Happiness as Realization of the Ideal:
What Criterion Do We Use to Rate Our Happiness?

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理想の実現としての幸福度：
幸せを評価するのにどのような基準を用いているのか

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Happiness is now very important as a policy tool. Takahashi (2018a) discussed "ideal happiness" based on Plato's theory of "Ideas." He showed that it could be used as a deflator of happiness like a GDP deflator to measure real happiness. However, he took data only from qualitative surveys with a small sample size. Therefore, we need more evidence from large-sample surveys. In this article, using five data sets from four countries, I re-examined what the most important criterion is to evaluate happiness and how ideal happiness has an effect on present happiness.

The findings showed that most people, in particular younger and middle-aged populations, rated their own happiness by comparing it with their ideal conditions of happiness. Moreover, many believed that it was very difficult to feel only happiness over the course of our whole life or that we need unhappy moments sometimes to understand the meaning of happiness. From the structural equation model (SEM), these opinions led to a lower ideal happiness. These persons tend to indicate lower levels of happiness. Therefore, the evidence made clear that the more that citizens believe that it is difficult to achieve only happiness in their lives or that unhappiness is meaningful for their lives, the lower the average level of happiness is in that country. We need to continue research in this field.

1. Introduction

1.1 Happiness as a policy tool

Happiness is now very important as a policy tool. Politicians and policy-makers consider citizens' happiness when they develop economic and social policies and evaluate their outcomes.[1] However, happiness is subjective. How can we understand happiness properly? Is the Asian meaning of happiness the same as that of the European? Can we compare your happiness with another's happiness? By using a question or a scale like "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are from zero to ten?", happiness studies reveal what is evaluated as a good life from the 1970s. In addition, the validity and reliability of measurements were tested extensively (Veenhoven, 1993; OECD, 2013).

The paradox of happiness asserts that the mean of happiness at the country level is constant over time (Easterlin, 1974). This means that economic growth does not improve happiness. At an indi-

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vidual level, happiness increases when a good thing happens and decreases when a bad thing happens. On the other hand, after a certain period of time, the person's happiness returns to an original reference point. This is called the "set point theory" (Headey, 2008). As the first attempt to grasp the reference point quantitatively, a measurement based on "ideal happiness" was developed as a projection of happiness in Takahashi (2018a). However, it has a limitation because data was taken only from qualitative surveys with small sample sizes (46-204).[2] They were useful to identify the meaning of ideal happiness because open-ended questions allow us to acquire a lot of information about what respondents think with text mining. Therefore, we need more evidence with large-sample surveys. In this article, using five data sets from four countries, I re-examined what the most important criterion to evaluate happiness is and how ideal happiness affects present happiness.

1.2　Literature review on this issue

1.2.1　Comparison with what

Happiness is not only subjective but it is also relative because there is no absolute value. Therefore, when a person evaluates her life, she needs criteria to compare with her life. From previous research in happiness studies, there could be three types of comparisons: social, temporal, and ideal comparison.

1.2.2　Social, temporal, and ideal comparison

From the 1970s, happiness studies examined if happiness is relative (Brickman et al., 1978). Relative income theory is one important comparison in happiness studies. It is said that the value of relative income compared with other people rather than absolute income affects happiness (Clark et al., 2008). Therefore, when a person rates her happiness, she could compare her happiness with other's happiness. On the other hand, it is not clear about who is the "other". The other may be friends, colleagues, neighbors, another area in the country like a big city, or people in another country.

In addition to social comparison, temporal comparison plays an important role when people evaluate their lives. Röcke & Lachman (2008) described this as a sentence that "subjective perceptions… may serve motivational purposes by providing information on personal improvement from the past or setting goals for the future" (p.2). Although the future holds some uncertainty, past experience and future expectation could affect a person's present happiness.

