**DEUTSCHES INSTITUT FÜR JAPANSTUDIEN**

**German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)**

# Bullseye view: Developing a sociological method for studying happiness

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***Working Paper 19/3***

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**Abstract**

Happiness research has gained tremendous popularity, yet research by anthropologists and sociologists trails behind in comparison to economists and psychologists. A sociological study that aims to understand the multidimensionality of happiness in Japan by focusing on a culture-sensitive understanding of happiness remains a desideratum. Therefore we developed a three-partite approach to studying happiness and life satisfaction: (1) word association, (2) in-depth conversation on happiness and life satisfaction issues using a bullseye-structured chart, which we refer to as “board game”, with tokens for visualization of dimensions’ overall importance, and satisfaction and dissatisfaction with them, (3) three quantitative questions on happiness, followed by in-depth discussion to tie to the multitude of existing quantitative studies. To test the methodology, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with Japanese men and women in rural Japan. We find that happiness is multidimensional, is an interpretative process, varies over the life course, and that the desire to maximize happiness is not universal. We argue to have created a methodology which we believe can be modified to be used in any country and with diverse population groups, while remaining culture-sensitive throughout.

**Keywords:** happiness, life satisfaction, Japan, culture, methodology, multidimensionality, social networks

# Bullseye view: Developing a sociological method for studying happiness

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A revised version of this will be published in: Mark Cieslik and Laura Hyman (eds). 2020. *Researching happiness: Qualitative, biographical and critical perspectives*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

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Place of publication: Tokyo, June 2019

## Introduction

Happiness research has gained extraordinary popularity in recent years, both among scholars and governments as well as the public. Research by anthropologists and sociologists on the topic remains limited in comparison to research by economists and psychologists (see introduction by Cieslik and Hyman, 2020). Despite the multitude of studies undertaken, our knowledge about happiness in Japan continues to be limited for a number of problems that boil down to methodology. Large-scale quantitative surveys on happiness and well-being that flag out Japan as unhappy in comparison to other highly developed societies, often rely on a single-item measurement of "overall happiness" or in conjunction with objective indicators of "overall well-being" (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2016; OECD Stat 2017); and hardly ever is the meaning of happiness and its importance in human life as universal standard questioned (Uchida, Ogihara and Fukushima, 2015).

A sociological study that aims to understand the multidimensionality of happiness in Japan by focusing on a culture-sensitive understanding of happiness remains a desideratum. In the two most recent edited volumes on happiness and well-being in Japan we presented novel findings from qualitative as well as quantitative researchers (Holthus and Manzenreiter 2017b; Manzenreiter and Holthus, 2017b). Yet most contributions focused on singular or select factors, such as age, friendship, parenthood, or political participation, to name but a few. Only Mathews (2017) paid tribute to the diversity of definitions in the understanding of happiness and life satisfaction in Japan.

In the following, we present a three-part innovative approach to studying happiness and life satisfaction. This methodology attempts to be sensitive to the gaps in the literature, as it inquiries about definitions of happiness and happiness-related terms, and it allows interviewees to explain their lives and weigh elements in their lives as to (1) their importance for living a good life and (2) to their positive and negative evaluation. To test the methodology, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 men and women in Japan. Each interview consists of three parts: (a) word association, (b) in-depth conversation on happiness issues using a bullseye structured chart, often referred to by us and the interviewees as a "board game", together with tokens for visualization of factors of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and (c) three written quantitative questions on happiness, all to be discussed in-depth with the interviewees thereafter. We find the following:

1. Happiness is very much an interpretative process, embedded in social networks and across personal biographies. Not one definition exists in people's heads, complicating the interpretation of quantitative surveys.
2. Happiness is multidimensional, and the relevance of the domains varies by life course stage and is influenced by numerous life circumstances. Mapping happiness across multiple domains by using visual props allows to get closer to a more holistic understanding of subjective well-being.
3. "The happier the better" as the underlying understanding of happiness in quantitative surveys is shown not to be a universal concept.

In the following section we provide a literature overview, presenting the current state of the art of happiness research first and foremost within and about Japan, and mostly on sociological and anthropological research in the field. Subsequently, we describe in detail the three-part methodology used in research we conducted in two stages in February and July 2018. We conclude the paper by discussing some fundamental findings in regards to the methodology of happiness research, and the applicability of the research design generally, while critically reflecting on flaws in the design and suggesting methodological improvements.

