

Reconceptualization of Life Satisfaction in Thailand: The Case of Bangkokians after the Flood Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The original model of life satisfaction based on the part-whole relationship perspective has broken life satisfaction down into satisfaction with thirteen domains of life. This study intends to remodel life satisfaction by breaking life satisfaction into three Thai characteristics, eleven domains of life, and two variables of socioeconomic status. Multiple regression was employed in order to determine the relationships of these sixteen constructs as well as the accidental flooding condition and overall life satisfaction. The results suggest that the new model can explain the variance in life satisfaction better. Additionally, consumer well-being in terms of satisfaction with material possessions had a positive impact on life satisfaction after the flood crisis, along with optimism and education. Satisfaction with news and information access turned out to be negatively related to overall life satisfaction. People that found themselves in the recent flood in Thailand were less satisfied with their lives than those that did not experience the flood first-hand.

Keywords: Life satisfaction, Flood crisis, Consumer well-being, Quality of life, Subjective well-being

Introduction

Quality of life issues have been mostly studied in the advanced countries. However, in 1991, the author made an early attempt to study quality of life in Thailand from the subjective indicator perspective as measured by life satisfaction. At that time, life satisfaction (LS) was conceptualized as determined by the thirteen domains of life (DOLs) as a part-whole relationship. The weakness of that conceptualization as shown by comparing the same model of LS between Thais and Americans, was that the variance in the LS of Thais could be explained by satisfaction with the thirteen DOLs and only by half of the variance explained in the case of Americans. In this study, six of these DOLs, including social life, spiritual life, healthcare, life in Thailand, Thai government, and local government were dropped and the seven new DOLs were added: relationship with friends, optimism, giving, gratitude, news and information access, environment, and good governance. The seven previous DOLs which remain in this study are family life, work life, personal health, recreation, self, purchase and consumption of goods, and services and material possessions. At the time of the reconceptualization of this study, Bangkok had been flooded for a few months. Therefore, it was a good opportunity for this research to examine the following objectives in the context of the flood crisis. First, the effects of marketing DOLs, namely, purchase and consumption of goods and services and material possessions, on LS were assessed. Second, the importance of these DOLs as compared to other DOLs was investigated.

Literature Review

Optimism

Optimism is an attempt to find the good in any given situation. Seligman (1991), a well-known positivist psychologist, suggests that an optimist is a person that converts, through his or her thought processes and inner dialog, the negative thoughts that stem from the setbacks that life sometimes deals us with positive thoughts. It should be noted that being optimistic is not just being positive during the good times; it is also being able to maintain positive thoughts about ourselves even during life's setbacks. Thus, it is expected that an individual with the psychological make-up of an optimist, who holds a positive world view, will tend to be satisfied with his or her life even when having to go through a crisis such as a flood.

Gratitude

A few years ago, researchers Robert A. Emmons from the University of California, and Davis and Michael E. McCullough from the University of Miami conducted a study on the dimensions of gratitude. They found that grateful people reported higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, and optimism, and lower levels of depression and stress. The disposition toward gratitude appears to enhance pleasant feeling states more than it diminishes unpleasant emotions. In the Thai setting gratitude, or in Thai, "Bunkhun," is investigated because it is a major value of Thais (Komin, 1990). Bunkhun includes certain characteristics, for instance, giving gifts to express thankfulness and reciprocating help when there is a chance. "Bunkhun" is supposed to lead Thais, or Bangkok residents in this case, to be satisfied with their lives even in the situation of flooding.

Giving

A Gallup poll has shown consistent results from 130 countries, indicating that those that give something (time, money or helping a stranger) have higher wellbeing scores. Giving tends to be important in the life of Thais because most Thais are Buddhist and giving is one of the central belief of Buddhism. Giving includes charity, or giving material help to people in want. It also includes giving spiritual guidance to those who seek it and loving kindness to all who need it. However, one's motivation for giving to others is at least as important as what is given. The Buddha taught that when we give to others, we give without expectation of reward. We give without attaching to either the gift or the recipient. We practice giving to release greed and self-clinging. Some teachers propose that giving is good because it accrues merit and creates karma that will bring future happiness. During the flood crisis in Thailand recently, Thai people helped each other out to a great extent by donating things such as food, drink, necessary items for living, and cash, as well as volunteering to help the flood victims. It is theorized that this spirit on the part of Thais, including Bangkok dwellers, is likely to lead them to be satisfied with their lives, especially during such a crisis, which provided people with the chance to put giving into practice.