In happiness studies, OECD (2013) proposed "meaning and purpose of life" based on Aristotle's eudemonic happiness. On the other hand, Takahashi (2018a) discussed "ideal happiness" based on Plato's theory of "Ideas." He showed that it could be used as a deflator of happiness like a GDP deflator for international comparison and time series to measure *real* happiness. The Greek philosopher Plato emphasized that the physical world is not as perfect as an "idea," and that non-physical forms are the most accurate reality. The concept is called the theory of "Ideas." "Idea" is the origin of the word *ideal*. In other words, "ideal" happiness, which is a projection of present happiness, becomes important when a person evaluates her happiness. For example, if a person who rates "ideal happiness" as 8 out of 10 and rates present self-happiness as 6, because her present happiness level is lower than ideal happiness, that person is less happy than someone who answers that present self-happiness is 10. On the other

hand, it can be interpreted that a person who thinks that ideal happiness is level 6 does not evaluate her life as miserable even when present self-happiness level is 6. Therefore, it shows that the gap between ideal happiness and present happiness is important in evaluating real happiness. In fact, if present happiness was adjusted by taking account of the individual gap between present and ideal happiness, the distribution of happiness in Japan was almost identical to that in the happiest countries like Denmark (Takahashi, 2018b).

1.2.3   Criteria for Happiness Evaluation

Taking account of previous findings, social comparison (others), temporal comparison (past and future), and ideal comparison (ideal) could be used as people's criteria for happiness evaluation. The Cabinet Office of Japan (2010) tested which of the three kinds of comparisons was the most commonly used. It shows that 64.0% of respondents to the survey said that they compared their happiness with ideal happiness. Following that, 55.7%, 30.2% and 26.8% said that they compared it with the future, the past and other people, respectively.[3] From this finding, we need more evidence from surveys in other countries.

2.   Methods

2.1   Data

In this article, I used five data sets from four countries. The details are shown in Table 1. Two surveys were conducted in Japan. The other surveys were conducted in the Netherlands, Philippines, and Thailand, respectively. The surveys were conducted by different organizations and in different years. The earliest one is the National Survey of Lifestyle Preference (NSLP). It was conducted under the project of National Well-being Indicators by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2010. The Survey for the Happiness Project of Thai people and the Survey for the Project Happiness (the Philippines) were conducted by JICA Research Institute in 2013. The Longitudinal Happiness Survey of Japanese Youth and the Survey for Quality-of-Life in the Netherlands were conducted online by Nakasone Peace Institute in 2019. They were all relatively large-sample size surveys with the number of subjects ranging from 586 to 7,039.

2.2   Measurements

All five surveys contained questions about present happiness and what criteria people use when they rate their present happiness. The question was phrased, "(t)aking all things together, how happy would you say you are? Please mark 10 if you are extremely happy and 0 if you are extremely unhappy." The subjects could choose up to two options out of six as multiple answers: "compared with ideal conditions of happiness," "compared with the future," "compared with your past," "compared with others around you," "compared with other areas in the country," and "compared with people in foreign countries."

In addition, the Longitudinal Happiness Survey of Japanese Youth and the Survey for the Quality of Life in the Netherlands 2019 included questions about ideal happiness and the reasons that the subject

Table1. Data set

	Japan (NSLP)	Japan (youth)	Netherlands	Thailand	Philippines
Name	National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences	Longtudinal Happiness Survey of Japanese Youth	Survey for the quality of life in the Netherlands 2019	Survey for the happiness project of Thai people	Survey for the Project Happiness (Filipino)
Organization	Cabinet Office of Japan	Nakasone Peace Institute	Nakasone Peace Institute	JICA Research Institute	JICA Research Institute
Year	2010	2019	2019	2013	2013
Mode	Self fill-in	Online	Online	Telephone	Face-to-Face
Sampling	Random Sampling	Population-based allocation	Population-based allocation	Population-based allocation	Random Sampling
Age	15–80 years old	15–49 years old	15–48 years old	18–70 years old	18–65 years old
Subjects	2900	7039	586	1004	1000
Male	1402	3815	290	504	500
Female	1498	3215	295	500	500
Other	—	9	1	—	—

uses to rate ideal happiness. The question about ideal happiness was phrased, "this is a question about ideal happiness. Do you believe that all persons should be happy? If so, to what extent should we be happy? If you chose 0, it would mean that your ideal happiness condition is "only when we feel unhappy," a score of 5 would mean that your ideal happiness is "the situation in which happiness is 50% and unhappiness is 50%," and a score of 10 would mean that your ideal happiness is "a state in which we feel only happiness." Please rate your happiness level on a 0–10 scale." The question was developed after a pilot test in India. The options for the question about the reasons why they rated ideal happiness included the following: "We should feel only happy because we get this life," "It's very difficult for us to feel only happiness in our life," "We need unhappy moments sometimes to understand the real meaning of happiness," and "Another reason (response to the open-ended question)." These options were developed from the findings in Takahashi (2018a).

