced Life

One of the participants, Susan, a 46-year-old, White middle-class woman with an under-graduate degree, said:

Errm, what does happiness mean to me in my life? Errm, gosh, that's that's quite a difficult question to answer. Errm, I suppose for me it's balance, having a sense of balance. If I'm not, if I, you know, there is a pie chart of your life, and there's work, and there's leisure time, and there's your partnership, your social connection, and then there's your children, and if I have all of those things, then I then I feel quite happy.

In the above quotation, Susan speaks about balance in relation to happiness. Balance, for Susan, refers to a kind of equilibrium in her life where there is time for work, intimacy, children, and leisure. In her view, one domain of life should not take precedence over other domains. For a balanced life, all life domains deemed important by Susan should be present. The life domains mentioned by Susan include work, family, interpersonal relations, and leisure time.

In the extract below, Sandra, who holds a leadership position in a trade union, speaks about the strain and tension she experiences as a result of her leadership position and the role that she is expected to fulfill in her household, which effectively impacts on her maintaining a balanced life:

Because the roles that women are perceived to be doing, you're supposed to be a housewife, you're supposed to be a mother, yes we are – you're supposed to do chores at home, neh I wasn't here for 4 days and now I come back, I get it like that, because you're supposed to be doing that. And in a sense there's always this thing, you should be able to cope with both sides. We live in a hostile society that doesn't really value the input of women.

Of particular interest in the interview with Sandra, but also with other interviewees, is that gender makes a difference in thinking about happiness. In Sandra's life at least – but in many women's lives as well – a balance (and therefore happiness) has to be found between work and public life on the one hand and home, children, and private life on the other.

Discussion: Happiness Through an African-Centered Decolonial Psychological Lens

In the above, we have presented our findings in relation to two themes: happiness as inter-connectedness, and happiness as maintaining a balanced life. In this section we discuss these themes drawing from the literature and reflecting on the themes from an African-centered decolonial lens.

Participants in the study expressed notions of happiness which cannot be easily attached to either hedonic or eudaimonic happiness (Wissing et al., 2019). While they were in the minority, these notions of happiness are of especial interest in thinking about well-being from

non-Euro-American cultural, psychological, and economic contexts (Wilson et al., 2018, Wissing, 2014b). It is easy to comprehend that the view of happiness that goes beyond hegemonic Euro-American-centring definitions of well-being are in the minority given how coloniality and apartheid have produced colonial and apartheid mentalities about happiness not just in South Africa (Dirth & Adams, 2019). At the simple level, these notions mean there are other ways to understand happiness which we are enabled to better comprehend by a theoretical lens that facilitates the surfacing of the accounts of the participants that avoid Euro-American-centric interpretations. These notions of well-being which exceed dominant ideas of happiness also point toward potential directions for further contextual and transnational qualitative studies on happiness in non-Western contexts.

It needs noting that when Mandy speaks about contentment as lessening the suffering of others, it is best understood within the context of South Africa's colonial and apartheid history of dividing people along racial and ethnic lines. That history deliberately inflicted suffering in the majority of people classified as African, Coloured, and Indian/Asian through a series of oppressive laws. As such, the suffering to which Mandy appears to be pointing is not just individual suffering but a concern with "othered" marginalised groups. Speaking of individuals, African feminist psychologists have also critically spoken against the capitalist individualism of feminism. As Cornell et al. (2019) show, "a decolonial feminist framework is not only rooted in a historical understanding of the effects of colonial power in contemporary society, but also centers the lived experiences of womxn in their interconnectedness with others and with the institutions and structures of society, as well as the experiences of all those (womxn and men) who have been historically marginalised and oppressed" (p. 62).

Researchers such as Layard et al. (2012) have identified altruism (helping others) as having a positive impact on the lives of those offering the help. In the study, Sandra's account of happiness evidenced altruism but goes beyond it to inter-connectedness. Subjectivity is not lost to Sandra in her response. Here, we contend that emotions are social, but also that subjectivity itself is social. Similar to Mandy's concern with others' suffering, the others to whom Sandra is referring were referring not only to other individuals but also to collective others – political comrades, community, or society. Happiness in this case is connected to the well-being of other individuals and to the well-being of the collective. Satisfaction is derived not only from values such as individual achievement, personal autonomy, agency, and positivity, but also by values such as community or social engagement and making a difference in the lives of others. Sandra's view on happiness, similar to Mandy's view, adds a layer of understanding of happiness not quite captured in the hegemonic Euro-American-centric individualist views of happiness.

Turning to balance in life, it seems obvious that harmony among different spheres of life is important for well-being. But there is a richer understanding of balance from women's perspectives. As noted in the findings, it was in the interview with Susan that the issue of balance as integral to happiness came up. Susan highlighted the need for time not only for work, but also intimacy, children, and leisure; in other words, in the different life domains. These life domains have been identified by researchers as being associated with happiness. For example, Delle Fave et al. (2011) note balance and see it as related to achieving equilibrium between needs, commitments and aspirations.