Relationship with Friends

A research conducted by the Gallup poll (Rath and Harter, 2010) reveals that people that have at least three or four very close friends are healthier, have higher wellbeing, and are more engaged in their jobs. Besides a family, a person that has thriving social wellbeing has a tightly knit group of colleagues that he she spends time with every day. They come together to help one another through financial problems, relationship issues, conflicts at work, and personal health challenges. An earlier study by Myers (1999) suggested the strong contribution of close social relationships to subjective wellbeing. It was found that the effect of a close relationship on subjective wellbeing was revealed through

satisfaction with friendships besides marital satisfaction. It is assumed that the support from friends, especially in a time of trouble such as flooding, seems to have eased people's lives in Bangkok.

News and Information Access

Thailand has joined the information age by adopting new technology for communication through e-mail, websites, and social media. These new channels of communication are the extensions of the traditional mass media communication; namely, television, newspapers, magazines, and radio. This study includes both new and old channels of communication. It is expected that during the time of the flood, the news and information related to the flood drew special attention of the audience. That is to say the communication through all of the above channels tended to play a major role in people's lives, especially as the flood impacted Bangkok.

Environment

Several researches have attempted to link the natural environment and subjective wellbeing. One good example is the research conducted by Praag and Baarsma (2005), who explored the environment from the point of view of noise pollution. Another example is a study done by Brereton et al. (2008), which indicated that consideration of amenities such as climate, environmental and urban conditions, and spatial dimensions are critical when analysing subjective wellbeing. In this study various aspects of the Thai environment, for instance, climate, garbage quantity, water quality, air quality, amount of dirt, and the number of parks and green areas are included in this DOL. It is expected that the flooding in most areas of Thailand in general and Bangkok in particular was due partly to the abnormal heavy rain, presumably be a result of climate change will heighten the importance of the environment. Such a satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an environment would in turns led to Bangkokians' life satisfaction.

Good Governance

In earlier research it was found that the quality of government has a substantial impact on average happiness, the level of happiness being higher in well-governed nations (Helliwell and Huang, 2008). This suggests that good governance is essential for subjective wellbeing. According to UNESCAP (2011), good governance has 8 major characteristics: participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and following the rule of law. This research has adopted these characteristics as described in the UNESCAP website as the measures of good governance. In short, it is assumed that satisfaction with good governance will be seen to lead to satisfaction in the lives of Bangkok residents.

Purchase and Consumption of Goods and Services

The consumption DOL in the previous study was defined as an activity that satisfied the basic needs of day-to-day-living. An example of the items used to measure this construct can be seen in Leelakulthanit, Day, and Walters (1991). In this study, such a DOL is viewed as a process of buying that generates customer values other than satisfying basic needs. These values include emotional values of relaxing, alleviating stress, enjoyment and symbolic value of status perception as reflected by the place of shopping. In addition, social value can be achieved by spending time shopping with family and friends. In addition, shopping can be a means of learning about new products.

It should be noted that in this study the consumption DOL has been redefined and measured. Apart from that, in order to incorporate the new lifestyle of technological adoption, two items were added to the material possessions DOL. These are possessions of computers and mobile phones.

Taken together, the reconceptualized model of life satisfaction based on a part-whole relationship assumes that the three Thai characteristics, namely, optimism, gratitude, and giving, as well as satisfaction with each of the eleven DOLs, which are family, friendship, work, personal health, recreation, self, purchase and consumption of goods and services, material possessions, news and information access, environment, and good governance, will be positively correlated with the satisfaction of people's lives in Bangkok after the flood crisis.