The National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences (NSLP) asked the same questions from 2010 to 2012. However, the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 affected answers about people's happiness during the surveys in 2011 and 2012. Therefore, I used the NSLP in 2010 in this article.

2.3 Hypothesis

Referring to previous works, a research question on this issue should inquire about which is the most important criterion to evaluate happiness—social comparison, temporal comparison, or ideal comparison. Another research question is how ideal happiness affects present happiness, if ideal comparison is the most important criterion.

I examined two hypotheses to answer the research questions.

First, responding to the first research question, I set the following hypothesis (H1) because the Cabinet Office of Japan (2010) found that the most people said that the ideal condition was the most

important criterion to evaluate their happiness. A chi-squared test will be used to look at statistical difference.

H 1: Most people evaluate happiness by comparing with their ideal conditions of happiness.

Second, Takahashi (2018a) showed that two typical opinions, "it is not possible to have life only with happiness" and "unhappiness is meaningful for life" were the most popular reasons when the subjects considered ideal happiness in the semi-structural surveys in Japan, Philippines, and Netherlands. Those persons rated ideal happiness from 5 to 9. In addition, Takahashi (2018a) showed that an opinion, "we should be happy in all our life," was the most popular in Costa Rica. Those persons rated ideal happiness at 10. Thus, people in Asian countries chose a lower ideal happiness level because they believed that it was not realistic to be always happy in their life or that unhappiness was meaningful for their true happiness. It looks like it is related to lower present happiness. Takahashi (2018b) also found that many Japanese evaluated unhappiness positively and then chose the mid-point as their ideal happiness. Therefore, I set the following hypothesis (H2).

H2: Lower ideal happiness leads to lower present happiness at a country level.

The hypothetical model for H2 is illustrated in Figure 1. I used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesis because I need to show the path between ideal happiness and present happiness after controlling for important factors. From enormous evidence from previous happiness studies, present happiness could be correlated with age, gender, economic condition, health, and marital status. The correlation coefficient of age on present happiness would be positive for the Netherlands and negative for Japan.[4] The correlation coefficients of gender (female), economic condition (income or wealthiness) and health (good health) would be positive. Those of marital status (single, divorced, and widowed) would be negative. On the other hand, ideal happiness could be negatively correlated with
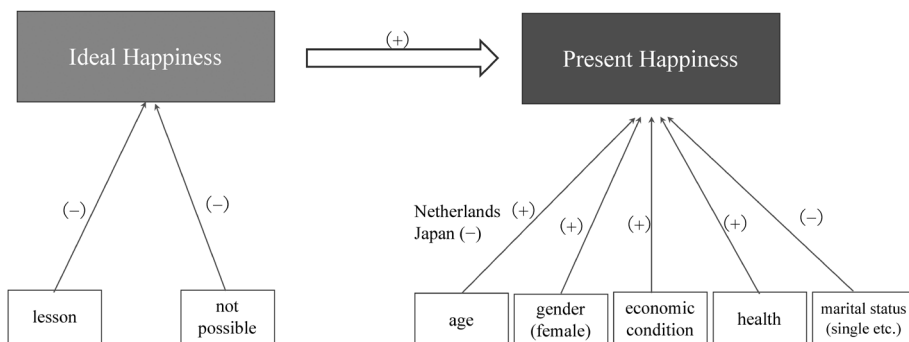

Figure 1. Model for H2

opinions that "it is not possible to have life only with happiness" and "unhappiness is meaningful for life." Last, ideal happiness could be positively correlated with present happiness. This means that higher ideal happiness leads to higher present happiness and lower ideal happiness leads to lower present happiness. Data analysis was done by R version 3.5.1.

