Tears of joy in India

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Despite evidence from religious and literary sources that people in diverse cultures throughout human history have cried in joy, almost no empirical psychological research exists on this topic. The purpose of this study was to develop a taxonomy of tears of joy (TOJ) experiences, to serve as the foundation for cross-cultural research relating TOJ to dispositional factors, as well as to emotional and physical well-being. In this investigation, 131 adults (69 females, 62 males) born in India and currently residing there responded to a survey inquiring if they had ever experienced (TOJ). If they answered affirmatively, they were asked to describe their most recent experience and rate its emotional intensity on a 5-point Likert scale. They were also asked how often they have TOJ, and when was the last occasion. In total, 109 participants reported having experienced TOJ (83.2%) and generated 123 specific reports, classifiable into 15 distinct categories. TOJ arising from non-romantic affection comprised the most frequent category (19.8%), followed by those involving a personal achievement (16.2%), and both the birth of a child (12.2%) and a reunion of any sort (12.2%). Females reported a TOJ experience significantly more recently than did males, but no other gender differences emerged. Emotional intensity was significantly related to category. The implications of these findings for positive functioning are discussed, and future avenues for research are suggested.

Keywords: tears of joy, tears of happiness, peak-experiences, crying, Indian positive psychology

Though my fifth birthday party was a long time ago, I can still clearly see the scene: my mother's elderly parents had prepared a birthday cake with candies for me. It sat majestically on their white formica kitchen table. My frail grandfather turned off the fluorescent light fixture overhead and gently asked me to blow out the candles. I did so as they sang “Happy Birthday to You,” and when grandfather turned the bright lighting back on, I suddenly noticed they both were crying. Of course at that tender age, I associated tears only with pain, and I asked what was wrong. I think it was my grandmother who smiled and replied, “Nothing is wrong, when you are older, you'll understand.” - Edward Hoffman

Although tears of joy have been depicted in religious and literary sources in varied countries for centuries, this powerful human phenomenon has been almost completely overlooked by modern psychology. To explain why this situation has prevailed lies outside the scope of this article. But with the growth of scientific interest in individual flourishing and well-being, positive emotions including tears of joy are gaining their rightful attention by researchers.

The literary view

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was a precocious child who learned Greek, Latin, French and Italian by the age of eight. But it was not until his mid-twenties that he astonished the Western literary world with the appearance of his first novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther, in 1774 (Goethe, 1774/2009). Written as a quasi-autobiography, it vividly portrayed its romantic hero as prone to outbursts of crying in his passion for life.

“Oh, if only I could fall on your neck and describe with a thousand joyous tears all the emotions that are storming in my heart.” Werther writes exuberantly about his romantic ardor for Lotte to his friend Wilhelm. Lotte allows Werther “the comfort of crying [his] eyes out over her hand,” and as he recounts such amorous scenes to Wilhelm, Werther again begins “weeping like a child” in recalling his romantic bliss.

Goethe’s fascination with tears of joy inspired later European and American writers, including luminaries like William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens in England, and the masterful Edgar Allen Poe in the United States. In an intriguing essay called The Poetic Principle, Poe (1850/2012) affirmed that aesthetics--specifically, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, and especially music, all possess the formidable power to make people cry. But what causes this phenomenon? In Poe’s view, our sense of the beautiful is not only innate, but linked vitally to the human longing for the transcendent:

“When by poetry or music we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep then…not <from an> excess of pleasure, but from our inability to grasp “those divine and rapturous joys of which” poetry or music gives us only “brief and indeterminate glimpses.” That is, Poe was suggesting that aesthetics, particularly music, gives us a heightened awareness of the gap between the most wondrous dimensions of human experience and our mundane daily life, and that this awareness causes us to cry.

