Representations of happiness and life satisfaction in the group of educated and socially active young people

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The paper examines the differences in the social representations of happiness among optimists and pessimists in the group of socially active, educated young members of the international youth organization Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales . To assess the degree of optimism and pessimism we used the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) developed by E. Diener, while social representation, divided into the nucleus and peripheral zones, were examined using Verges' technique within the framework of the concept of social mindsets offered by S. Moskovichi.

It has been shown that, irrespective of the optimism or pessimism of the participants, the nucleus of their representations of happiness contains such a value as love. However, only in optimists' representations is this value combined in the nucleus with the values of family and friendship. In the pessimists' nucleus zone of the representation of happiness, love is presented as an independent value, primarily associated with striking emotional experiences, which has aspects of psychological addiction. Considerable differences between optimists and pessimists have also been found in the peripheral zone of the representation of happiness. Only optimists have such associations as "knowledge", "children", and "faith" in their peripheral area. In our opinion, the major scale of differences between optimists and pessimists is formed by the factor of sociocentricity and egocentricity.

Keywords: life satisfaction, optimism, pessimism, social representations of happiness, socially active educated young people, social and economic crisis

Introduction

In many countries and regions, the current economic crisis and the great uncertainty over its events and effects has turned young people, who have received excellent modern educations and are only starting their adult life, into one of the most vulnerable social groups. They are not responsible for the emergence and development of the crisis, but they will soon have to shoulder the hard work to overcome its consequences.

Modern social psychology, represented by Seligman & K, appears to be most sensitive to the public demands, attitudes and feelings of the people affected by this crisis. It announces and formulates a special direction in the science under the name of "positive psychology", based on the search for and study of internal, psychological personality resources, the influence of the optimistic way of thinking, of one's belief that he or she is able to live through and cope with the most difficult circumstances of their life. In the opinion of experts, a positive mindset causes people to choose more promising adaptation strategies that allow them to cope with stress in their lives and lead to higher achievements and a better perception of their prospects (Taylor, 1989, Zeligman, 1997, Aranson, 1998, Stefanenko, 2002). These considerations served as a starting point in our empirical research. The representative of the "positive psychology" school, Diener, created a compact test for the assessment of life satisfaction. The test was unique in that it did not simply assess "life satisfaction" as a current emotional state, but measured the individual's cognitive mindset, including a general assessment of his or her past and present life as well as future prospects. The high level of life satisfaction in Diener's test suggested inner harmony, and acceptance of one's self, one's destiny and life in general (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985).

The test's extreme scores, i.e. the highest and lowest, correspond to the respondents' optimistic and pessimistic mindsets, which relate to their satisfaction with life as a whole. The assessment of inner resources (optimism or pessimism) of people living under a large degree of uncertainty about processes in advanced and emerging economies, is particularly interesting for social psychologists wishing to find out how these mindsets are linked with the individuals' representations of happiness. Our goal was to understand how these individual representations of happiness are developing into phenomena of collective consciousness, how they turn into social attitudes, into mindsets of large social groups.

Research into the pessimistic or optimistic mindsets of socially active groups of educated young people presents considerable interest not only for academics, but also for representatives of political elites in any society. In the study of such groups, analysis of socials attitudes is of special importance. This is where American "positive psychology" combines and intersects with the European approach, which is called "the theory of social mindsets" (Moskovichi, 1992).

Moskovichi's concept of social mindsets is based on the ideas of Durkheim, in whose sociology collective representations are regarded as an element of the "collective consciousness". Emelyanova correctly emphasizes that the reality of social mindsets, according to Moskovichi, is not individual and psychological, but a social reality constructed in micro- and macro-social interactions (Emelyanova, 2006, p. 34). Consequently, the appropriate object of study of the "production and formation" process is a social group (community), in which discussion and discourse are an essential condition, and also a tool in the work of this group.

