

The determinants of happiness among Thai people: Some evidence from Chai Nat and Kanchanaburi*

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Abstract

This study examines the level of happiness of Thai population in Chai Nat and Kanchanaburi provinces and its relationship to various determinants. Economic status perspectives in terms of “objective” (income, debt burden) and “subjective” (a feeling of relative poverty to their neighbors) factors are used as happiness determinants. The paper also examines the effects of non economic factors on happiness including formal education attainment, physical health and perceived quality of the areas in which people live. Having analyzed these effects, it is found that despite their different geography, the findings of two provinces are similar. While the effect of income on happiness is inconclusive, the most important predictor is a feeling of being not poor compared to neighbors which is self interpreted as a feeling of contentment with what one has. The policy of training one’s mind of contentment accompanying with working hard through fair and righteous means, which is a Buddhist teaching of Blessings of Life, should lead to real well-being and peace not only for Thailand but also other countries if adopted.

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Key words: Happiness; income; relative poverty; contentment

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Introduction

One of the determinants of happiness most studied has been the one relating to an objective measurement of economic status –i.e. income. In rich countries, it has been found that differences in wealth within nations show only small positive correlation with happiness (Ahuvia & Wong 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 including social factors, physical health, physical environment in which the individual is living and other economic factors (Gough & Doyal 1991) such as the degree of satisfaction with one's standard of living which is a subjective measurement of economic status (Borooah 2006). Another subjective economic factor is social comparison with regard to relative income, which makes it more difficult to control one's mood (Layard 2005). Those who compare themselves to the other members of society whose standard of living they aspire to are likely to fall into unhappiness. The relative poverty is likely to be more important in countries where there is great inequality of economic status among people. Regarding economic factors, most studies apply only the objective measurement of economic status in determining happiness.

Thailand is an interesting setting in which to examine the effect of objective and subjective economic factors on happiness. The successful economic growth of the country has undoubtedly

brought about several advancements that benefit Thai population. Nevertheless, it has also been observed that unequal distribution of wealth is apparent and poverty incidence remains an important problem in the country despite the overall decline in the proportion of the population below the poverty line (Deolalikar, 2002).

There are two research questions of this study. First, what is the level of happiness among Thai people?. The second question is “ What are the determinants of happiness?”. We use both objective and subjective measurements of economic status and several demographic, social and health factors to explore their relationship to level of 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). A study by Gray et al (2008) on happiness among Thai elderly reveals that a feeling of relative poverty compared to neighbors is the most important predictor of happiness. Older persons who feel that they are not poor, which is self-interpreted as a feeling of contentment with what one has, are happiest. On the other hand, a path to happiness among them lies in training their minds not to crave things without limit.

Material and methods

We use the data from the survey of well-being indicators which is under a research project of Mahidol University on poverty eradication in Thailand. The 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 Chai Nat 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 with an eleven-point scale (0-10). The exact question of the survey reads as follows: “At present, how are you feeling?” Please answer according to the following scales: 0 means being “unhappiest,” 5 means being “not unhappy and not happy,” and 10 means 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: Percent distribution of independent variables, mean happiness and standard deviation of population aged 20 and over, Chai Nat and Kanchanaburi

Characteristics	Chai Nat				Kanchanaburi			
	%	Mean	Standard deviation	N	%	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Age								
20-34	15.5	6.2	1.725	391	27.3	6.0	1.654	768
35-49	31.6	5.7	1.834	797	35.2	5.6	1.715	992
50-64	30.9	5.7	1.963	779	25.3	5.6	1.925	712
65+	22.0	5.6	2.016	553	13.1	5.7	2.091	369
Sex								
female	60.0	5.7	1.938	1,511	57.3	5.7	1.844	1,629
male	40.0	5.9	1.848	1,009	42.7	5.8	1.773	1,212
Marital Status								
Single	7.6	5.9	1.871	191	9.1	6.2	1.733	258
Married	73.7	5.8	1.884	1,856	77.9	5.7	1.739	2,213
Widowed, divorced, separated	18.7	5.5	1.986	472	13.0	5.6	2.229	370
Completed education								
No education	7.4	5.2	2.071	187	11.0	5.3	2.055	314
Lower secondary and below	79.7	5.7	1.908	2,007	71.6	5.7	1.779	2,033
Upper secondary and above	12.9	6.5	1.571	325	17.4	6.4	1.639	494
Income (Baht)								
None	44.1	5.7	1.977	1,110	36.9	5.8	1.882	1,049
20,000 and below	10.9	5.3	1.978	275	10.3	5.0	1.909	292
20,001-50,000	17.6	5.7	1.747	442	24.0	5.6	1.724	681
50,001-100,000	12.7	5.8	1.842	321	16.0	5.9	1.734	453
100,000 and above	14.7	6.4	1.740	371	12.9	6.2	1.603	366
Debt								
Yes, a big, very big burden	9.1	5.0	2.116	230	9.1	4.6	1.983	259
Yes, a burden to some extent	16.4	5.6	1.650	414	16.7	5.6	1.589	476
Yes, but not a burden at all	13.7	6.1	1.668	345	10.8	6.1	1.612	307
No	60.7	5.8	1.960	1,529	63.2	5.9	1.819	1,797
Ownership of the house								
Yes	76.1	5.8	1.893	1,918	72.3	5.8	1.821	2,055
No	23.9	5.6	1.940	601	27.7	5.5	1.773	786
Perceived neighborhood quality								
Poor	6.1	4.9	2.144	155	7.8	5.6	1.883	222
Good	28.3	5.5	1.861	714	33.6	5.6	1.850	953
Very good	65.5	6.0	1.867	1,651	58.6	5.9	1.776	1,665
Serious sickness last month								
Yes	18.8	5.9	1.861	474	18.5	5.8	1.755	526
No	81.2	5.8	1.907	2,045	81.5	5.7	1.815	2,315
Feeling of relative poverty								
Poorer than neighbor	23.6	4.8	1.974	594	18.0	4.9	1.980	512
As poor as neighbor	26.6	5.5	1.690	669	41.4	5.6	1.719	1,175
Not poor	49.9	6.4	1.756	1,257	40.6	6.3	1.633	1,154
Total	100.0	5.8	1.907	2,519	100.0	5.7	1.815	2,841