3.　Empirical Results

3.1　Criteria for Happiness Evaluation

Table 2 shows how people stated their criteria when they rated present happiness. Most subjects gave "compared with ideal" as the most important criterion except for Filipinos who named "compared with the future" as the most and "compared with ideal" as the second most important criterion. The second most important criteria were different country by country. Japanese and the Dutch respondents chose "compared with the future." The Thai respondents said it was "compared with others." A chi-squared test confirmed the differences between the most and the second most important criterion at a statistically significant level in each country (Japan (NSLP): $\chi^2=41.246$, p<0.001; Japan (youth): $\chi^2=1126.7$, p<0.001; The Netherlands: $\chi^2=17.352$, p<0.001; Philippines: $\chi^2=23.236$, p<0.001; Thailand: $\chi^2=13.024$, p<0.001).

As shown in Table 1, the demographics of the subjects in the surveys were quite different. For example, subjects were aged from 15 to 48 or 49 years in the survey in the Netherlands and in Japan, respectively. Such demographic differences may affect the above the results if age affects the choice. Figure 1 shows how people state their criteria by age. In Japan, all age groups gave "compared with ideal" as the most important and "compared with the future" as the second most important criterion. However, the older the respondents, the more they chose "compared with the past" or "compared with others around you" (see Figure 2(1) and (2)). In the Netherlands, all age groups gave "compared with ideal" as the most important criterion, similar to Japan. However, they gave "compared with your past" as the second most important. In addition, the older the respondents, the more they chose "compared with others around you" (see Figure 2(3)). In Thailand, all age groups except the 60s, 70s, and over gave "compared with ideal" as the most important and "compared with others around you" as the second most important criterion, similar to the Netherlands. However, respondents in their 60s chose

Table 2.　Criteria for Happiness Evaluation (4 countries)

	Japan (NSLP)	Japan (youth)	Netherlands	Philippines	Thailand
ideal	63.8 ***	57.7***	60.8***	42.9	69.0***
future	55.4	42.8	31.9	53.5***	13.3
past	30.1	29.6	48.5	30.5	47.9
others around you		19.5	35.5	30.2	61.2
other areas in the country	26.7	2.5	4.9	19.7	4.7
others in foreign countries		3.5	18.4	14.5	3.8

Note: 1. Calculated by the author from the data sets in Table 1.
　　　2. *** shows p<.001

(1) Japan (NSLP)

(2) Japan (Youth)