For the purposes of this research we have chosen the social idea, or ***representation***, of **happiness**. "**Happiness**", along with "**success**" has always been the most important value in the ideology of the modern market economy, which is based on the philosophy of hedonism and pragmatism. According to the theory of psychoanalysis, whose mythology has become part of Western society's public consciousness, the idea of happiness is inherent in the principle of pleasure as a basic

regulator of a person's behavior. During periods of social and economic crises or disintegration of economies, the idea of happiness is subject to inflation, deflation and other deformations. It rises to the surface of consciousness more frequently, becomes a significant and relevant topic of discussion, initiates discourse, and eventually acquires a new system of meanings in the social world of large groups (Wagner, 1996). We are convinced that the international youth organization Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (AIESEC), chosen for this research, is a group whose individual but at the same time highly concurrent ideas about happiness are likely to become collective *representations* of the new generation of managers in many countries' economic and political spheres in the nearest future. This concurrency of individual ideas and their transformation into social *representations* are measured on the basis of the ideas and methods suggested by Moskovichi's disciples and followers: Abric and Verges.

According to Abric (1993), in a social *representation* there is a central *nucleus* linked to collective memory and the group's history; it ensures the homogeneous quality of the group through consensus; it is stable, coherent and sustainable, and not oversensitive to the current environment; its function is to generate the meaning of the social representation and determine its organization. The peripheral system in its turn provides for the integration of every group member's history and personal experience, and maintains the group's heterogeneity; it is dynamic, includes contradictions, and protects the central nucleus.

Methods

The purpose of the research is to study representations of happiness of young optimists and pessimists belonging to the international youth organization AIESEC.

The object of the research is the structure and content of **representations of happiness** among socially active, educated young people living in different countries and belonging to different national cultures who participate in the work of the international youth organization AIESEC.

The research is focused on the relationship between the content and structure of the representations of happiness on the one hand, and life satisfaction (pessimism-optimism) of the socially active young people on the other.

Characteristics of the sample

The participants were young, socially active people from different countries. The majority (over 90%) of respondents are members of the international youth association AIESEC, whose objectives include the development of young people's leadership potential to ensure their positive contribution to society. The association brings together students and recent alumni of higher education institutions who share the ideas of the AIESEC Charter, have a good command of English, and take a socially active position. They work on a permanent basis on projects, and participate in national and international conferences and seminars. There were 153 respondents aged 16–29, with a median age of 21, mode of 19-20; there were 81 women and 72 men. The respondents' age distribution is shown in Figure 1.
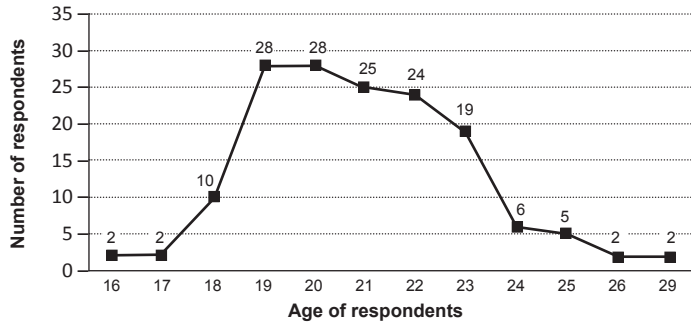
Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by age

People from 34 countries participated in the research: Britain (1 person), Afghanistan (1 person), Bangladesh (3 persons), Bahrain (2 persons), Bulgaria (6 persons), Ghana (1 person), Germany (2 persons), Hong-Kong (4 persons), Egypt (1 person), India (26 persons), Indonesia (3 persons), Iraqi (1 person), Iran (2 persons), Italy (3 persons), Kazakhstan (1 person), Cameroon (1 person), China (2 persons), Malaysia (7 persons), Mexico (3 persons), Moldova (1 person), Morocco (1 person), Oman (1 person), Pakistan (1 person), Russia (47 persons), Serbia (14 persons), Singapore (1 person), Taiwan (5 persons), Tunisia (2 persons), Turkey (3 persons), Ukraine (1 person), Philippines (1 person), France (1 person), Croatia (1 person), Japan (2 persons).

Tasks of empirical research

1. Carry out empirical research in groups of respondents belonging to different countries and cultures, whose joint activity presupposes the generating of common solutions to urgent problems in the lives of young people and society on the basis of talks and discussions.
2. Divide representatives of different countries into three groups: optimists, pessimists and intermediate.
3. Describe the content and structure of the representations of happiness in each group.
4. Compare the structures of the representations of happiness in these three groups (optimists, pessimists and intermediate) and isolate the sequence of change in the representations in the extreme groups, monitoring for these changes in the intermediate group.
5. Describe the obtained results and draw conclusions.

