

East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities

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MULTILAYERED SOCIOCULTURAL PHENOMENA: ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND ECONOMIC STATUS

by Fukushima Shintaro

Abstract. In this article, incoherent results of the associations between subjective well-being and economic status at multiple social levels are shown. Although individual-level positive associations are shown within developed countries, national-level associations disappear among developed countries. Group/area-level associations, meanwhile, do exist within Japanese societies. From these inconsistent phenomena, a sociocultural unit is proposed, within which well-being of people is collectively shared based on mutual reciprocity. The

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simple addition of social scientific results themselves cannot reconstruct the whole range of phenomena. Humanities could be considered as the glue, which adds sociocultural meanings to the generalized scientific results.

Keywords: culture; economy; multilevel; social science; sociocultural unit; universality; well-being

Because the human being is commonly regarded as a “social animal” that lives its life in groups (Dunbar 1992), social science has shown much interest in socio-psychological characteristics both at the level of the individual and the level of the group/society. Phenomena at these levels do not exist or occur independently, but are constructed collectively (Sherif 1936.). This is also the case in the field of well-being; factors and processes of well-being at both levels are qualitatively different. Hence, questions such as “Why or how is the person happy?” and “Why or how is the group/area happy?” are regarded as totally different questions (Farrell, Aubry, and Coulombe 2004). In his classic work *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951) insists that suicides are not only determined at the individual level, but also emerge as collective phenomena at the group level. He stresses the importance of “social facts,” which are composed of social structures, values, and cultural norms. Consequently, social scientific researchers have increasingly acknowledged that the well-being of people cannot solely be explained by a single level: neither the individual level nor the group/area level (Mohan and Mohan 2002; Farrell et al. 2004; Deneulin and Townsend 2007; Ballas and Tranmer 2012; Cramm, Møller, and Nieboer 2012; Murayama, Fujiwara, and Kawachi 2012).

This article describes the necessity of capturing multilayered social phenomena, from the individual level to social levels, with an example from the association between economic status and subjective well-being.

ECONOMIC STATUS AND WELL-BEING AT DIFFERENT SOCIAL LEVELS

National-level associations between economic status and well-being. It is widely accepted that economic development improves people’s well-being, especially in the early stage of economic growth (Inglehart 1997). Recent social scientific research, however, has shown that economic growth does not increase the subjective well-being of nations once they reach a certain economic level (US\$10,000 per year, as reported by Frey and Stutzer 2002). This phenomenon is called the “Easterlin Paradox” (Easterlin 1974; Easterlin et al. 2010), and social scientists including psychologists (Diener, Diener, and Diener 1995), economists (Layard 2005), and political scientists (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart et al. 2008) have assumed the validity of this

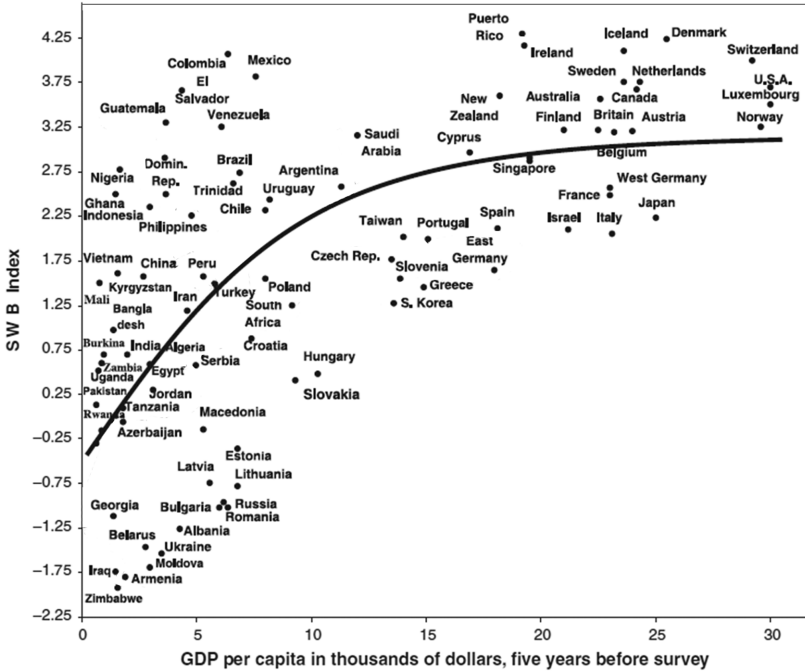


Figure 1. Associations between the Subjective Well Being Index and GDP per capita at the national level (Inglehart et al. 2008).³