## The concern for culture in happiness research

Despite a decade-long flourishing of happiness research in Japan (Coulmas, 2009; Holthus and Manzenreiter, 2017a), our knowledge about the state of well-being of Japanese is still wanting. A review of the literature generates a compartmentalized debate of often inconclusive and contradictory results, largely due to the incompatibilities of the specific heuristics associated with the agenda of their respective academic fields. The editors of *Cultures of well-being* (White and Blackmore, 2016) argue that research methods have their own cultures in as far as they produce a generalized view of the world as taken for granted; the rules of the game, as they call it, use specific key terms, reference points, criteria for truth and core routines, rituals, and practices that ultimately only are able to draw a map of the world they are interested in. Different methodologies do not simply highlight different aspects of happiness, they generate different data and allow different analytical routines and thus actively constitute diverging accounts. On a more fundamental level, unsolved conceptual and methodological issues are at the root of the fragmented nature of happiness research. The vagueness and variety of happiness concepts encompassing similar key terms of the academic debate, such as life satisfaction, well-being, or quality of life (for example, the psychologists who originated the Quality of Life Inventory use the terms quality of life, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction interchangeably; see Frisch et al., 1992), and the resulting differences in operationalization severely limit the conclusions that can be drawn from these studies (Holthus and Manzenreiter, 2017).

In the OECD Better Life data from 2017, Japan's life satisfaction score (on a scale from 0 as lowest to 10 as highest) averages at 5.8, which lies below the OECD 35 country average of 6.6 (OECD Stat, 2017). According to the *World happiness report 2018*, Japan ranks 54th out of 156 countries (Helliwell et al., 2018: 21, 25). Yet international comparison of happiness and life satisfaction comes with methodological difficulties and limitations. Husser and Fernandez (2018) argue that already slight changes in wording of a question may cause considerable differences in outcome, while others question the ability of respondents of differentiating clearly and consistently between subtle numerical gradients, their argument supported by low test-retest reliability (Krueger and Schkade, 2008). In a rare example of mixed-method research in happiness (Ponocny et al., 2016), the mismatch of respondents' quantitative evaluation with their narrated accounts demonstrated that response biases and semantic variability in the interpretation of happiness constructs and rating scales significantly delimited the explanatory power of numerical self-reported happiness indices. Culture-specific response patterns, such as the tendency by Japanese to avoid extreme ratings in surveys (Chen, Lee and Stevenson, 1995) further question the cross-cultural comparability of measurement rates, and cultural psychologists have raised doubts about an artificially flattened and essentially wrong understanding of happiness as culturally universal (e.g. Marcus and Kitayama, 1998; Oishi et al., 2013; Uchida, Ogihara and Fukushima, 2015). They point out that positive social relationships matter in all societies, but feelings of autonomy are only of importance in so-called individualist societies (Oishi et al., 1999).

Whereas in Western societies of Europe and North America people are rather construing their sense of happiness in relation to the self, self-esteem and other internal references, collectivist societies in Asia place more emphasis on norms and the social appraisal of others as frame of reference (Kwan, Bond and Singelis, 1997; Suh et al., 1998; Suh, 2000; Lu and Gilmour, 2004; Kitayama et al., 2006; Uchida and Kitayama, 2009). The concept of interdependent happiness developed by Hitokoto and Uchida (2015) is based on empirical evidence that well-being in Japan is better predicted by emotional support, quality of interpersonal relationships and harmony than by individual achievement and autonomy (Cabinet Office 2012).

## Methodological considerations

Paired with an awareness about the disparities in arguments about happiness and well-being in the existing academic literature, our concern for definitions and aspects of culture, language and terminology shaped our methodological approach. Our goal was to create a methodology that is culture-sensitive while at the same time flexible enough to be used in a variety of different settings.

### *Intercultural research and issues of intimacy and gender*

Feelings about happiness and the satisfaction and dissatisfaction with one's life are inherently personal, and might often not even be revealed to one’s closest peers. Additionally, face-to-face interviews by strangers can be felt as intrusive, no matter which culture. The fact that we as foreigners are researching this topic in Japan is challenging but also advantageous to a certain degree. Being outside the social group of the interviewee, the threshold to reveal personal sentiments to foreigners can be lower, because there is less fear of retribution or any form of negative consequences from one’s social group. Falling outside of relevant social groups allows foreign, Caucasian scholar in rural Japan for the possibility to ask questions kind of naively: It permits asking questions which Japanese researchers in comparison might be more hesitant to ask, and interviewees might be more open to us outsiders than towards other Japanese. As *gaijin* (foreigners, outsiders), we remain outside the tight-knit community and thus are “neutral” to the constraints of Japanese society and a rural community in Japan in particular with its normative expectations for its inhabitants and its intricate relationships.