For some of the women in the study, the lack of balance in life – thus unhappiness – was explicitly connected to gender inequality. One area where gender inequality is often observed is in the area of gender relations (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Helman & Ratele, 2016). The sexual division of labour is a key site of unequal gender relations in the home. This was clearly expressed by Sandra, who has to contend with her position as a leader in a trade union, yet, at the same time, is expected to fulfil specific household duties based on her gender.

From a feminist perspective, particularly a feminism from below that centres women who work in often exploitative, precarious, or care-sector jobs, it is commonplace that women do double shifts (long shifts at work and another shift at home). As such, a happiness as a balanced life does not only mean work-life balance but also suggest gender equity as part of balance.

Another source of this perspective, that is to say people need balance in their lives to be happy but also that balance has to be restored where it is lacking, is the specific historical context of South Africa. This source, the history of the place, is what makes the perspective not only feminist but also (South) African-situated. In South Africa, many communities and families were thrown off-balance, as it were. This was caused by a cruel system of government that deliberately dislocated people from their ancestral lands and fractured families (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall, 2014). Colonialism and apartheid did not desire for people to have a balanced life. Throwing lives out of balance, or just out, was especially the case for African people. A glaring lack of balance is evident where, for example, fathers or mothers were forced to work as migrants and had to be away from family for long periods, a phenomenon that many African people grew up with (see Mokoene & Khunou, 2022; Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018).

Finally, in addition to the disequilibrium caused by colonial and apartheid dispossession and family fracturing, another source for our perspective is life in exploitative, individualist, capitalist societies. In such societies, both rich and poor, work tends to be overvalued over other domains of life. Furthermore, other so-called “unprofitable” work (from the point of view of market-driven economies), specifically the work of caring for others, is uncounted, unseen, unpaid, and undervalued.

From the findings, we contend that the search for balance is integrally tied to gender equality. In addition to the association of balance with happiness, the link between balance, gender (in)equality, and (un)happiness is another research and theoretical direction we want to suggest for further contextual and transnational qualitative studies on happiness in both African and non-African contexts.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is derived from the question: how do women who live in a country like South Africa, which is characterised by high levels of gender and sexual violence, construct happiness? We suspect this question would be of interest for researchers in other countries and intra-country contexts that experience high levels of gender and sexual violence. As South Africa continues to be troubled by intractable racist and sexist history, contemporary poverty, and economic inequality, we were also looking for signs about how participants speak of happiness in such a context.

The article revisited a study on women’s accounts of happiness (Rustin & Florence, 2021; Rustin & Shefer, 2022). The article drew from and expanded on Ratele’s (2019) work on looking at what people do, think, and feel from the perspective of African-centered decolonial psychology. An African-centered decolonial psychological perspective contends that women’s accounts of happiness are best grasped in the context of the women’s material and cultural environment. This contention is applicable to all accounts of happiness, all accounts of psychological and social life.

The article interwove an African-centered decolonial psychological perspective with African feminist psychological insights. In enmeshing decolonial African-centered perspectives and African feminist psychology, it became possible to not only produce a more situated analyses of women’s happiness but also to center issues of gender and gender inequality within African-centered psychological thought.

We will be rightly questioned about what makes the perspective we have advanced, one that embeds human feelings, in the environment in which humans exist, African in any way. What makes such a perspective African-centered is precisely that these women's accounts of happiness is that we are convinced that none can fully understand what they mean by happiness outside of political, economic, and cultural histories that have shaped their lives.

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Author Note

Kopano Ratele is professor of psychology at the University of Stellenbosch and head of the Stellenbosch Centre for Critical and Creative Thought. He has published extensively and his books include *There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (2009, with Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni), *Liberating Masculinities* (2016), *Engaging Youth in Activism, Research and Pedagogical Praxis: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives on Gender, Sex, and Race* (2018, co-edited with Jeff Hearn, Tammy Shefer, and Floretta Boonzaier) and *The World Looks Like This From Here: Thoughts on African Psychology* (2019). His latest book is *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022). Please direct correspondence to kratele@sun.ac.za.

Carmine Rustin is a feminist scholar and holds a PhD in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of the Western Cape (UWC). She is currently a lecturer in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at UWC. Carmine has served as co-coordinator and researcher attached to the Andrew W Mellon funded Project on Sexual and Gender Justice in the Women's and Gender Studies Department. She is the former Chief Researcher of the Research Unit in the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. Her publications include Rustin, C., & Shefer, T. (2022). Women's narratives on gender equality and subjective well-being in contemporary South Africa. *Gender Questions*, 10(1); Rustin, C. & Shefer, T. (2022). Review of the Covid diaries: women's experiences of the pandemic by A. Gouws and O. Ezeobi (Eds. 2021). *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 6, (1-2), pp. 303-307(5); Rustin, C. (2021). What gender legislative reforms have meant for women in South Africa. *Law, Democracy and Development*, 25, 47-70; Rustin, C. & Florence, M. (2021). Gender equality and women's happiness in post-apartheid South Africa, *Agenda*, DOI: 10.1080/10130950.2021.1917298

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