Objective economic factors: income and debt

To assess objective economic factors 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.

Social security: ownership of household

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 they were the owners, and they are likely to be happier than those who did not own the house.

Social security: perceived 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 the perception of 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.

Subjective economic factor: relative poverty to their neighbors

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

Chai Nat reported that they did not feel poor compared 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 contentment with what one has was reported as a reason of not feeling poor by almost all of them (over 90 percent in both provinces).

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), objective economic, social and health factors (income, debts, ownership of house, perceived neighborhood environment and physical health), and the internal factor of relative poverty (feeling of contentment). All independent variables are treated as dummy variables. The exceptions are age and perceived neighborhood environment, which are treated as continuous independent variables.

Results of multiple regression analysis

Tables 2 and 3 display regression models of Chai Nat and Kanchanaburi respectively. Each table consists of 5 models, all take happiness as the dependent variable. The R^2 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 objective economic factors: income and debt into Model 1. Model 3 adds social security variables: 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.

Table 2: Regression on Happiness on selected predictors of population aged 20 and over, Chainat (N=2519)

Characteristics	Model 1		Model2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Constant	5.237	***	4.423	***	2.991	***	2.780	***	2.632	***
Age	-0.003		-0.002		-0.004		-0.003		-0.002	
Sex (Ref: female)										
Male	0.176	**	0.091		0.045		0.030		0.072	
Marital status (Ref: single)										
Married	0.208		0.224		0.227		0.211		0.200	
Widowed/divorced/separated	0.045		0.083		0.096		0.106		0.215	
Completed education (Ref: none)										
Lower secondary level and below	0.346	**	0.384	**	0.358	**	0.332	**	0.173	
Upper secondary level and above	1.158	***	1.044	***	1.017	***	0.977	***	0.616	***
Income (Baht) (Ref: none)										
20,000 Baht and below			-0.195		-0.182		-0.191		0.026	
20,001-50,000			0.047		0.039		0.028		0.071	
50,001-100,000			0.007		0.019		0.004		-0.048	
More than 100,000			0.522	***	0.513	***	0.488	***	0.301	**
Debt (Ref: yes, a big/very big burden)										
Yes, a burden to some extent			0.545	***	0.525	***	0.509	***	0.326	**
Yes, but not a burden at all			0.835	***	0.764	***	0.744	***	0.396	**
None			0.861	***	0.888	***	0.877	***	0.623	***
Ownership of house										
(Ref: no)										
Yes					0.169	*	0.164	*	-0.005	
Perceived neighborhood quality					0.159	***	0.157	***	0.138	***
Serious sickness last month										
(Ref: yes)										
No							0.300	**	0.257	**
Feeling of relative poverty										
(Ref: Poorer than neighbor)										
As poor as neighbor									0.639	***
Not poor									1.326	***
Adjusted R ²	0.03		0.055		0.085		0.088		0.156	

*** = p ≤ 0.001; ** = p ≤ 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.1;

Table 3: Regression on Happiness on selected predictors of population aged 20 and over, Kanchanaburi (N=2841)

