A feeling of self sufficiency and happiness among Thai people*

by

Rossarin Gray and Rungthong Kramanon

Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University
Salaya, Phutthamonthon, Nakhon Pathom 73170 Thailand
Tel 0-2441-0201 ext. 243, Fax 0-2441-9333, E-mail: prrgr@mahidol.ac.th

*This study was supported by the Royal Thai Government and Mahidol University.

Paper written for the international conference on "**Happiness and Public Policy**" organized by the Public Policy Development Office (PPDO), the Government House, Bangkok and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), on 18-19 July 2007 at the United Convention Center (UNCC) in Bangkok, Thailand.

Abstract

This study examines the level of happiness of the Thai population and its relationship to various external and internal factors. Using data from Chainat and Kanchanaburi provinces, it is found that despite their different geography, the findings are similar. According to multiple regression analyses, external factors including higher education, higher income, lower debt burden, better quality of neighborhood, better health status increase level of happiness significantly. The strongest predictor of happiness is, however, the internal factor – that is a feeling of relative poverty to their neighbors. Controlling for income, other demographic and socioeconomic factors, the respondents who do not feel poor show the highest level of happiness compared to those who feel as poor as or poorer than their neighbors. This is self-interpreted as a feeling of self-sufficiency which is likely to be influenced by Buddhism, the religion of most Thai. The idea of being appreciated with what one has leading to happiness exits not only in Thailand but also in the West.

Introduction

The fact that happiness consists of a mixture of harmonious internal and external factors in the first place was introduced by Aristotle, an ancient famous Greek philosopher (Aristotle, 1999). According to him, the internal factor is an equally harmonious mixture of reason, strong desire and emotion. Similarly, in the contemporary world, the ability to control one's mood or spirit, particularly on social comparison, as a predictor of happiness is argued by an economist (Layard 2005).

For external factors, one of the relationships most studied has been the one relating to income and happiness. In rich countries, it has been found that differences in wealth within nations show only small positive correlation with happiness (Ahuvia 2002). Rather, happiness tends to lie in the quality of friendship and of family life once people rise above the poverty level (Lane 2000). In poorer countries, the results are mixed—that is people do not always have higher levels of happiness as income and objective conditions increase (Moller 2005; Janakarajan and Seabright 1999). Thus, it seems that other factors may override income in its importance to reach happiness such as social factors, other economic factors, physical health and physical environment in which the individual is living (Gough & Doyal 1991). However, most current research in this field is focused on external factors, not internal factors.

Thailand presents an interesting setting in which to examine the effect of external and internal factors on happiness. The predominance of Thevarada Buddhism is considered an important aspect of the Thai setting since it influences Thai people's attitudes, thoughts, and way of life. (Knodel et al 1987). Inspired by Buddhism, Thai lay people tend to subscribe to

the Buddhist notion of seeking a path of moderation between two extremes, feeling satisfied with what they have and not feeling that resources are never sufficient to meet increasing desires. However, globalization and capitalism may have influenced this phenomenon of increasing desires. The situation in Thailand, thus, provides a good opportunity to study the importance of both external and internal factors on the level of happiness among the Thai population.

There are two research questions of this study. First, what are the level of happiness among Thai people?. The second question is "What are external and internal factors affecting happiness?".

Determinants of happiness

Happiness is a subjective measurement of well-being (SWB). The effect of age on happiness is found to be inconsistent. Some studies found a positive relationship while other studies found a negative relationship. However, it is clear that the young and the old seem to be happier than the middle aged, controlling for health and other factors (Frey & Stutzer 2002). Regarding marital status, several studies found that married people, on average, are happier than unmarried people (Coombs 1991; Diener et al. 1999; Waite & Gallagher 2000). The impact of gender has also been studied. It has been found that women seem to be happier than men, but the difference is not substantial (Frey & Stutzer 2002). Education and happiness appear to be unrelated (Frey & Stutzer 2002). However, it has been argued that the influence of education on happiness depends on the operational definition of education (Michalos 2007). If education is operated as not only formal education (with certificates) but

lifelong learning for the whole lifespan of individuals, education will have an enormous impact.