statement for decades (Figure 1). This paradox is also shown over time at the national level. Clark, Frijters, and Shields (2008) showed that the happiness level of the United States did not increase while income per capita increased dramatically between 1973 and 2004. The same phenomenon was also found in the developed countries in Europe (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands) and Japan (Easterlin 1995, 2005; Clark et al. 2008; Deaton 2008). By contrast, both income and life satisfaction were shown to have increased in developing and transitional countries (Frijters, Haisken-DeNew, and Shields 2004; Howell and Howell 2008).

Individual-level associations between economic factors and well-being. As shown in the previous section, national-level associations between economic status and subjective well-being disappear in developed countries. Recent studies, however, have found that the individual-level economic growth and happiness are still associated with each other even within developed countries (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; see Figure 2). Although the regression coefficient of the effect of income on happiness is smaller in developed countries (Blanchflower and Oswald 2004) than in developing

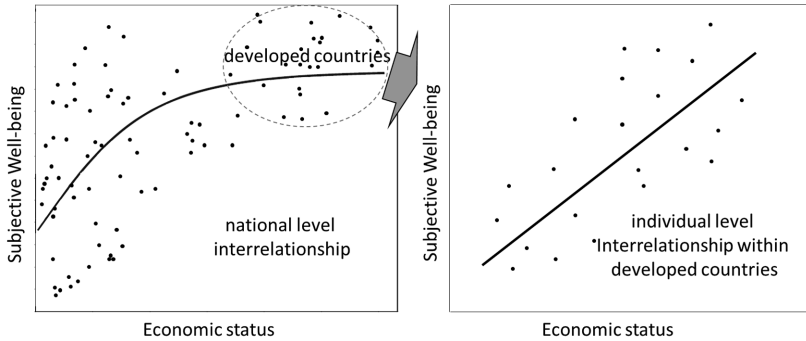


Figure 2. Interrelationships between economic status and subjective well-being at national level and individual level (within developed countries; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008).

or transitional countries (Lelkes 2006), significant associations do exist in every type of country. Why do such inconsistent associations between economic indices and well-being arise at different social levels? The next section attempts to explain the reason by focusing on the relative income condition of people compared with related others within the same group.

Relative economic status in local contexts. One possible explanation for the inconsistency in the association between well-being and economic status at different levels is the failure to consider the relativity of social subjects. Recent studies reveal that not absolute income but subjective comparisons between one's own income and the incomes of related others are important in determining subjective well-being (Boyce, Brown, and Moore 2010; Clark 2003; Luttmer 2005). In other words, specific local status—not general global status—matters in the increase in the subjective well-being of people; income of related others compared with one's own income can even lead to the deterioration of one's own well-being. This finding could explain why economic status within countries, and not between countries, is associated with the subjective well-being of people. Individual-level good subjective well-being based on relatively high economic status and bad subjective well-being based on relatively low economic status are two sides of the same coin, which have no direct relation to group/area-level associations between economic status and subjective well-being.

WELL-BEING IN AN EAST ASIAN CONTEXT

At a glance, the results shown in the previous section may lead to the conclusion that the economic standard of individuals and not the economic standard of groups/areas has positive effects on the well-being of people. The results, however, cannot be generalized in every society or culture in the world.