Methodology

Sampling

In early January, 2012, a short while after the flood crisis in Bangkok, five hundred adults who were at least twenty-one years old and living in households in Bangkok, Thailand were interviewed. The respondents were selected via a two-stage cluster (area) sampling, using census data obtained from the National Statistics Office as a sampling frame. The first stage was a random sampling of one block each from all 50 administrative districts. The second stage was a sampling of every fifth household after randomly selecting the first household within each block until a total of ten households within each block was achieved. The response rate was 62.19%.

Measures

The scale used to measure LS and satisfaction with DOLs, as well as giving, was similar to that used in the study of Leelakulthanit, Day, and Walters (1991). However, optimism and gratitude were measured with a five-point Likert scale. The multi-item measures used for all of the constructs in this research were highly valid and reliable, as shown in Appendix 1.

Data Analysis

The reliability analysis of each of the items (that is, subdomains) was performed by computing the item's Cronbach alpha. Scale items with low inter-item correlations were eliminated. The items were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation to determine the number of factors underlying the items associated with each domain of life. If the factor analysis results suggested more than one factor, the items which were weakly related to no factors (factor loadings < .35) or which clearly represented more than a single domain were dropped. The remaining items were refactored until the unidimensionality was obtained. Then, the reliability analyses were conducted again, and the size of the reliabilities obtained (in the .7 to .9 range) supported the use of the measures (Nunnally, 1978). The reliabilities reported in the present study (Appendix 1), ranging from .83 to .95, compare very favorably with those reported in a previous study of life satisfaction, which are in the range of .65 to .88 (Leelakulthanit, Day & Walters, 1991).

It is noteworthy that at first the Eigenvalues of the construct of news and information access suggested that there were two factors (i.e., two Eigenvalues were more than 1). According to the examination of the pattern of factor loadings after varimax rotation, the item of news and information from e-mail was dropped because the factor loadings of this item loaded high on both factors. Then, the remaining two items of factor two were dropped because the second factor, consisting of news and information from social media and websites, tended to bias to the young generation, the well-educated, and high-income people. In short, eventually, the four remaining items of the construct of news and information access, which made up of one factor were the news and information obtained through the traditional mass media of television, newspaper, magazine and radio (Appendix 1).

Results

According to the results of the present study, Bangkok residents are mostly satisfied with their lives. The mean LS value was 3.48 on the average LS scale of 7.5 (Appendix 1). Bangkokians are optimistic (mean = 2.39) and least pleased with the governance of the Thai government (mean = 4.62). Being grateful, satisfaction with giving, and other DOLs were in between these two factors, as shown in Appendix 1. The impact of flood status, optimism, the Thai characteristics (i.e., gratitude and giving) and satisfaction with different DOLs and education and household income on LS was investigated by performing multiple regression analysis. The values obtained from the scale items of optimism, gratitude, giving, and the subdomains associated with a particular DOL and LS were averaged to form the measures of these constructs. Education was categorized into two groups: Bangkokians with an education lower than a bachelor degree and those with at least a bachelor degree. Household income was also divided into two groups by splitting the group at the monthly household income level at 36,000 Baht (\$US 1 = 30 Baht). Multiple regression was run by regressing LS on flood status, optimism, gratitude, giving, satisfaction with the eleven DOLs, education, and household income.

The results of this regression, as shown in Table 1, suggested that taken together, the seventeen independent variables accounted for 33% of the variance in LS (R-square = .33).

Table1: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis of LS on Satisfaction with DOLs and Socioeconomic Groups

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.693	.360		1.924	.055		
Flooded road	.171	.093	.079	1.845	.066*	.943	1.060
Optimist	.343	.066	.261	5.231	.000**	.689	1.451
Gratitude	-.026	.091	-.015	-.289	.773	.623	1.605
Give	-.018	.082	-.012	-.219	.827	.560	1.787
Fam	.020	.080	.016	.254	.800	.430	2.326
Friends	.017	.064	.015	.272	.786	.600	1.667
Wok	.107	.078	.085	1.368	.172	.445	2.249
Phea	.018	.052	.018	.355	.723	.690	1.448
Rec	.064	.081	.048	.789	.431	.465	2.149
Sel	.042	.091	.033	.459	.646	.341	2.928
Con	.032	.062	.027	.509	.611	.630	1.588
Mat	.275	.078	.241	3.533	.000**	.370	2.699
Info	-.114	.061	-.095	-1.854	.064*	.650	1.538
Env	-.021	.044	-.022	-.475	.635	.805	1.242
Govern	.021	.039	.025	.553	.581	.842	1.188
Educ gr	.262	.105	.121	2.502	.013**	.739	1.353
H-income gr	.101	.103	.047	.982	.327	.765	1.307