(3) The Netherlands

(4) Thailand
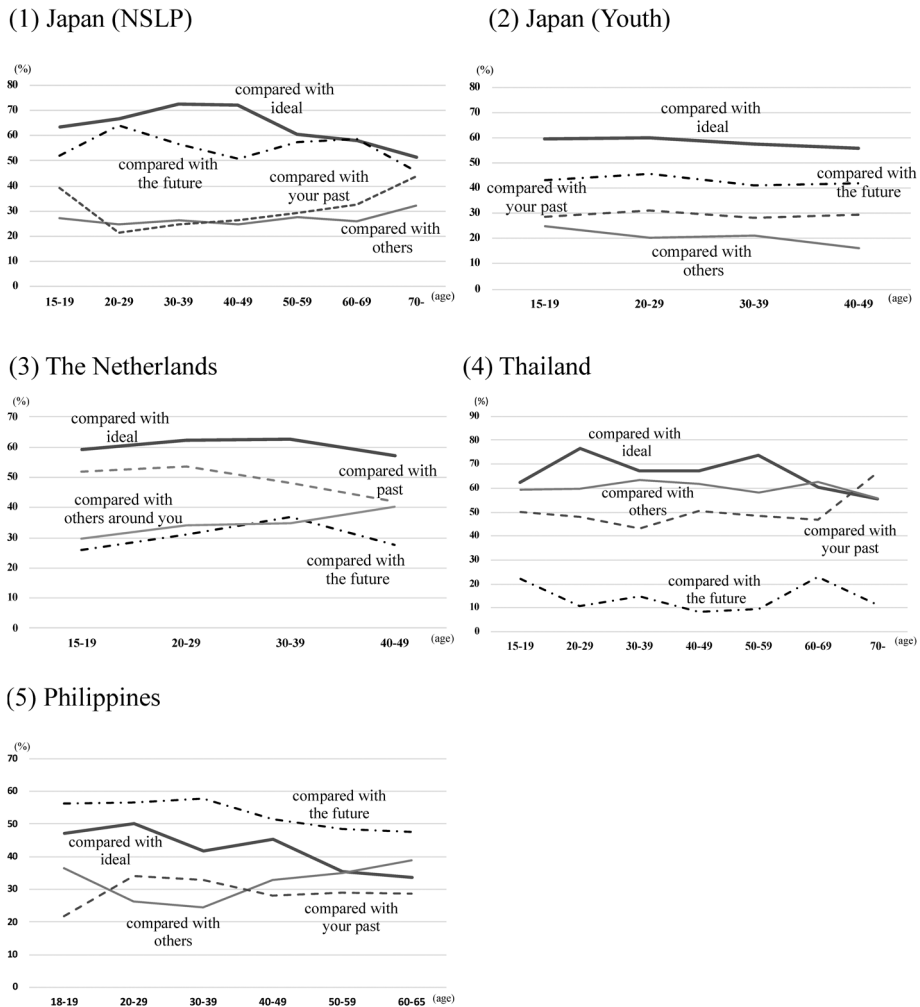

(5) Philippines

Figure 2.   Criteria for happiness evaluation by age

Note: Calculated by the author from the data sets in Table 1.

"compared with others around you" as the most important. In addition, respondents in their 70s and over stated "compared with your past" as the most important criterion (see Figure 2(4)). In the Philippines, all age groups gave "compared with the future" as the most important criterion. Then, all age groups except those in their 60s stated "compared with ideal" as the second most important. Those in their 60s mentioned "compared with others" as the second most important criterion (see Figure 2(5)). This result is quite different because, in the other three countries, the older the respondents, the more they chose "compared with others around you."

In summary, citizens considered "compared with the ideal" as the most important criterion except for respondents in the Philippines. We also need to note that age changes the order selected as important. The older the respondents, the more they chose "compared with your past" or "compared

with others around you" and the fewer people chose "compared with ideal" in most of the countries.

3.2   The effect of ideal happiness on present happiness

Testing H2, SEM was conducted in two countries, Japan and the Netherlands. The summary of the results are shown in Figure 2. Model fitness is good enough because χ^2 is statistically significant, GFI was higher than 0.9, and RMSEA was lower than 0.1 for both countries. Only CFI was not above 0.9 but close to it (0.870 and 0.835 for Japan and the Netherlands, respectively). When I look at the details of the results (see right-hand side of Figure 3), similar to most happiness studies, happiness was correlated with age, economic hardship (cf. no＝0), long-term illness (cf. no＝0), and marital status (cf. married＝0). The only difference between Japan and the Netherlands was the sign of correlation coefficient of age, positive for the Netherlands and negative for Japan. This is consistent with previous studies.

In addition, ideal happiness correlated negatively with "it is not possible to have life only with happiness" and "unhappiness is meaningful for life" (see left-hand side of Figure 3). Moreover, ideal happiness related with happiness positively at a statistically significant level. Therefore, H2 is confirmed because lower ideal happiness led to lower present happiness.