A recent review of the top journals in the field of psychology with six subdisciplines showed that 96% of research participants were selected from Western industrialized countries, specifically those from North America (68%) and Europe (Arnett 2008). Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) have also demonstrated that samples from human psychology and behavior were drawn entirely from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. These studies suggest that results from past studies cannot be directly generalized to societies worldwide; in fact the results can differ in every sociocultural context that is shared within specific groups/areas (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Specifically, the relationships between economic status and subjective well-being are not necessarily the same between every sociocultural context (Clark et al. 2005; Lelkes 2006).

Sociocultural construals of subjective well-being in an East Asian context. The field of cultural psychology has revealed stable cultural differences in psychological/behavioral tendencies among various societies/areas. This academic field is based on the assumption that individuals and sociocultural contexts are mutually constructed, and specific psychological/behavioral tendencies are transmitted and shared in a dynamic manner (Kashima 2014).

Previous studies have demonstrated that people living in Western societies are more individualistic, engage in analytic thinking, and value individual freedom and personal rights. People living in East Asian societies, by contrast, are more interdependent, engage in holistic thinking, and value social relationships (Markus and Kitayama 1991, 2010; Triandis 1995; Nisbett et al. 2001).

It follows that subjective well-being in different cultures generally cannot be compared. In fact, we should expect more contextualized forms of well-being to be actualized in each culture. Cultural construals of subjective well-being are shared within each culture and constructed through sociocultural contexts; once shared and transmitted, they then define the way people pursue and feel well-being.

Although international indices of well-being such as the OECD's Better Life Index focus on facilitating broad international comparisons, indigenous local indices such as Bhutan's GNH contain multidimensional measurements that reflect specific cultural concepts and values. It is important to consider both general and culturally specific views of well-being, which are shared within each society in an integrative manner.

A series of cross-cultural studies have pointed out the existence of a cultural construal of well-being: that is, an individual achievement model of well-being is more prevalent in European and North American cultural contexts, whereas a balanced and relational model of happiness and well-being is more prevalent in East Asian cultural contexts (Uchida,

Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama 2004; Uchida and Kitayama 2009; Uchida and Ogihara 2012). Hitokoto and Uchida (2015) proposed the concept of “interdependent happiness,” which in an East Asian cultural context is mutually pursued and attained based on human relationships. Japanese culture has been regarded as interdependent and collectivistic, one in which people need to care about “group harmony,” and outstanding individual economic achievement is not regarded positively.

Group-level well-being beyond individual-level well-being in Japan. Well-being is usually understood as an “individual feeling or property.” However, it can also be achieved collectively among specific groups, such as communities and nations, over a long period of time (Uchida and Kitayama 2009; Plaut et al. 2012). As noted above, social scientific studies have increasingly acknowledged that well-being cannot be explained only by the characteristics of individuals, but must also account for the contexts of group/areas in which people live their lives. The factors and processes for achieving individual and group/area well-being should be qualitatively independent.

In the previous sections, it was shown that economic growth did not increase subjective well-being after reaching a certain economic standard at the national level. In contrast, the economic status of individuals within a country certainly increased the well-being of people. The relative income hypothesis, which insists on the importance of relative and not absolute income, has been proposed as a reason for this inconsistency.

As shown above, the results of the associations between economic status and subjective well-being of people can lead to the hasty conclusion that individual economic status—and not the economic standard of groups/areas—has positive effects on the subjective well-being of people. In the traditional rural community, which is regarded as the basic group in Japan, meanwhile, people tend to value group/community over individuals. Suzuki (1940), for example, refers to the community settlement as “a mind,” which has its own subjective autonomy, and house (“*Ie*”) and community (“*Mura*”) as specific units of agency (Watanabe 1978). Individuals are not regarded as independent subjects in these communities. Given such sociocultural characteristics, individual achievements are not necessarily regarded as good; people need to care about a well-balanced harmony among group members and be oriented to the goals of the group more than those of the individual. The same logic applies to economic achievement. Consequently, it is hypothesized that, in a Japanese sociocultural context, not only individual-level economic status, but also group/community-level socioeconomic status would be indispensable to subjective well-being.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS ON THE ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN ECONOMIC STATUS AND WELL-BEING BOTH AT INDIVIDUAL LEVEL AND GROUP/AREA LEVELS WITHIN JAPAN

As it has been assumed in past studies based on the relative income hypothesis, do individual levels of income have a positive effect, and in contrast, area/group levels a negative effect on subjective well-being in Japan? In the Japanese sociocultural context where individuals are interdependently connected based on the ideal of group harmony, it may be hypothesized that the economic conditions of groups and communities, in addition to the economic status of individuals, affect the subjective well-being of people. To examine this hypothesis, related empirical results from Japanese society are shown in the following section.