$R^2 = .334$ $\bar{R}^2 = .305$ $F_{17,387} = 11.423$ $P = .000$ * = Significant at $\alpha \leq .1$ ** = Significant at $\alpha \leq .05$

In addition, non-flood status, optimism, satisfaction with material possessions, and education had a positive influence on LS, whereas satisfaction with news and information access had a negative effect on LS. That means that the more optimistic people were and the more satisfied they were with their material possessions, the more they were satisfied with their lives. Likewise, regarding the people in a non-flooded situation, the higher the education, the more satisfied they were with their lives. On the other hand, the more satisfied people were with their news and information access, the less satisfied they were with their lives. This negative impact of news and information access on LS might have occurred because in general the news presented is often bad news, especially during the flood disaster in Thailand.

The relative impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable, as suggested by the standardized parameter estimates, indicated that optimism and satisfaction with material possessions approximately equally and positively influenced LS. Their standardized estimates were .26 and .24, respectively. The coefficients for satisfaction with news and information access and education were -0.1 and .12, respectively, indicating that they were approximately equally important in affecting LS. It should be noted that multicollinearity was not likely to be a problem because the magnitude of variance inflation factors associated with each independent variable was far less than ten (Wetherill, Duncombe, Kenward, Köllerström, Paul & Vowden, 1986).

In order to investigate the impact of flooding on Bangkokians' LS, optimism, gratitude, giving, and satisfaction with eleven DOLs, two sets of t-tests were conducted. First, the results of the comparison of the difference of means of LS, optimism, gratitude, giving, and satisfaction with the eleven DOLs between the Bangkok resident group for which the roads near their houses were not flooded versus the group with flooded roads revealed that the group whose roads were not flooded (N = 279) was more satisfied with their overall lives than the group with flooded roads (N = 220), as shown in Table 2. Furthermore, the not-flooded road group was more satisfied with their family lives, friendship, personal health, and material possessions than the flooded group (Table 2).

Table2: Mean Comparison of LS and DOLs between the Group without Flooded Roads and the Group with Flooded Roads

LS & DOLs	Not Flooded Road (N= 279)	Flooded Road (N= 220)	t(Sig.2-tailed)
LS	3.36	3.73	.000**
Optimism	2.34	2.44	NS
Gratitude	1.91	1.93	NS
Giving	2.29	2.33	NS
Family	2.4	2.61	.005**
Friends	2.6	2.76	.051*
Work	2.73	2.81	NS
Personal Health	2.57	2.83	.009**
Recreation	3.05	3.16	NS
Self	2.65	2.76	NS
Consumption	2.94	2.97	NS
Material Possessions	2.62	2.9	.001**
News & Info. Access	2.78	2.8	NS
Environment	4.3	4.19	NS
Good Governance	4.56	4.6	NS

NS = Not Significant

* = Significant at $\alpha \leq .1$ ** Significant at $\alpha \leq .01$

Second, the results of the comparison of the difference of means of LS, optimism, gratitude, giving, and satisfaction with the eleven DOLs between the non-flooded house group versus the flooded house group revealed that the non-flooded house group (N = 368) was more satisfied with their overall lives than the flooded house group (N = 131), as shown in Table 3.