Interview research on well-being can always potentially be influenced by interpersonal dynamics, as well as issues of gender and age of interviewee and interviewer. Even though this cannot always be solved, in our case we approached these issues by conducting research in a team of two, which despite not being ethnically diverse (both researchers are Caucasian), differs in regard to gender, social standing, and personality. As lives in rural Japan have been and remain even today more or less gendered, conducting the interviews as man and woman of different ages, we believe to have provided sufficient variance for the interviewees to be able to feel comfortable with either of us and choose whom to mostly speak to.

### *Location: Rurality and access to the field*

A common hurdle in ethnographic research is to get access to "the field," which is potentially even more pronounced in the case of happiness research *and* in the case of rural communities, and by dealing with highly private affairs of individual emotions and subjective experiences. Researchers need stories of reflective accounts of the causes and outcomes of happiness, and they need people willing to communicate their personal histories, values, and ideas about happiness. Yet Japanese society is more on the close-lipped side than on the open-hearted for expressing private feelings. In psychological terms, culturally accepted forms of behavior favor reticence and introspection but not extraversion and self-disclosure (Lebra 1976; Marcus and Kitayama 1991; Lebra 2009). This is particularly the case with people outside the limited circle of close friends and family members.

What considerably helped us getting access to people’s minds and stories was the ethnographic research history of the Department of East Asian Studies/ Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna, where we both worked. Vienna based scholars, who spearheaded fieldwork and social sciences research among Continental European researchers of Japan, conducted a first survey in 1968 in the Aso area in Kumamoto prefecture on the southern island of Kyushu. The same area became the focus of a new research project of the Vienna school of Japanese Studies since 2015. The initial researchers are still well remembered in the area, as many had never seen foreigners, giving the researchers at the time an exotic status. All in all, the extensive research history and the careful reenactment of relations at different levels (locals, officials, governments and scholars) eased our current access and lay the foundation of trust relationships.

### *Interviewees*

Within the Aso region, we conducted interviews among residents of a small rural settlement of about 60 households, as well as among citizens of the town center four kilometers away, which has a population size of slightly less than 10,000. A large percentage of people in Aso either works in agriculture, services, or is self-employed. Through snowball sampling, we interviewed a total of 23 people. Of these, 13 are male and 10 female, 9 are single and 14 are married, 6 are from the village and 17 are from the town, and ages range from 33 to 75. In total we interviewed 7 people in their 30s, 9 in their 40s, and 7 aged 50 and up. 12 people have moved into the area at some point during their lives, whereas the other 11 people have been lifelong residents.

Some of those had left for a certain period of time in their youth but returned later. Several, particularly the younger interviewees, have moved from outside the region into the town and opened their own businesses. These younger entrepreneurs are well-connected with each other, and many of them consider the others their circle of friends.

### Tripartite interview structure

Research was conducted through interviews in a two-step process: 14 interviews in February 2018, 9 in July 2018. The interviews ran on average 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analyzed using MaxQDA. Interviews were usually held in the interviewee's residences, in some instances in their workplaces and in two cases in public spaces like an unused room of a restaurant in one case, a communal hall in the other. Interviews consisted of three parts, with the second being the main segment.