Of course, literary references to tears of joy date much earlier than Goethe. The Mahabharata, the Sanskrit epic of ancient India, recounts how “Pritha heard such grateful voices born aloft unto the sky, milk of love suffused her bosom, tear of joy was in her eye.” (Mahabharata, 1899/2013). In The Iliad, the Greek poet Homer nearly 3,000 years ago depicted Odysseus as crying in pleasure when the bard Demodocus recounts the story of the Trojan horse, despite Odysseus’ pain in remembering lost comrades and lost time. Later, first-century Greek elegists like Virgil and Propertius celebrated tears as signs of romantic fervor that could bring lovers close together. In the Hebrew Bible, tears of joy appear in a variety of narratives, such as when Joseph the dreamer is reunited with his beloved brother Benjamin after many years, and when the ancient Hebrews, released from Babylonian captivity, witness the rebuilding of their sacred temple in Jerusalem.

As evidenced by such wide-ranging examples, it may be no exaggeration to suggest that in all cultures and historical periods, people have cried from joy.
The psychological view

Nevertheless, psychology as a science has produced almost no research on this seemingly universal phenomenon. Focusing on treating emotional pathology including anxiety, depression, and phobias, early founders of psychotherapy like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler gave little attention to positive emotions. With their experimentalist focus on laboratory white rats, American behaviorist leaders like B.S. Skinner and Clark Hull had nothing to say about this entire domain. In the early-to-mid 1950s, several American psychoanalysts turned their attention to this phenomenon. Presenting a variety of examples drawn from their clinical practice as well as world literature, Weiss (1952) and Feldman (1956) argued that tears of joy were actually tears of sadness. In their view, for example, parents cry at their daughter’s wedding not from happiness for her romantic bliss, but from anxiety about her marriage or from the sense of having lost their “little girl” forever. Both psychiatrists denied that human beings ever truly cried from joyful feelings, but rather, that these always masked underlying pain.

It was precisely in rebellion against such cynicism and reductionism that humanistic psychology rose to prominence in the 1960s. The zeitgeist in post-World War II America was changing; a new optimism about human nature was coming into prominence. Specifically in this light, Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1959, 1962, 1970, 1971) described his investigations into peak-experiences—that is, moments of intense happiness and meaning. He contended that such tears were sometimes accompanied by feelings of both gratitude and undeserved good fortune. Rollo May, another originator of humanistic psychology, regarded joyful tears as interwoven with the creative process, such as involving the fine arts or music. For example, in a video interview entitled The Human Dilemma, May (undated) observed that the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony concludes with the words, “Joyful, joyful, but that these words come “only after the agony that is shown in the first part of that symphony.”

More recently, a new generation of researchers has been focusing on the role of emotions in healthy personality functioning. For example, Anderson (1996) identified nine characteristics of weeping associated with such feelings as gratitude, joy, and wonder. These included a sense of reconnecting with lost parts of one's self, as well as a sense of inner freedom or vastness. Placing such experiences in a broad philosophical-religious context, Braud (2001) in a qualitative study related joyful crying to such positive emotions as awe, compassion, gratitude, love, and yearning. Suggesting that this somatic response might be physiologically rooted in the human organism, he observed that, “For me, wonder joy tears are responses to encountering and appreciating what is truly important...an ‘empathy indicator’ or ‘compassion indicator’ or ‘gratitude indicator.’” (p.106)

Consistent with this view, Rottenberg et al. (2008) in research with Dutch women, found that crying in response to positive events was associated with greater empathy. Those with higher scores measuring anhedonia (an inability to feel pleasure) or alexithymia (an inability to express emotions) were less likely to report this type of experience. The Jungian analyst Von Buchholtz (2002) observed that many recent male and female Olympic athletes had cried upon their moment of victory or triumph, and speculated whether intense happiness paradoxically can become painful so that it produces tears. As Compton & Hoffman (2012) noted in their review of this phenomenon from a positive psychological perspective, “A great deal of empirical investigation concerning gender, age, and cultural factors remains to be done before psychologists well understands the intriguing phenomenon of ‘tears of happiness.’” (p.140)

Hypotheses of the study

Our specific hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: TOJ experiences among Indians will be categorizable into a coherent typology.

Hypothesis 2: TOJ involving non-romantic affection will be reported most frequently.

Hypothesis 3: TOJ involving personal achievement will be reported second-most frequently.