Physical health, social environments, physical and economic security, are also proposed as determinants of happiness (Gough & Doyal 1991). Neighborhood quality is found to be a powerful factor determining happiness in previous studies (Borooah, 2006; Chan and Lee 2006). However, it has been found that an increase in income is not necessary lead to a higher level of happiness (Janakarajan and Seabright 1999; Moller 2005). This is likely to be due to other predictors of happiness. One of them may be the ability to control one's mood or spirit as argued by Layard (2005). For instance, social comparison, particularly with regard to relative income, makes it more difficult to control one's mood. Thus, those who dwell on the fact that they are poorer than the others and lose control of their moods are likely to fall into deep depression. However, this kind of internal factor has not yet been tested as a predictor of happiness studies.

Material and methods

Our study is based on a research project of Mahidol University using a community participatory approach for poverty eradication in Thailand. One of the objectives of this project was to develop indicators of the population's well-being. To serve this purpose, a survey was carried out using face-to-face interviews in Chainat and Kanchanaburi provinces in August 2005. This survey employed stratified two-stage sampling designed, and it is a provincially representative survey. There were 1,440 sample households in each province included for the interview Population aged 20 years and older were selected for this study

since age twenty is the start legal age for loan, which is one of our independent variables. The sample sizes were 2, 519 persons for Chainat and 2, 841 for Kanchanaburi.

Setting

Chainat and Kanchanaburi are provinces located about almost 200 kilometers north and northwestern part of Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand respectively. According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census, there were about 400,000 people residing in Chainat, and 640,000 people living in Kanchanaburi (National Statistical Office 2002). Almost all in both provinces were Buddhists. Gross Provincial Product (GPP) per capita in 2005 was 61, 109 Baht in Chainat and 64,906 Baht in Kanchanaburi. In 2007, 1 \$US is approximately equal to 35 Baht.

Key measures and findings of background characteristics

The measure of happiness

The variable indicating the level of happiness in this study refers to self-report of their feeling at the time of the survey. The assessment was given as a response to the question, "At present, how are you feeling?" We do not insert the term "satisfied" or "happy" in order to avoid bias in the question and to allow for less constrained responses since people may feel both happy and unhappy at the same time. More happiness means less unhappiness. The respondents were asked to use an eleven-point scale (0-10) to rate their feeling, with 0 being "unhappiest," 5 being "not unhappy and not happy," and 10 being "happiest."

It can be seen from table one that mean happiness in both provinces are almost the same: 5.8 for Chainat and 5.7 for Kanchanaburi. The patterns of mean happiness according to respondents' characteristics are also similar. The mean happiness in Chainat range from 4.8 for those who feel that they are poorer than their neighbors to 6.5 for those who have completed upper secondary and above, which is the category of highest completed education in this study. In Kanchanaburi, mean happiness range from 4.6 for those with a big/very big burden debt to 6.4 in the same category as Chainat.

[Table 1 about here]

Economic security

To assess economic security among the population, income and having had any debt over the previous year were used. Regarding the criterion of having had any debt, since having debt does not always mean feeling financial strain, the ability to pay back the debt should also be taken into consideration. In this paper, having debt is classified into four types: 1) having no debt at all, 2) having some debt but feeling no debt-burden, 3) having debt and feeling debt-burdened to some extent, and 4) having debt and feeling seriously debt-burdened.

The findings show that the highest percentage of respondents had no income. Those with no income reported themselves as housewives, students or not working. We hypothesize that income will have positive relationship with level of happiness.

Over 60 percent of people in the two provinces had no debt. About 9 percent reported that they had debt and feeling seriously debt-burdened. We hypothesize that the elderly with

no debt or with debt but no feeling of debt-burden are happier than those characterized by the other two types of economic hardship.

Ownership of household: a basic need of human being

Ownership of household is a basic need of human being. Those who own the houses are likely to feel secure and satisfied with their lives. Over 70 percent of respondents in Chainat and Kanchanaburi reported that there were the owners, and they are likely to be happier than those who did not own the house.