Characteristics	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model5	
Constant	5.530	***	4.539	***	3.735	***	3.467	***	3.305	***
Age	0.000		0.001		-0.002		-0.001		-0.001	
Sex (Ref: female)										
Male	0.084		0.073		0.046		0.026		0.043	
Marital status (Ref: single)										
Married	-0.284	**	-0.219	*	-0.156		-0.186		-0.171	
Widowed/divorced/separated	-0.340	**	-0.273	*	-0.199		-0.218		-0.139	
Completed education (Ref: none)										
Lower secondary level and below	0.349	**	0.348	**	0.301	**	0.285	**	0.142	
Upper secondary level and above	1.021	***	0.835	***	0.826	***	0.796	***	0.481	***
Income (Baht) (Ref: none)										
20,000 Baht and below			-0.620	***	-0.575	***	-0.560	***	-0.406	***
20,001-50,000			-0.189	**	-0.182	**	-0.180	**	-0.122	
50,001-100,000			0.078		0.101		0.094		0.054	
More than 100,000			0.262	**	0.311	**	0.294	**	0.149	
Debt (Ref: yes, a big/very big burden)										
Yes, a burden to some extent			0.892	***	0.863	***	0.848	***	0.722	***
Yes, but not a burden at all			1.220	***	1.163	***	1.147	***	0.908	***
None			1.177	***	1.201	***	1.185	***	1.013	***
Ownership of house										
(Ref: no)										
Yes					0.328	***	0.320	***	0.235	**
Perceived neighborhood quality					0.076	***	0.072	***	0.064	***
Sickness last month										
(Ref: yes)										
No							0.386	***	0.336	***
Feeling of relative poverty										
(Ref: Poorer than neighbor)										
As poor as neighbor									0.489	***
Not poor									1.019	***
Adjusted R ²	0.031		0.081		0.096		0.102		0.137	

*** = $p \leq 0.001$; ** = $p \leq 0.05$; * = $p \leq 0.1$;

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 in Chai Nat. However, in Kanchanaburi, it is found that those who had income of 2,000 Baht and below are less happy than those with no income. These findings may be due to an issue generally found concerning income data quality. 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 in Kanchanaburi not in Chai Nat. Regarding the perceived 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 to relative poverty, the results clearly show that, holding the other factors constant, it 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 a subjective economic factor—a feeling of relative poverty, explains the level of happiness much better than in the previous models. The R^2 increased significantly from Model 4 to Model 5. This suggests the most importance of this happiness determinant.

Discussions

The contribution of this paper has been, firstly, to explore the level of happiness of the Thai population by using the eleven point scale (0-10) that applied to many other countries (Veenhoven 1997). 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.” This finding is similar to the level of happiness among the Thai elderly (Gray et al 2008).

Although it was found that happiness was not part of the national character -that is some cultures were more optimistic than the others (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 and the Thai value of remaining calm and indifferent in some situations such as those that may provoke social condemnation (Podhisita 1985). This interpretation is the same as the study of happiness among older persons suggested by Gray et al (2008).

Concerning the second contribution related to factors affecting the level of happiness, the findings in both provinces are similar. Evidence shows that Thai population who have higher education, have no debt or had non-burdensome debt tend to feel happier than those with lower education, and with burdensome debt respectively. Those who perceive that they live in the areas with better quality of neighborhood are happier than those living in lower quality of neighborhood.

Interestingly, this study reveals that for economic factors while the effect of “objective” economic factor of income on happiness is inconclusive, the “ subjective” economic factor –a feeling of relative poverty is the most important factor determining level of happiness. Controlling for the all other 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. As mentioned, comparison economic status with neighbors or friends may lead to deep depression if they have unlimited desires. Statistics from the same survey asking why they do not feel poor shows that over 90 percent of them in both provinces felt so because of a feeling of contentment with what they have. To find out more detail concerning this issue, we carried out 6 focus group discussions of the young, the middle aged and the old of males and females in the two provinces in May 2007. There is a consensus that they have been told “should be satisfied with what one has” since childhood mostly from parents and

teachers. A few have reported that they also heard this notion from Buddhist monks. In other words, although they may be poor by any standards, they are likely to adjust to and be satisfied with what they had. Consequently, they are happier. This finding is also the same as the study of older persons by Gray et al (2008). Therefore, it is most likely that this notion has pervaded Thai culture.

The importance of formal education, debt issues, physical health and perceived quality of the area where they live should be highlighted as predictors of happiness. Regarding economic factors, special attention should be paid to the subjective factor –i.e. a feeling of contentment among Thai population. This feeling can help increase happiness, particularly not only among the poor but also the wealthy. The policy of training one's mind to be content with what one has should come together with the notion of working hard through fair and righteous mean which is one of a Buddhist teaching of Blessings of Life. This policy can be adopted in any part of the world. Then, people will find real well-being, peace, and greedy will be disappeared.

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