Stages of conducting the empirical research

1. Compiling a set of research techniques in the English language (common for all participants)
2. Agreeing on the rules of the research procedure.
3. Conducting distant research.
4. Collecting and processing the data.

Data collection procedure

The survey was conducted during AIESEC conferences in Taiwan (March 2010), India (August 2010), and Austria (October 2010). All the questions were presented in the form of an online electronic questionnaire via the Google platform. Respondents received an electronic link to the questionnaire with the request to participate in an interesting research study. After the respondents answered all the questions, their answers were automatically shown in the electronic data summary table (like a Microsoft Office Excel table, but online).

Data collection was carried out from August 2010 to March 2011. When there were over 150 people in the data bank, we decided to stop collecting data and move on to the next stage of research, the processing of data. The data were exported from the Internet to the Excel Microsoft Office program, in which all further analysis was conducted.

Research techniques

1. The polling technique of explicit life satisfaction, *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS), developed by Diener and his colleagues (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). It aims to collect data on the cognitive assessment of subjective well-being, and consists of five statements. Respondents are asked to assess the level of their agreement with these statements. Vitterso and Roysamb with factor analysis confirmed that SWLS measures a single construct and that the concept of life satisfaction can be applied to a wide range of cultures (Diener Vittersø, Røysamb, & Diener, 2002) — hence our decision to use it.

2. Association test of the type of incomplete sentence: "Happiness is …". We offered this test to obtain information on the representations of happiness among people belonging to different nationalities and cultures. Respondents were asked to give 10 word associations in order of preference on the sentence "Happiness is …". We chose the association method because it is simple and can be used with people from different countries and cultures.

3. Verges' technique. The method of associations allowed us to use Verges' technique (Verges 1992 — from research by I.V. Bovina "Social Psychology of Health and Illness" (Bovina, 2007), where representations are subjected to prototypical and categorical analysis using two parameters: the frequency of a concept's occurrence in the answers of respondents, and the rank of its occurrence. Verges' idea is based on the consensus principle, its empirical criterion being the frequency of the concepts' occurrence. The rank of the answer is an empirical criterion of the concepts' importance for the respondents. In our research we slightly modified Verges' method, retaining its main principles. Thus, we did not calculate the average rank of the concept, but counted the frequency of its occurrence in the group of the first five out of a total of ten associations in the test "Happiness is …" for each respondent. Further, if the number of association occurrences in the group of the first five associations exceeded half of the total number of its occurrences in the lists of associations, we considered the rank of the

association to be high. If this number was smaller than half, we considered it to be low. Having obtained two parameters for each concept — the frequency median and the rank (high or low) — we placed the concept in one of the four areas in the results' presentation scheme of Verges' technique (Table 1).

Table 1. Verges' Technique's results presentation scheme (1992)

Group of concepts X	*High rank of concept (over 50% of occurrences are in the group of high rank)*	*Low rank of concept (less than 50% occurrences are in the group of high rank)*
High frequency of concept (occurrence over 50% subjects)	area 1	area 3
Low frequency of concept (occurrence below 50% subjects)	area 2	area 4

Thus, the structure of social representations divides into the central nucleus and peripheral system.

Area 1 — The nucleus as the stable part is linked with the history and collective memory; it leads the group to homogeneity through consensus and allows us to determine the organization and meaning of the social representation.

Areas 2, 3 and 4 — the peripheral system (2, 3 — primary; 4 — secondary; the difference lies in the degree of priority of the area components and their proximity to the nucleus). This system has greater mobility; it ensures integration of individual experience, includes contradictions, and allows people to adapt to reality (Abric, 1993).

The elements of the notion nucleus perform the organizing and meaning-forming (semantic) function, while the elements of periphery add meaning to the nucleus, linked with it directly, but more susceptible to change. We analyzed only the elements registered by 20% and more of the subjects, what means that we built a representation structure that includes only the answers of highest consistency.