4.   Discussion

In this article, I re-examined what the most important criterion to evaluate happiness was and how ideal happiness affects present happiness. Easterlin (2001) said that "(i)n the pre-adult years social comparison over a wide socio-economic spectrum plays a relatively large part than personal different educational background in shaping aspiration. In the adult years, as individuals with different educational backgrounds embark on relatively segregated socio-economic tracks, past personal experience becomes more important" (p. 480). However, the results in this paper are quite different from that finding. Most people, in particular younger and middle-aged populations, rated present happiness by comparing with ideal conditions of happiness. Moreover, many of them believed that it was very difficult to feel only happiness over the course of the whole life or that we needed unhappy moments sometimes to understand the true meaning of happiness. From the structural equation model (SEM), the opinions led to lower ideal happiness. The respondents tended to choose lower happiness. Therefore, the evidence made clear that even after for controlling for age, gender, economic conditions, health, and marital status, the more citizens that believe that it is difficult to achieve only happiness in their lives or that unhappiness is meaningful for their lives, the lower average happiness in that country is. This means that culture and values affect average happiness at the country level. Politicians and policy-makers should look at not only present happiness but also ideal happiness when they develop economic and social policies and evaluate their outcomes.
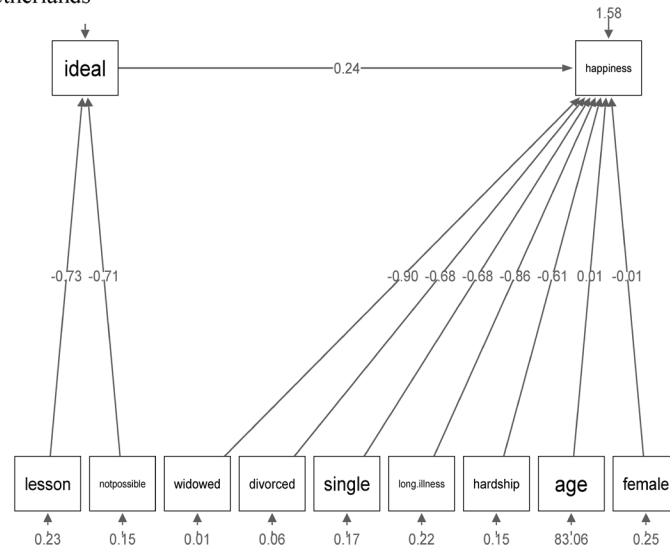
Along with the above findings, there are several limitations. The number of countries covered by this article is only four: three in Asia and one in Europe. It is not clear that the results would be consistent with those in other continents like North or South America or Africa. We need to continue research in this field.
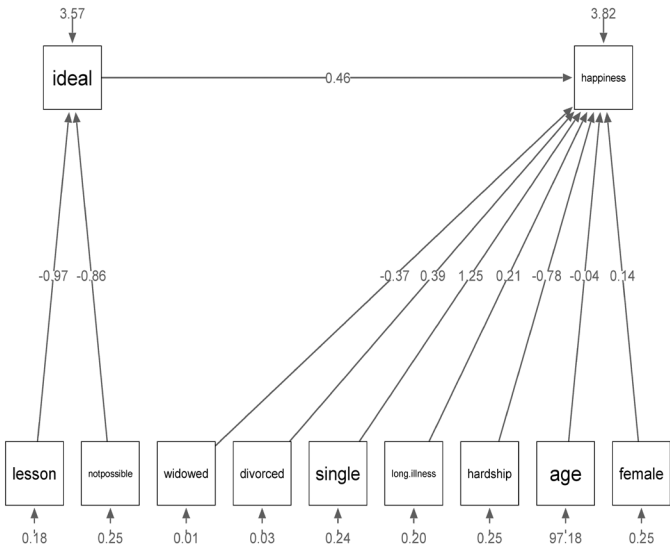
(1) Japan

(2) The Netherlands

	chisq	aic	gfi	agfi	cfi	rmsea	srmr
Japan	418.6	58360.8	0.946	0.602	0.870	0.080	0.030
Netherlands	47.6	3832.2	0.929	0.478	0.835	0.086	0.036

Figure 3. SEM result

Note: Analyzed by the author from the data sets in Table 1.

Notes

[1] For instance, Bhutan has the Gross National Happiness (GNH) to check people's happiness when the government develops policies.

[2] See pp. 122–125 in Takahashi (2018a) about information of the qualitative surveys in Japan, Philippines, Costa Rica and the Netherlands.

[3] The NSLP didn't distinguish others because it didn't have the three options about others, "compared with others around you," "compared with other areas in a country," "compared with people in foreign countries."

[4] Cabinet Office (2008) showed that Japanese happiness did not follow the U-shape of happiness on age, which is common in the developed countries. The U-shape of happiness on age means that youth and elderly are happier than middle-aged population. In Japan, elders were less happy than other age groups.

Acknowledgments

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