Quality of neighborhood

Neighborhood quality is also employed as one of the predictors of the level of happiness. In our study, neighborhood quality is based on one's assessment of the quality of areas in which one lives. The assessment includes the items on acquaintance with neighbors, contributions to community activities, reliability of neighbors in times of crisis, mutual trust, and feeling of security in terms of life and property. The respondents were asked a number of questions, including 1) how well they knew their neighbors, 2) how much people in the community would contribute to public activities in terms of labor or money 3) how their neighbors would react if they needed help, 4) how much they trusted their neighbors, and 5) how safe they felt in terms of their lives and property.

We allocated marks to 3 response categories in questions one to four ranging from 0 = not satisfied at all, 1 = somewhat satisfied and 2 = very satisfied. However, there were four response categories for question four ranging from very worried (0) to not worried at all (4)

We, then, categorized neighborhood quality as "very good," "good," and "poor." The "very good" category refers to the scores of 9-11 The "good" and "poor" categories refer to the scores of 6-8 and 0-5. It is found that the highest proportion of population in the two provinces lived in areas with very good neighborhood quality. Given the assumption that the quality of areas in which one lives can influence an individual's level of happiness, we hypothesize that the higher the quality of area in which they live the happier they are.

Physical health

A measure of physical health is based on a question whether they were so sick that they were unable to perform their daily activities during last month prior to the survey. About 18 percent of respondents in the two provinces reported "yes", and they were classified into poor health status group. Those who had poor health status are hypothesized to be less happy than those with good health status or who were not sick last month.

Relative poverty to their neighbors and a feeling of self-sufficiency

The selected independent variables noted above are regarded as external factors.

Regarding internal factors, the feeling of self-sufficiency is used. Some people, despite being relatively poor, nonetheless may feel "self-sufficient". This feeling relates to the internal factor of "perceived relative poverty".

Specifically, the respondents were asked whether they felt poor compared to their neighbors. The choices for answers were: "feeling poorer than their neighbors," "feeling just as poor as their neighbor," and "not feeling poor." We hypothesize that those who did not feel poor were more likely to be happier than those who felt poorer or as poor as their

neighbors. About half of the population in Chinat reported that they did not feel poor compare to their neighbors compared to 40 percent in Kanchanaburi, and they are the happiest group in the two provinces as measured by mean happiness. If the answer was "not feeling poor" they would consequently be asked why they felt so. A feeling of self-sufficiency was reported as a reason of not feeling poor by almost all of them.

Data analysis strategy

Multiple regression analyses are employed. The dependent variable is level of happiness, which is continuous. The independent variables include the components of happiness, which are, namely, basic characteristics (age, sex, marital status, completed education), external factors (income, debts, ownership of house, neighborhood environment and physical health), and the internal factor of relative poverty (feeling of self-sufficiency). All independent variables are treated as dummy variables. The exceptions are age and neighborhood environment, which are treated as continuous independent variables.

Results of multiple regression analysis

Tables 2 and 3 display regression models of Chainat and Kanchanaburi respectively. Each table consists of 5 models, all take happiness as the dependent variable. The R² value displayed at the bottom of each model shows the total amount of variance in happiness explained by all the predictors in the model.

Model 1 includes only basic variables on age, sex, marital status and completed education. Model 2 adds the variables representing economic security: income and debt into Model 1. Model 3 adds ownership of house and neighborhood quality. A variable on physical

health is then added into Model 4. The last model (Model 5) includes variable in Models 1 to 4 and a feeling of relative poverty.

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

The results of regression analyses are similar for both provinces. Model 5 which includes all independent variables show that age, sex and marital status do not have significant effect on happiness. Regarding completed education, those who completed upper secondary level are significantly happier than those with lower educational level or no education.

Those who had income last year more than 100, 000 Baht are found to be happier than those who had lower income or no income. Being without debt or with debt but not feeling a big burden is strongly associated with higher happiness than being indebted and feeling that it is a big/very big burden.

Ownership of the house is found to be significantly positively associated with happiness only for Kanchanaburi. Regarding the quality of neighborhood, those living in a better environment are significantly happier than those living in a poorer environment.