Results

Distribution of participants from different countries and cultures according to Diener's technique "Assessment of life satisfaction"

In this research we will use a division into three groups, according to level of life satisfaction:

1. Pessimists group (the low level) unites those totally dissatisfied, dissatisfied and less satisfied than average by Diener;
2. Intermediate — intermediate level of satisfaction by Diener;
3. Optimists — high and very high level of satisfaction by Diener.

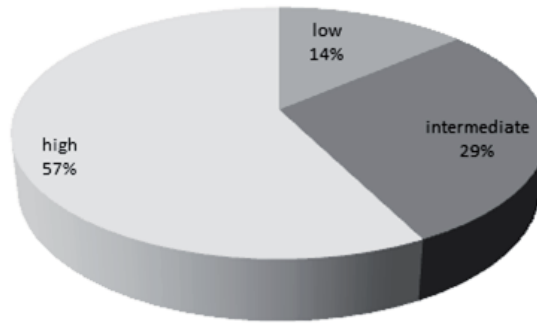The participants of our research were distributed in the following way (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by level of life satisfaction

The group with a low level of life satisfaction comprises 21 persons (14%), the group with intermediate level — 44 persons (29%), the group with high level — 88 persons (57%).

Persons from countries with the greatest numbers of participants (Russia — 47, India — 26, Serbia — 14) are distributed in three groups in accordance with the general distribution of all participants, which allows us to assume in this research that the young people's levels of life satisfaction do not depend on the country of residence.
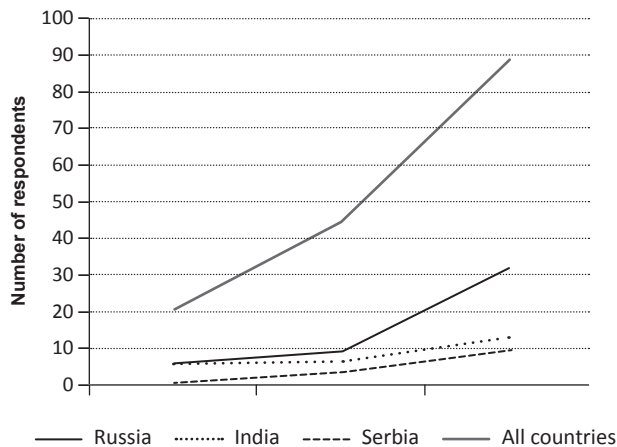

Figure 3. Results of distribution by life satisfaction level of the three most widely represented groups in the total sample.

In Figure 3 the horizontal axis represents three levels of life satisfaction: "low", "intermediate" and "high"; along the vertical axis we measure the number of respondents from Serbia, Russia and India in these groups, against the overall distribution by country.

The content and structure of the social representation of happiness in the three groups of respondents, who differ by level of "life satisfaction" (pessimists — intermediate — optimists): analysis results.

To analyze the structure of the representations, we collected **1530** association-concepts about happiness: **210** in the group with a low level of life satisfaction, **440** in

the group with an intermediate level, and **880** in the group with a high level of life satisfaction.

Pessimists. The main result we obtained from pessimists (respondents with a low level of life satisfaction) is that in their nucleus zone there is only one concept: "love".

The first peripheral system comprises the following elements: emotions, family, friends, and relationships. The second peripheral system is made up by the concepts: hobby, dream, harmony, nature, success, way of life, transience (Table 2).

Table 2. The structure of happiness representation in the group of respondents with a low level of life satisfaction (pessimists)

Low life satisfaction	*High rank of the concept (over 50% of cases occur i n the high rank group)*	*Low rank of the concept (less than in 50% of cases occur in the high rank group)*
High frequency of the concept (occurs in over 50% of subjects)	love	emotions
Low frequency of the concept (occurs in less than 50% of subjects)	family friendship relationships	dream, aim, hobby, nature peacefulness, harmony, satisfaction, success, achievements transience, way of life

As we can see, this group's respondents have a low consistency of associations and the concept "love" became a semantic core of the notion of happiness (which can be explained by the age graph, showing the majority of the respondents to be at the age of obtaining experience of building deep personal relationships). It is possible that pessimists see love as the only meaningful kernel in the idea of happiness, while emotions are connected to love as the most "desirable" sensation. "Emotions" were not in the nucleus, although the frequency of occurrence of "emotions" is even higher than that of "love' (14 compared to 11).