Sampled people and areas in Japan. We conducted a questionnaire survey of 42,804 individuals (level 1) living in 412 communities (level 2) in 164 cities (level 3) of 16 prefectures (level 4) in Japan (Uchida et al. forthcoming). Here community is defined as a basic social group composed of around 100 households (*cho* or *chomoku* in the data set of the Population Census of Japan 2010). Communities were sampled randomly from farming areas, fishing areas, urban areas, and other areas.

There were 57,472 communities in our target areas. We defined “farming communities” as communities with a relatively high percentage of farmers ($\geq 25\%$), “fishing communities” as those with a relatively high percentage of fishers ($\geq 25\%$), and “urban communities” as those with a high population density ($\geq 4,000$ persons/km²) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan 2010).¹

We determined that the number of samples required to meet our sampling goal was approximately 10,000 households for each type of community. The actual number of sampled communities varied by type because the number of households varied by community type; the number of households was larger in urban/other communities than it was in farming/fishing communities.

We mailed our survey to all households in the sample communities and received 7,364 responses (7,295 valid responses²) from 408 communities. The response rate at the individual level varied across communities (mean = 22%, $SD = 11\%$).

Measures of economic status and subjective well-being. As an indicator of economic status, we measured equivalent income. Equivalent income is defined as household income divided by the square root of the household size, which reflects the necessary income for an adult to have the same utility level in each household.

As for the indicator of subjective well-being, we measured happiness by an 11-point scale single item (from 0 to 10). We prepared the question

Table 1. Regression coefficients of equivalent income on happiness at different levels

	Group Levels			
	Level 1: Individual Level	Level 2: Community Level	Level 3: City Level	Level 4: Prefectural Level
Regression coefficients (standard error)	0.229(0.01)***	0.363(0.05)***	0.439(0.06)***	0.694(0.19)**
Number of sample	5,833	407	164	15

Note. *** 0.1% significant; ** 1% significant.

item “Do you feel happy in general? If you feel completely happy, please rate 10; in contrast, if you feel completely unhappy, please rate 0.” This has been shown to be reliable and valid in social/psychological surveys (Abdel-Khalek 2006).

Empirical results in Japan. Regression coefficients of equivalent income on well-being from the individual to the prefecture level were calculated to determine how strongly income affects well-being at each level. From flat associations between economic status and subjective well-being at the national level among developed countries and also the relative income effect which has been shown in previous studies, it was predicted that the regression coefficients of equivalent income on happiness would decrease as the social unit became larger (individual level > community level > city level > prefecture level > national level \cong 0).

The results shown in Table 1 did not support the hypothesis. As predicted from the relative income hypothesis, equivalent income had significant positive effects on the happiness of participants at the individual level. The equivalent income of groups/areas (i.e., communities, cities, and prefectures), however, also had positive effects on the happiness of people. Furthermore, regression coefficients were largest at the prefectural level (level 4), followed by the city level (level 3), local community level (level 2), and individual level (level 1). The results suggest that the economic status of groups/areas, besides the status of individuals, had the additional function of improving the happiness of people within Japanese culture.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that not only individual economic status, but also the economic conditions of groups/areas—from community level to prefecture level—raise the happiness of people in Japanese sociocultural contexts.

Figure 1, however, showed that the positive effect of economic conditions of groups/areas is not increased at the national level; in fact, economic conditions at the national level do not have significant effects on the subjective well-being among developed countries. How is it possible to explain this discrepancy?