Physical health was measured by the severity of sickness last month. As expected, we find that the respondents who were not seriously sick are significantly happier than those who were sick.

Regarding the internal factor relating to relative poverty, the results clearly show that, holding the other factors constant, the internal factor has a significantly positive effect on happiness. For instance, controlling for the same income, the respondents who reported that

they were not poor or as poor as their neighbors are significantly happier than those who reported that they were poorer than their neighbors. A report of "no poverty" has a much stronger positive effect than a report of "similar poverty" or "more poverty."

Note that the last model (Model 5), which includes an internal factor, explains the level of happiness much better than in the previous models. The R² increased significantly from Model 4 to Model 5.

Discussions

This paper answers the two research questions by analyzing surveyed data on well-being indicators in Chainat and Kanchanaburi provinces. The first question concerns the level of happiness of the Thai population. It is found that the average happiness level of the respondents is 5.8 for Chainat and 5.7 for Kanchanaburi, which is close to "being not sad and not happy."

Although it was found that happiness was not part of the national character -that is some cultures would have a gloomy outlook on life whereas others were more optimistic (Veenhoven 1997), we argued that the finding of average happiness of 5.7-5.8 among the Thai population is likely to reflect the modest self- presentation influenced by Buddhist teaching of avoidance of the two extremes of happiness and sadness. It has been found that the general flexibility and tolerance often associated with Thai culture is influenced by Buddhism (Knodel et al 1987; Lauro 1979). In addition, remaining calm and indifferent in some situations such as those that may provoke social condemnation is a prevalent value (Podhisita 1985).

Concerning the second research question, related to factors affecting the level of happiness, several external factors and an internal factor were used to assess the effects. It appears from our regressions models that both external and internal factors have significant effects on happiness.

Regarding external factors, the findings in both provinces are similar, and as expected. Evidence shows that Thai population who have higher education, income of over 100,000 Bath, have no debt or had non-burdensome debt tend to feel happier that those with lower education, lower income, and with burdensome debt respectively. Those who live in the areas with better quality of neighborhood are happier than those living in lower quality of neighborhood.

Interestingly, this study reveals, however, that despite the significant effects of external factors, these external factors are not as important as the internal factor of feeling self-sufficient in the determination of level of happiness. Controlling for the external factors, those who feel that they are not poor or at least not as poor as their neighbors are significantly happier than those who feel poorer than their neighbors. The same survey also shows that over 90 percent of those who reported that they were not poor compared with their neighbors felt so because of a feeling of self-sufficiency or contentment with what they had. In other words, they did not see themselves falling short of things that their neighbors might have.

Generally, it can be claimed that feeling self-sufficient may be influenced by the Buddhist philosophy that the path to happiness lies in training one's mind not to crave things without limit and so to avoid unreasonably torturing oneself. "Feeling satisfied with what one has" is a phrase that the Thais hear throughout their lives. This is confirmed by 6 focus group

discussions of the young, the middle aged and the old of males and females carried out in the two provinces in May 2007. There is a consensus that they have heard it (should be satisfied with what one has) since childhood mostly from parents and teachers. Therefore, it is likely that this notion has pervaded Thai culture. In other words, although they may be poor by any standards, they are likely to adjust to and be satisfied with what they have. Consequently, they are happier.

It should be noted that the definition of self-sufficiency or moderation, however, may not be the same for every Thai. It was argued that in Thailand "where the status of being Buddhists [sic] is passed on automatically at birth, being legally Buddhist and philosophical [sic] Buddhist are not necessarily one and the same" (Rojanaphruk 2005).

Interestingly, a similar philosophy exists in other parts of the world. R. Layard, an economist, argues that people's happiness depends on their "inner selves" or personal values and philosophies of life. "People are happier if they are appreciate what they have, whatever it is; if they do not compare themselves with others" (2005: 72).

Although external factors should not be ignored, our finding highlights the need for paying special attention to a feeling self-sufficiency among Thai population. Those who feel that they never have enough will never be able to quit striving and struggling. They will never find real happiness. A feeling of self-sufficiency can help increase happiness, particularly among the poor living in a country where there is great inequality in economic status among the people.

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