Hypothesis 4: TOJ will be reported more frequently by women than by men.

Method

Participants

The sole criterion for participants in this study was to be of Indian birth and current residence, and age 21 or older. The majority of participants were recruited by the second author and her acquaintances, all fluent in Hindi, involving both opportunity and snowball sampling methods. They initiated face-to-face contacts with 89 persons in trains, buses, cafes, and business settings. Only 1 declined to participate. Of the 88 participants who were interviewed, 42 (18 males, 24 females) were interviewed in Hindi. They tended to be from lower-to-middle educational and SES backgrounds, such as domestic, drivers, nurses, and security guards. Besides the 88 persons who responded to our questionnaire in face-to-face interviews, 43 responded by email in separate mailings to 211 persons. They comprised a snowball sample that mainly comprised the authors' colleagues and friends, and their own acquaintances.

Thus, a total of 131 individuals (65 females, 61 males, 5 gender unknown) born and currently living in India responded to our questionnaire, of whom 109 (56 females, 49 males, 4 gender unknown) responded affirmatively as to whether they had ever experienced TOJ. The response rate for usable reports was therefore 27.3%. Our sample was highly educated. Of the 128 participants who indicated their educational achievement, 38.3% had a college degree, 44.5% had an advanced degree, 9.4% had some college education, and only 7.8% had no college education. Of the 128 participants who indicated their current religious affiliation, 68.0% were Hindu, 7.8% were Muslim, 6.3% were Christian, 0.8% were Jewish, 7.8% indicated no religious affiliation, and 9.4% listed another faith, such as Jain or Zoroastrian. Of the 130 participants who reported their age range, the percentages were as follows: age 21 to 30=43.8%; 31-40=19.2%; 41 to 50=20.0%; 51 to 60=6.9%; 61 and over=10.0%.

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was that developed by the authors after a pilot test was conducted by the first and third authors involving 82 participants living in the US and South America. The first portion of the questionnaire used in India stated: "The field of psychology today is interested in the role of positive emotions in our life, such as joy. Yet, very little is known about tears of happiness or joy. Please answer the questions below as best as you can.” Following questions related to participants’ gender, age-range,
degree of education, religious affiliation if any, and country of birth and current residence, they were asked: “Have you ever experienced tears of joy?” If the answer was affirmative, participants were asked, “How often do you experience tears of great happiness or joy?” on a 4-point Likert scale and “When did you last experience tears of great happiness or joy?” also on a 4-point Likert scale. Next, participants were asked, “Please describe the last occasion when you experience tears of great happiness or joy. Please indicate if you were alone or with others; where it took place, and what caused you to have this reaction.” Lastly, participants were asked to rate, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very mild) to 5 (very strong), how intense were their emotions in this experience.

**Procedure**

The majority of the face-to-face interviews, which took place in Mumbai, Delhi, and also in southern India including Manipal, took about 20 minutes to complete in English, and somewhat longer if conducted in Hindi. Email replies were usually received within seven days of initial contact. Consistent with the results of a previous study on midlife peak-experiences in India (Hoffman, Garg, Kaneshio & Kapur, 2012), 12 participants reported more than 1 distinct TOJ experience. For the 16 additional reports they produced, we did not assign emotional intensity scores but used only the intensity score of their first report. Two participants provided reports that were too vague to be categorized. Thus, a total of 123 usable reports were gathered from the 131 participants.

**Data analysis**

Responses to the TOJ question were coded using a phenomenological content analysis, developed by Hoffman and Ortiz (2009) to investigate peak-experiences that occurred before the age of 14, through the process of retrospective recall. This type of peak-experience analysis was subsequently validated through studies conducted in both the United States (Hoffman, Kaneshio & Compton, 2012) and India (Hoffman et al., 2012). For TOJ, the process of code analysis consisted of a classification scheme developed from our pilot study that organized the reported TOJ experiences into distinct categories. In this study, these categories encompassed: 1) the birth or conception of a child, including news of pregnancy; 2) observing a child, such as in attaining a developmental milestone; 3) romantic love, including a marriage proposal, wedding, or planning a wedding; 4) non-romantic affection, including happiness in a family member's achievement; 5) personal achievement, such as related to education, work, or other goal attainment; 6) intense identification with a movie or other entertainment-medium whether fiction or non-fiction; 7) a reunion of any sort; 8) reflection on one's life; 9) personal recovery from illness/accident; 10) loved one's recovery from illness/accident; 11) aesthetic delight; 12) individual religious experience; 13) interpersonal laughter; 14) material gain, such as receiving a coveted present; 15) witnessing an act of goodness.