Sociocultural boundary based on shared belief/value system. It may be possible to interpret the gap as a sociocultural border within which reciprocal relationships among group members are built and the well-being of people collectively generated based on mutual reciprocity. Reciprocal relationships, at the same time, could construct among group members the shared belief/value that they are interdependent and inseparable from one another, which in turn may generate a sense of compathy among group members in relation to subjective well-being; that is, the well-being of group members and the well-being of one's self would be directly interconnected in a psychological manner.

Although cross-cultural studies generally regard the country or larger areas such as Eastern and Western as the units of culture, it has been shown that these units are not necessarily valid, and areas within countries are also indispensable sociocultural units (Fischer and Schwartz 2011; Schwartz 2014; Talhelm et al. 2014). Fischer and Schwartz (2011), for example, examined the variances of values both between and within countries by using several data sets, and found that variances between countries are not necessarily large (from 2% to 22%) compared with variances within countries. Talhelm et al (2014) also showed that sizable psychological differences which had shown in past studies could be seen at the regional level within a country.

These multilayered cultural differences are based on a shared normative meaning/value system, which is constructed collectively beyond individuals in an intersubjective manner (Shweder 1991; Kitayama, Duffy, and Uchida 2007; Wan et al. 2007; Morris, Hong, and Chiu 2012; Schwartz 2014). This is why it is necessary to capture human psychology/behavior not merely at the individual or single ecological level, but at multiple levels (Subramanian et al. 2006; Murayama et al. 2012; Cheng et al. 2016).

Subjective well-being in a Japanese sociocultural context. Subjective well-being in Japanese society has been shown to be lower than in other industrialized societies (Diener et al. 1995; Inglehart 1997). At first glance, Japan might be regarded as a “miserable country.” Can we really make such a conclusion?

This moderate level of well-being is, in fact, quite compatible with the balance-oriented concept of well-being collectively shared within Japanese culture. Uchida and Kitayama (2009) showed that Japanese regard happiness both positively and negatively (67% of Japanese described positively),

whereas over 98% of American reported happiness positively. Furthermore, it is shown that pleasant and unpleasant emotions are negatively correlated in the United States, whereas they are positively correlated in East Asian countries (Bagozzi, Wong, and Yi 1999). These balance orientations between positivity and negativity and between self and others are constructed collectively as Japanese sociocultural contexts and cannot be generalized for the whole society.

CONCLUSION

This article introduced the incoherent results of the associations between subjective well-being and economic status at multilayered social levels. In addition, the existence of a sociocultural unit in which people share specific beliefs/values was discussed.

Although social scientific research can shed light on social phenomena from various perspectives in an objective manner, the simple calculation of results itself cannot necessary reconstruct entire phenomena. Sociocultural realities exist as intersubjectively shared meanings within specific contexts, and each sociocultural context has been transmitted over a long period of history within specific societies and cultures.

Although the quantified results of social scientific research alone cannot wholly capture socioculturally constructed phenomena, these attempts may reach their goal through collaboration with the humanities, which can function as the glue of social scientific results. The humanities can help capture the socioculturally specific narratives shared in each local culture and contribute interpretive meaning to simplified and generalized scientific results. Thus, the integration of these two approaches—social sciences and humanities—would lead us closer to the goal of better capturing the entire body of the sociocultural cosmos.

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NOTES

1. To sample communities, we stratified the communities based on two dimensions: geographical region (seven regional blocks) and type of the community (farming, fishing, urban, mixed, and other). Note that the three types of communities (farming, fishing, and urban types of communities) were not mutually exclusive. Therefore, we defined “mixed communities” as those meeting at least two of the three criteria of community types. Communities that did not meet any of the criteria were categorized as “other.”
2. Some respondents chose the same answer number in consecutive Likert scale items even when the items covered diverse questions. For quality control, 69 cases were removed, as they showed this pattern for more than half of the sections in the survey.
3. The author modified the original figure; the category border of the “Latin American” and the “Ex-Communist” were deleted.

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