

# Subjective Happiness in Koreans, by Household-Level and Individual-Level Characteristics

Meegon Kim  
Senior Research Fellow, KIHASA

Various international comparisons indicate that Korea has seen marked improvement in objective quality of life, but not in subjective well-being. Quality-of-life levels vary across different household-level and individual-level characteristics in Korea. The findings suggest the need for policy attention and support to households with elderly members, chronically-ill members, day-to-day workers, unemployed members, unskilled manual workers and non-regular employees.

## 1. Happiness, briefly defined

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sees happiness as the supreme human good. He observed that *eudaimonia*, Greek for happiness, consisted in "living well" (*eu zen*) and "acting well" (*eu prattein*). Human being's specific function, according to Aristotle, is to "perform rational activity according to human excellence," by which he meant the supreme human good or happiness. For Darwin, as what matters most in the life of human species are survival and procreation, as the case is for other mammals, happiness is a physiological state of pleasure that people encounter when they sense an increased chance of survival.

The utilitarian concept of happiness is not entirely different. Jeremy Bentham argued in *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* that happiness "consists of ... enjoyment of pleasures, security from pains"; for John Stuart Mill, it was "intended pleasure, and the absence of pain."

## 2. Happiness: cross-country comparisons

With a growing body of happiness research exploring an increasing number of factors, various measures of happiness have evolved in academic circles. Today, social scientists often use such terms as "well-being," "quality of life," and "flourishing" to depict the objective conditions of happiness, while individuals' self-perceived happiness is measured in terms of "subjective well-being" and "life satisfaction."

### Objective quality of life

Arguably the most representative of objective quality-of-life indices, the Human Development Index (HDI) is composed of life expectancy (life expectancy at birth), education (a combination of "mean years of schooling" and "expected years of schooling") and GNI (measured in terms of PPP in US dollar). The HDI score for Korea was 0.909 in 2012, up from 0.640 in 1980. Given that the average HDP for 47 countries of "very high human development" was 0.773 in 1980 and 0.905 in 2012, the increase Korea achieved in its HDI score during this period suggests a rise in quality of life from below-average to above-average.

Korea did less well in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality of Life Index, which encompasses a broader range of indicators including "material wellbeing," "health," "political

stability," "family relations," "community life," "climate and geography," "job security," "political freedom," "gender equality." In 2012, Korea was ranked 12th among a total of 185 countries on the HDI list, but remained 19th on the EUI list of 80 countries. The implication is for increased policy attention to areas other than life expectancy, education and GNI.

### **Subjective quality of life**

In the World Values Survey, Koreans' happiness level was seen to have increased in the period between 1990 and 1996 as its score declined from 2.14 to 2.00 (1=very happy, 4=not happy at all), but again went down to 2.04 in 2001, although slightly picking up thereafter to 1.99 in 2005.

### **OECD Better Life Index**

In the Better Life Index (which consists of housing, education, employment, community, environment, community participation, health, life satisfaction, security, and work-life balance), Korea received low scores on many of its component indicators, ending up placed 27th among the 36 countries surveyed in 2013.

## **3. Subjective happiness, by individual-level characteristics**

### **Happiness, by socio-demographic characteristics**

A survey conducted in 2014 of 3655 Koreans (from 3655 households) aged between 19 and 75 found that happiness levels were lower for household heads than for non-household heads (6.00 vs. 6.40, out of possible 10). Women's happiness score was 6.34, while men's was 6.06. Also found was that the older the people, the lower their subjective happiness level, which is to say that the age-happiness curve for Koreans takes not a general u-shape, but a linearly declining pattern. This may to some extent have to do with the country's subpar old-age income protection and the elderly poverty and suicide rates that are among the highest in all OECD countries.

Koreans with spouses reported a significantly higher happiness score (6.38) than those without (5.90). Also, the higher the educational attainment, the higher the reported levels of happiness.

Koreans with strong religious faith had significantly higher levels of happiness than the non-religious or those with a weak religious faith. Also, the more positive personality traits, the higher the level of happiness. The statistical significance found in this relationship is such that the correlation is stronger between happiness and personality traits than between happiness and any other factor.

### **Economic status and happiness**

In terms of employment status, those who reported the highest level of happiness were full-time employees, followed in order by employers and the self-employed (and the non-economically active), temporary workers, and the unemployed. In terms of occupational types, the reported happiness level was highest for those in managerial or professional jobs, followed by service workers, skilled technical workers, the non-economically active (and the unemployed), and unskilled manual workers. Regular workers as a whole reported higher happiness levels than their non-regular counterparts. Implied here is the need for social

support for those whose precarious economic positions lead to their low levels of happiness.

#### **4. Subjective Happiness, by household-level characteristics**

##### **Happiness and the presence of vulnerable members in the household**

People from households with disabled, chronically-ill, elderly or unemployed members or credit defaulters reported low happiness levels. The relationship between living with chronically-ill members and low happiness levels, in particular, was statistically significant with a high F-value of 91.47. When it came to life satisfaction scores, it was the presence of elderly members in the household that revealed the highest statistical significance with an F-value of 91.52.

##### **Happiness and household size**

Koreans' reported happiness levels rose as household size increased from one member to four members but to decline as the number of members rose to five or higher. This is in line with the finding that those with spouses or children for that matter, compared to those without, reported higher happiness levels. More often than not, the difference between a 4-member household and a household with more members was one or more additional elderly members in the latter, which to some extent corroborated the finding that happiness levels were lower for those from households with five or more members than those from 4-member households.

By household type, married couples with children (a standard 4-member household) reported highest happiness levels, followed in order by single-person households, single-parent households, and skipped-generation households. Lastly, as predicted, those from homeowner households reported higher happiness scores than those from renter households.

#### **6. Concluding thought**

As discussed, Korea has fared relatively well in the HDI rankings, but not as well in the EIU's Quality of Life Index, which consists of a broader range of indicators. Moreover, in some comprehensive happiness measures, notably in OECD's Better Life Index, Korea has been doing quite poorly, and more poorly in subjective well-being rankings than in objective conditions. Overall, this points to the need to shift the focus of social policy from the previously emphasized areas of life expectancy, education and GNI to improving people's quality of life and their subjective life satisfaction. This would involve increased social support for individuals and groups with relatively low levels of happiness.