To maximally understand the reports in this sample, we read the responses autonomously seeking specific themes of TOJ amid the narratives, and then organized these themes according to the coding scheme. The following guiding principles were used to examine the participants' responses: (a) each self-report would receive one theme code; (b) to classify a specific TOJ experience, one should try to understand the whole set of statements made by the participant, and not just isolated sentences or pieces of information. The authors would then discuss, compare and revise possible classifications until a consensus was reached.

**Results**

Participants reported a wide range of experiences involving TOJ (see Table 1). Though many narratives had their own, unique flavor and tone, repeated themes clearly emerged. It proved possible to organize the 123 scorable reports of adult Indians into a coherent taxonomy, thus supporting our first hypothesis. We found it interesting that all 15 categories replicated those identified in our pilot study involving persons living in the US or South America, but three categories were absent: those involving nature, a group religious experience, and what we termed “fandom euphoria” (TOJ evoked by a sports team's or politician's victory, or a celebrity sighting). None of the 15 categories proved dominant, though four accounted for more than 63% of all reports: non-romantic affection (19.5%), personal achievement (16.2%), the birth of a child (12.2%), and a reunion (12.2%). In that TOJ involving non-romantic affection were most frequently reported by our sample, and TOJ catalyzed by a personal achievement were second-most frequent, our second and third hypotheses were likewise supported. Also prominent were the two categories of romantic love and intense identification with a movie or other mass-media narrative, both at 8.1% of all reports. None of the other nine categories yielded more than 6.0% of all TOJ reports. The respective percentages were: observing a child (5.7%), reflecting on one's life (5.7%), a loved one's recovery from illness/injury (4.1%), aesthetic delight (3.3%), personal recovery from illness/injury (1.6%), individual religious experience (0.8%), material gain (0.8%), interpersonal laughter (0.8%), and witnessing an act of goodness (0.8%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of TOJ</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-romantic affection</td>
<td>Reminiscing with my married sisters over old times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>When I won 1st place in a singing competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of a child</td>
<td>Holding my son for the first time when he stared at me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic love</td>
<td>When it sunk in I had married the right man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense identification with movie, TV or print narrative</td>
<td>Watching the finale of Les Miserables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing a child</td>
<td>Seeing the innocence of my nephew as he spoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on one's life</td>
<td>When I turned 30, I cried with joy about my life's possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loved one's recovery from illness/accident</td>
<td>When I visited my father, who is getting well after cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic delight</td>
<td>Watching the fireworks at Disneyland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants varied widely in how ubiquitous TOJ were in their lives. Of the 101 participants who responded to the frequency item, 17.8% experienced TOJ at least monthly, 32.7% several times per year, 22.8% about once per year, and 26.7% less than yearly. Participants were less varied concerning their most recent TOJ experience. Of the 104 participants who responded to this item, 37.5% reported a TOJ within the past month, 30.8% within the past six months, 6.7% within the past 6 to 12 months, and 25.0% more than 12 months ago. Not surprisingly, there was a high positive correlation (r=.85, p<.001) between these two items that assessed the ubiquitousness of TOJ.

Gender differences concerning TOJ were quite sparse. Neither women nor men were significantly more likely statistically to report a TOJ experience; thus, our fourth hypothesis was not confirmed. Nor did any statistically significant gender differences emerge with regard to any of the 15 specific categories in terms of either prevalence or frequency. However, females were significantly more likely (p<.001) to have a TOJ experience more recently than did men. Finally, as we expected, TOJ carried considerable emotional impact, with a mean score of 3.73. Of the 98 reports in which an emotional impact score was provided, 62.2% were rated either 4 (strong) or 5 (very strong), and only 12.2% were rated 1 (mild) or 2 (moderate). There was also a statistically significant relation between TOJ category and emotional intensity (Pearson r=.60, p<.001).