Further, we turn our attention to the associations that are part only of the second peripheral system. "Success" and "fleeting" occur there most frequently, and they establish connections with the nucleus and confirm our inference about the understanding of happiness as experiencing emotions in the state of falling in love. A hobby implies the opportunity to experience pleasant emotions similar to love again and again. The word "fleeting" here points to the idea of the instability of happiness, to the belief that happiness is beyond people's control because the state of being in love may be fleeting and transient. Very close to this are such concepts as "nature" (gives power and energy) or "serenity, harmony" (something that can be easily broken), and "dream, target" (being somewhere far away).

Thus we can see that in this group, the representation structure is formed solely around the emotional experience of love.

Intermediate group. The structural elements of representation of happiness in the group with an intermediate level of life satisfaction are presented in the following Table 3.

Table 3. The structure of the representation of happiness in the group of respondents with intermediate life satisfaction levels

Intermediate life satisfaction	High rank of the concept *(occurs in the high rank group in over 50% of cases)*	Low rank of the concept *(occurs in the high rank group in less than 50% of cases)*
High frequency of the concept (occurs in over 50% of subjects)	love, emotions, family	achievements, relationships
Low frequency of the concept (occurs in less than 50% of subjects)	peace, harmony satisfaction	Depends on you, well-being, health, helping others, important, life, nature, way of life

As we can see, in this group the nucleus of the representation is formed by three elements: Emotions, Family and Love. Emotions (we mean positive emotions, as there were no negative emotions) were stated by the majority (80% respondents in this group). The word "emotions" is as frequent as "family"; "love" is the most frequent of all. Here we also see that in the first peripheral area there appear the concepts "relationships" and "achievements", which implies that happiness is perceived as something attained by one's personal efforts, possibly by building relationships, and by personal contribution to them. The first peripheral area also includes "serenity, harmony" and "satisfaction", which may show the significance of these feelings. In the second peripheral area we see the concepts "depends on yourself", "important"; this signals the priority of the internal control locus.

On the whole, the intermediate group's structure of the representation of happiness is formed around experiencing positive emotions, coming from communication and relationships with close people within the family, and happiness is associated with personal achievements, with the attained serenity, harmony, nature, with the value of life itself, of well-being and freedom.

Optimists. To describe the structure of the representation of happiness in the group with high levels of life satisfaction we will also use a summary Table 4.

Table 4. The structure of the representation of happiness in the group of respondents with high levels of life satisfaction

High levels of life satisfaction	high rank of the concept *(occurs in the high rank group in over 50% of cases)*	low rank of the concept *(occurs in the high rank group in less than 50% of cases)*
high frequency of the concept (occurs in over 50% of subjects)	Love, family, friendship emotions	None
Low frequency of the concept (occurs in less than 50% of subjects)	Success, achievement, serenity, harmony, satisfaction, relationships, life, important, valuable, hobby	Depends on yourself, children, communication, freedom, faith, God, helping others, knowledge way of life

In this group the representation nucleus is made up of the elements *love, family, emotions and friendship*. As we can see, respondents with high levels of life satisfaction understand happiness as the establishment of deep and lasting personal relationships (family, friendship). In the peripheral zone, we come across such ideas as "achievement", "harmony", "relationships", and "satisfaction"; these indicate a willingness to make a personal contribution to the building of relationships and to their harmony (this is probably considered to be the same as achievement). There are also links with the concepts "life", "valuable", "hobby", giving the representation structure a shade of light-heartedness, as if about something enjoyable.

We note that one part of the primary periphery remains unfilled. This means that if the concept is of low priority, it cannot have a high frequency of reference in this group. It is possible, however, for a high-priority concept to have low frequency of reference. This testifies to the priority of rank over frequency. High consistency in the frequency of occurrence went with a consistently high priority ranking. We can see that in this group, the zone of the nucleus has significantly expanded. In the secondary zone of the periphery the presence of ideas like "depends on yourself", "helping others", "way of life" indicates that the personality is active. Only here, in this group's periphery zone, appear the words "children", "knowledge", "freedom", "faith" and "God".

To analyze the differences and commonalities in the groups with varying life satisfaction levels we will use the following Table 5.