Table3: Mean Comparison of LS and DOLs between the Non-Flooded House Group and the Flooded House Group

LS & DOLs	Non-Flooded House (N= 368)	Flooded House (N= 131)	t(Sig.2-tailed)
LS	3.41	3.83	.001**
Optimism	2.38	2.4	NS
Gratitude	1.92	1.9	NS
Giving	2.3	2.33	NS
Family	2.45	2.62	.057*
Friends	2.61	2.84	.018**
Work	2.75	2.81	NS
Personal Health	2.65	2.78	NS
Recreation	3.06	3.2	.073*
Self	2.65	2.83	.043**
Consumption	2.92	3.03	NS
Material Possessions	2.67	2.96	.005**
News & Info. Access	2.78	2.82	NS
Environment	4.24	4.28	NS
Good Governance	4.52	4.74	.089*

NS = Not Significant

* = Significant at $\alpha \leq .1$ ** Significant at $\alpha \leq .05$

Moreover, the non-flooded house group were more satisfied with their family lives, friendships, recreation, self, material possessions, and good governance of the Thai government than the flooded house group (Table 3).

Conclusion

The reconceptualization of the determinants of LS in this study as a linear regression model has a better fit compared to the original model developed by Leelakulthanit, Day, and Walters (1991). Specifically, the current model has an R-square and R-bar-square of .33 and .30, respectively, whereas the original model has the values of .28 and .25, respectively. The new determinant of LS during the flood crisis is optimism, while social support from family and friends did not seem to play a vital role in the overall satisfaction of people's lives during the crisis, although the non-flood victims tended to be more satisfied with their family and friends than the flood victims. Again, marketing did not seem to contribute to people's LS through purchase and consumption of goods and services, but did exert a positive influence on LS through satisfaction with material possessions (Leelakulthanit, Day, and Walters, 1991). The importance of material possessions to Bangkokians can be clearly seen by the evidence that many people did not leave their homes at that time, despite the fact that the first floors of their two-storey houses were flooded. The news and information received by the people during the

flood crisis were overshadowed by bad news. That is why the access of such a thing had a negative impact on LS. It is noteworthy that household income did not have any impact on LS, whereas education did. Money did not seem to help much during the troubled time of flooding. It was the knowledge and wisdom of how to deal with the flooding situation that actually helped.

The two sets of comparisons of not flooded and flooded, whether the flooding concerned the nearby roads or the people's houses, indicated that people who were not flood victims, no matter how mild the flood was, tended to be more satisfied with their lives in general than the flood victims. The non-flood victims were more satisfied with their material possessions, family, and friends than the flood victims. The severity of the flood did affect the satisfaction with DOLs. The flooded house group tended to be less satisfied with many more DOLs than the group whose nearby roads were flooded. The flooded house victims seemed not to be able to enjoy themselves with hobbies and entertainment from the mass media. In addition, this group seemed to be less satisfied with their ability to learn on their own and with their self-confidence. The flooded-house situation suggests that the flooded house victims were not so successful in fighting the flood and may even have made them lose their self-confidence. It is noteworthy that if the flood got into the people's houses, it made them dissatisfied with the government and they questioned its good governance.

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Appendix 1

Dimensionality, Internal Consistency, and Mean of Measures

Domains of Life and Their Subdomains	Item with High Loading	Mean
1. Life in General		3.52
Delighted – Terrible Scale	X	3.47
Satisfaction Scale	X	3.68
Faces Scale	X	3.11
Ladder Scale	X	3.77
Coeff. Alpha	0.85	
2. Optimism		2.38
When something bad happens you think it will disappear.	X	2.23
You will look at the good side of others and overlook the bad side.	X	2.61
You often look at the bright side of your future.	X	2.38
You are an optimist.	X	2.33
Coeff. Alpha	0.83	
3. Gratitude		1.92
You will appreciate it when someone helps you.	X	1.82
You want to return the gratitude when there are some chances.	X	1.80
You often give a gift to express thanks.	X	2.28
When someone does something for you, you will say thanks.	X	1.79
You often feel thankful when something good happens to you.	X	2.04
You often think of the one who does something good to you.	X	1.78
Coeff. Alpha	0.88	
4. Giving		2.31
Give something to someone	X	2.31
Merit making	X	2.16
Give to charity	X	2.29
Help others	X	2.25
Be kind to others	X	2.25
Sharing what we have	X	2.34
Sacrifice	X	2.40
Give without expecting anything in return	X	2.34
Forgiveness	X	2.36
Coeff. Alpha	0.94	