**Discussion**

Though religious and literary sources in diverse cultures have described TOJ for millennia, our study is the first to develop a typology of such experiences. It is noteworthy that over 82% of our sample of Indian adults reported having had TOJ in their life, and also that 15 distinct categories emerged from their narratives. Clearly, this phenomenon is both common and psychologically complex. And although nearly 17% of participants denied ever having TOJ, over 9% described more than one recent such experience, though they were not requested to do so. As we expected, TOJ experiences usually had strong emotional impact, regardless of one's age, gender, religion, or degree of education.

The most common TOJ experience recounted by our sample involved non-romantic affection, comprising nearly 20% of all reports. Reflecting the salience of family ties in Indian culture, these generally encompassed moments of great happiness relating to children, parents, and siblings. For example, a Hindu woman in her 40s described having TOJ "when my daughter finished her board exam" and a similar-aged Hindu man recalled, "when I received a letter from a distant relative stating her appreciation for my taking such good care of my parents." Sometimes, though, TOJ were evoked by feelings of closeness to non-family members. For instance, a Hindu man in his 20s recounted, "I was sick for four days and missed some important classes. But on Monday evening, a group of friends came to my home and brought all the notes of the classes I had missed. They made me very happy." A Christian woman in her 20s broadly stated, "To me, tears of joy always occur when I am with others, especially peers and family."

Consistent with our expectations in view of the high emphasis on goal attainment among well-educated Indians, TOJ experiences of personal achievement, typically involving education, work, or finances, ranked second-highest in frequency. This finding is consistent with research on Indian values among the highly educated (Agarwal & Misra, 1986) and suggests that goal attainment is capable of producing intense happiness among Indian adults. For example, a Christian woman in her 20s related, "When I won first

**Table 2:** Frequency of Specific Types of TOJ by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>% of reports</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>% of reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-romantic affection</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of child</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reunion</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic love</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification with movie / other medium</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing a child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on one's life</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery of loved one from illness / injury</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic delight</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal recovery from illness / injury</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material gain</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual religious experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal laughter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing an act of goodness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages relate to total reports generated by that gender. 5 participants with scorable reports did not indicate their gender.
place in a singing competition, I was accompanied by my dear friends” and a similar-aged Hindu man mentioned, “When I got my first job at my current employer, I cried for joy. It was a relief, but more than that, I was glad to be part of the place.” Likewise, another Hindu man in his 20s vividly recounted an educational achievement: “It was around 3 a.m. We were partying at a friend’s house when I received confirmation from a top American university that I had been admitted into their prestigious law program. It was my dream school. I was elated, and hence the tears of joy.”

As we expected, the relatively rare, momentous life-event of a child's birth ranked high in frequency— that is, in third place as a TOJ catalyst. Usually, it was reported by the the biological mother or father, but also at times by other family members. Typical was the response of a Hindu woman in her 20s: “This was when my son was born. When I held him in my arms and he was staring at me, tears came into my eyes.” A Hindu man in his 40s likewise recalled, “During the birth of my daughter, my parents and in-laws were present along with the hospital staff. As I held her for the first time, the fresh life I saw for the first time.”

Tied for third in frequency with a child’s birth were TOJ evoked by a reunion. Typically, these involved a get-together with a close family member/members after a perceived long absence. In most instances, the reunion was forged by a celebration or holiday excursion. For example, a Hindu man over age 60 mentioned, “Both my sons live abroad, and we do not get many opportunities to meet. So when they come to India, or in the rare times that we travel to Jamaica, where they are settled, the first few hours are smeared in joy.” Sometimes, however, the reunion was catalyzed by adversity, such as between adult siblings upon the hospitalization of their infirm father. It is interesting to note that in our time, airports are often the venue of such emotionally intense events.