Table 5. Representation of happiness in groups of respondents with low, intermediate and high levels of life satisfaction

	Nucleus	*Primary periphery*	*Secondary periphery*
Low life satisfaction	Love	Emotions, family, friends, relationships	Dream, aim, hobby, nature, serenity, harmony, satisfaction, success, victory, fleeting, way of life
Intermediate life satisfaction	Love Emotions Family	Achievements, relationships, serenity, harmony, satisfaction, enjoyment	Depends on yourself, well-being, health, helping others, important, life, nature, way of life
High life satisfaction	Love Friendship Family Emotions	Success, achievements, serenity, harmony, satisfaction, relationships, life, important, valuable, hobby	Depends on yourself, children, companionship, freedom, faith, helping others, knowledge, way of life

As we can judge from the data, the meaning-forming nucleus in the structures of happiness representation differs across the groups with different life satisfaction levels: the higher the level of life satisfaction, the broader the representation and the closer its links to the respondents' deep personal relationships with significant others (love, friendship).

Comparing the peripheral parts of the representation, we can see that, although all respondents correlate happiness with "serenity, harmony", "satisfaction", "success", "relationships", "way of life", there are quite a number of differences: for the pessimist group happiness is "a dream", and is "fleeting". For the optimists happiness is associated with "knowledge", "faith" and "freedom", and also with "children", which is not observed in the other two groups.

In the intermediate group, the representation structure contains references characteristic of both high and low levels of life satisfaction, representing associations of internal and external locus of control. However, this group has its own specifics: in the periphery appear such concepts as "well-being" and "health", indicating links to the benefits of a more material character, in comparison with the high-satisfaction group.

Discussion

The data we have obtained show that the structure and content of representations of happiness vary depending on whether people are optimists or pessimists. We can state that:

A) All the groups, regardless of their life satisfaction level, have the human value of love in the nucleus of their happiness representation.

B) In the group of pessimists (people with the lowest life satisfaction levels) the representation of happiness includes associations with the "fleeting" character of happiness.

C) In the group of young pessimists, the representation nucleus consists of only one concept, "love", which is primarily associated with the need for striking emotions and experiences.

D) The young optimists' representation of happiness shows their certainty that happiness depends on themselves. Only in the optimists' periphery are there ideas of "faith", "knowledge", "freedom", and "children".

E) The group with intermediate level of life satisfaction occupies a similar position in terms of the rank and frequency of representation elements, which confirms the non-random nature of the differences in young people's representations of happiness.

F) In the optimists group, a part of the representation periphery was missing: if a concept had low rank of association, the likelihood of this association's high frequency occurrence was nil. This phenomenon probably reflects some peculiarities of optimists' thinking and logic.

Conclusion

The results of our empirical research allow us to conclude that the major differences in the representations of happiness lie along a continuum that could be labeled "egocentricity — socio-centricity".

According to our research, the social representations of happiness of all young respondents in our sample have a fundamental common element: love and positive

emotions linked to it. However, both the nucleus and periphery of the representation clearly demonstrate the differences in the understanding and interpretation of the value of love across the groups with varying levels of life satisfaction. For the pessimists, the energy of love is focused on the emotional state of being in love, rather than on the other person; here love is an insatiable thirst for striking emotions, and a constant pursuit of euphoria generated by falling in love. It is different with optimists: their representation nucleus includes not only emotions, but also relationships with the loved ones in which love, together with the values of family and friendship, form a bundle of concepts. These results suggest that optimists' representation of happiness is socio-centric, and is not confined solely to the inner, essentially physiological states but has a clear focus on the relationships with other people. Our findings are consistent with the results of research into labor motivation carried out in groups of people of different ages, professions and education, who were statistically assembled by the criterion of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their work. The research was conducted in the USSR in the 1980–1985 (Kokurina, 1987).

Moreover, only optimists have the word associations from the spiritual sphere, such as "children", "knowledge", "freedom", "faith", "God".

The results obtained in the research confirmed our belief that optimism is an important personality resource of young people, which is based on lasting friendly relationships with others, first and foremost in the family.

We can therefore conclude that the institution of family and the development of the ability to build and sustain friendship are powerful socio-psychological resources of today's socially active and educated young people. These resources will help them cope with the numerous difficulties and problems they are likely to face in the nearest future.

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