Appendix 1 Continued

Dimensionality, Internal Consistency, and Mean of Measures

Domains of Life and Their Subdomains	Item with High Loading	Mean
5. Family		2.5
Marriage	X	2.38
Home-life	X	2.38
Children	X	2.40
Housing	X	2.53
Neighborhood	X	2.85
Transportation	X	2.75
Parents, brothers, sister	X	2.13
Coeff. Alpha	0.90	
6. Friend		2.67
Support by friends	X	2.68
Help given by friends	X	2.66
Consulting with friends	X	2.65
Telling friends about your misery	X	2.71
Relationships with friends	X	2.47
Talking with friends about private matters	X	2.71
Chances to get together with friends	X	
Coeff. Alpha	0.95	
7. Work		2.76
Availability of work	X	2.28
Work condition	X	2.69
People you work with	X	2.76
Hours worked	X	2.81
Earning	X	2.91
Job security	X	2.79
Retirement program	X	3.03
Autonomy	X	2.72
Opportunities to express your ability	X	2.75
Advancement opportunities	X	2.91
Coeff. Alpha	0.94	

Appendix 1 Continued

Dimensionality, Internal Consistency, and Mean of Measures

Domains of Life and Their Subdomains	Item with High Loading	Mean
8. Health		2.68
Wellness	X	2.72
Stamina	X	2.63
Mobility	X	2.54
Appearance	X	2.85
Coeff. Alpha		0.91
9. Recreation		3.09
Local recreation and fitness facilities	X	3.26
Access to planes, trains	X	3.36
Spectator sports	X	3.44
Hobbies	X	2.87
Entertainment and cultural events	X	2.79
Computer games	X	3.20
Travelling	X	2.85
Coeff. Alpha		0.87
10. Self		2.70
Self-actualization	X	2.81
Social skills	X	2.63
Respect by others	X	2.67
Level of education	X	2.82
Ability to learn on your own	X	2.62
Level of professional competence	X	2.73
Confidence in yourself	X	2.57
Coeff. Alpha		0.93

Dimensionality, Internal Consistency, and Mean of Measures

Domains of Life and Their Subdomains	Item with High Loading	Mean
11. Consumption		2.95
You can buy what you want by shopping.	X	2.89
The chance to buy good products cheaply		3.02
Service from the sellers		3.12
Convenient location		2.77
Shopping makes you relax.	X	2.92
Shopping reduces your stress.	X	2.93
Shopping makes you enjoy yourself.	X	2.94
The store where you shop reflects your image.	X	3.13
Shopping gives you exercise.	X	3.08
The shopping store is a convenient place to meet friends.	X	2.78
Shopping gives you a chance to do activities with family and friends.	X	2.76
Shopping makes you learn about new products.	X	2.90
Coeff. Alpha	0.94	
12. Material Possessions		2.74
House	X	2.52
Furniture and appliances	X	2.65
Private transportation	X	2.71
Computers	X	2.74
Mobile phones	X	2.67
Clothing and jewelry	X	2.82
Saving and investment	X	2.95
Coeff. Alpha	0.94	

Appendix 1 Continued

Dimensionality, Internal Consistency, and Mean of Measures

Domains of Life and Their Subdomains	Item with High Loading	Mean
13. News and Information Access		2.79
News and information from TV	X	2.55
News and information from newspapers	X	2.73
News and information from magazines	X	2.99
News and information from radio	X	3.05
News and information from email		3.13
News and information from social media		2.91
News and information from websites		3.07
Coeff. Alpha		0.88
14. Environment		4.25
Climate	X	3.88
Garbage quantity	X	4.32
Waste water treatment	X	4.24
Air quality	X	4.32
Loudness of sound	X	4.22
Dirt quantity	X	4.51
Park availability		4.30
Forest quantity		4.49
Natural resources management		4.52
Coeff. Alpha		0.93
15. Good Governance		4.58
The right to give opinions	X	3.98
Consensus	X	4.33
Accountability of leadership	X	4.54
Transparency of the government	X	4.77
Response to people's needs by the government	X	4.75
Equality in Thailand	X	4.72
Efficiency of the government	X	4.72
Fairness in law enforcement	X	4.77
Coeff. Alpha		0.95