We found it intriguing that over 8% of participants described a TOJ experience evoked by a movie or TV program, whether fictional or reality-based. This was the same percentage in our sample as a TOJ spurred by romantic love, and higher than the frequencies of TOJ evoked by either religious or aesthetic experiences. Although an element of aesthetics was undoubtedly present for participants in the films, TV programs, or books they found so captivating, their comments focused mainly on the characters they viewed—especially those coping with adversity in their lives. For example, a Sikh woman in her 20s mentioned crying at the finale of Les Miserables, “watching an end to a truly distressing situation.” A Hindu man in his 50s recounted TOJ while watching an Indian reality-TV show in which a poor but hard-working woman was given enough money to permit her ailing husband to obtain adequate medical treatment and their three children to get a good education. More broadly, a Hindu man over age 60 commented, “While watching movies, I often shed a tear when the hero outdoes the bad guy and when families reunite.” He then added, “It reminds me of our reunion when I meet my boys.” Such narratives, usually rated by participants as having strong emotional intensity, indicate that mass-media presentations can exert a beneficial impact on our mental health. Indeed, a growing number of clinicians (Banks, 2010; Schulenberg, 2003) are recommending films as useful adjuncts in therapeutic practice. Muramoto (2012) suggested that a primary reason why millions of people around the world flock to movies is precisely to experience TOJ, an uncommon event in their own daily lives.

Less frequent but hardly rare (5.8%) were TOJ evoked by observing a child, usually one's own off spring. For example, a Hindu woman in her 40s commented, “On the first of June when my son came back from his first day at work, it was then that I realized that my son was growing up. I had tears of happiness, joy, and pride.” This finding is consistent with the salience of Indian midlife peak-experiences involving a child's achievement (Hoffman et al. 2012). Equally frequent were TOJ catalyzed by intense reflection upon one's life. For instance, a Sikh man in his 20s recalled, “I was alone late in the evening, with some music on. I thought of my past, I felt light. I cried with joy for having lived.” It is also interesting to note that relatively few participants reported a recent TOJ experience involving any of the seven categories of aesthetics, personal recovery from illness or injury, recovery of a loved one from illness or injury, individual religious experience, material gain, interpersonal laughter, or witnessing an act of goodness (each category less than 5% of all reports). Contrary to our expectation, too, not a single participant reported TOJ from an encounter with nature. These findings suggest that for Indian adults today, tear-evoking emotions of happiness are unlikely to arise outside the realm of one's family, close friends, and personal attainments.

Finally, it is noteworthy that gender differences failed to emerge concerning any of the 15 categories of TOJ. This finding is consistent with the recent study of midlife peak-experiences in India (Hoffman et al., 2012), which likewise failed to uncover any significant gender differences. The fact that females in our sample reported a significantly more recent TOJ experience compared to males, but not more frequent TOJ in general, may reflect their greater tendency to focus on contemporary events in their lives.

Limitations of the present study

Although this study contributes to our knowledge about TOJ in India, there are some methodological limitations. First, our sample was comprised mainly of individuals who were college graduates fluent in English and residing in urban areas. Since a minority of Indians have English-language proficiency or are college graduates (due partly to financial considerations), we are cautious about generalizing our findings to non-English speakers and/or those who are below the middle-class in economic status. In light of these methodological limitations, we plan follow-up research that will sample Indians with greater variability with regard to their educational and economic backgrounds. In addition, future studies about TOJ among Indians may benefit by investigating individuals from different regions of India, or comparing those from rural, suburban, and urban communities. Because data collection was obtained entirely through email and face-to-face interaction, our participants were not anonymous. Quite possibly, therefore, their self-reported experiences may have been biased, either consciously or unconsciously, in favor of social desirability: recounting TOJ concerning child and adult family members, or a praiseworthy academic or career achievement, rather than those involving a private religious experience, aesthetics, or witnessing an act of goodness. Despite the limitations, this study makes a contribution towards better understanding an important facet of positive emotions in India. It will be useful now to determine whether our taxonomy of TOJ experiences has cross-cultural applicability, as well as relevance to individual emotional and physical well-being.
References