*Part 1: Warm up: associations and definitions*

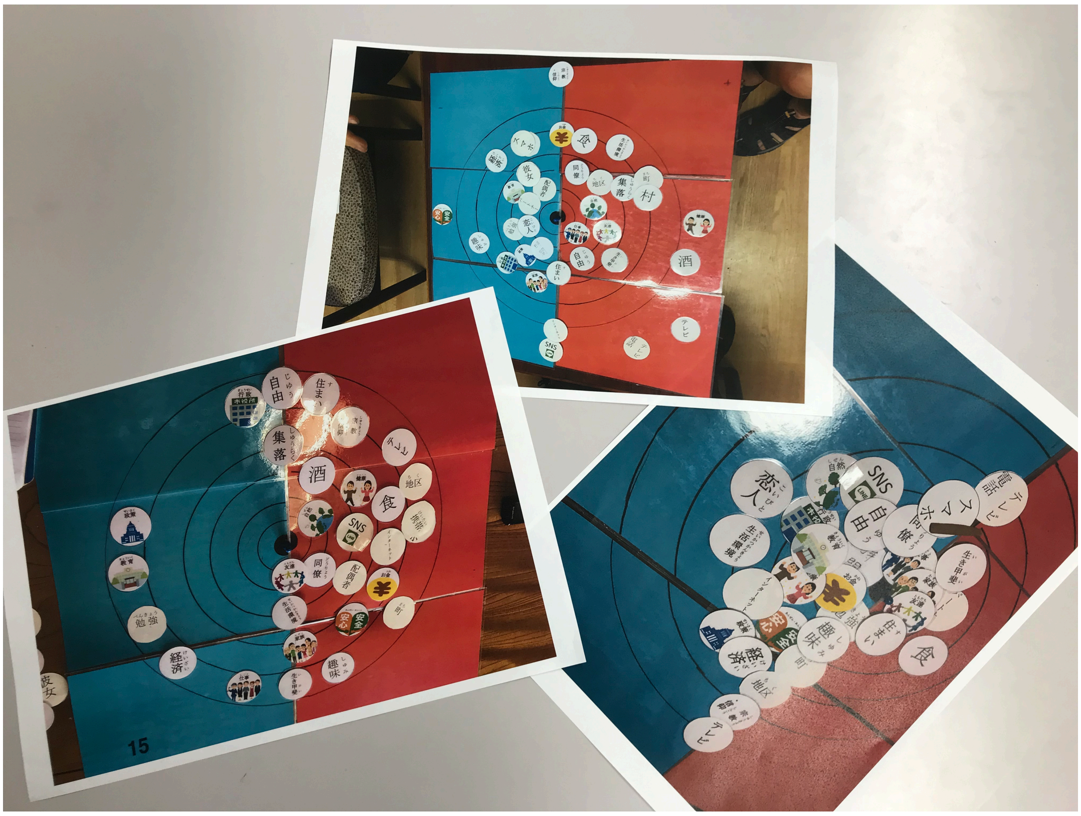
The impersonal completion of a quantitative, anonymous survey away from prying eyes may certainly be the least intrusive form of research on “happiness” or “well-being”. Yet a questionnaire leaves many conceptual questions unanswered and presumes respondents to have the same understanding about the meaning of the terms: no survey we are aware of is providing definitions of happiness or well-being. Our approach tackles the openness of the concepts by asking for the meanings associated with terms from the semantic cloud of well-being at the outset of the interviews. Part 1 serves two purposes, as it provides (a) an intro or warm up to the topic per se, as well as (b) offers a glimpse into the understandings of the terms by the interviewees. We began the interviews by naming seven terms, asking interviewees to talk about anything that comes to mind or that they associate with these terms or how they would define them. The seven terms are: happiness (*shiawase*), sadness (*kanashimi*), worries (*nayami*), hope (*kibō*), success (*seikō*), anxiety (*fuan*) and failure (*shippai*).

*Part 2: A bullseye view on life satisfaction*

Part 2 is the main part of the interviews. Here we worked with props in a kind of board-game style. As shown in Figure 1, the board is two-colored, the red side meaning satisfaction, the blue side dissatisfaction. Circles radiating from the center weight the significance of variables that we provided in the form of round tokens. Interviewees were instructed to first place a board game figure representing one's self on the bullseye, and then to arrange the tokens on the board, according to where they see them to influence their lives. By selecting and placing tokens on the chart, people reveal what fields and aspects they think to be important for living a good life, and if they currently are satisfied or not with them. If needed, we provided brief explanations during the process.

In most cases, the tokens feature an image in connection with the signifying word written in Kanji (Chinese characters) plus the reading in Japanese syllabary script (*hiragana*). Literacy in Japan is high, as indicated by high school graduation rates of 90 percent and more; yet functional illiteracy is not unheard of and particularly susceptible to social deprivation factors, such as low socio-economic status, educational careers and place of residence at schooling age. By having the tokens not provide any difficulty in reading for the interviewees, we tried to accommodate all social strata and levels of education. In addition to the tokens prepared by us, we offered our interviewees to label blank tokens with other terms, in case we had missed something of significance in their lives.

**Figure 1**: Bullseye chart in practice: 3 examples



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The inscription of tokens is selected in accordance with our understanding of the state of art of happiness research in Japan. Before the second set of interviews we added a few tokens for aspects that had not been sufficiently addressed in the first round of interviews and covered a greater variety of partner relationships, communication devices (social media, internet, cell phones), and locality labels (district, hamlet). The complete list of tokens is as follows:

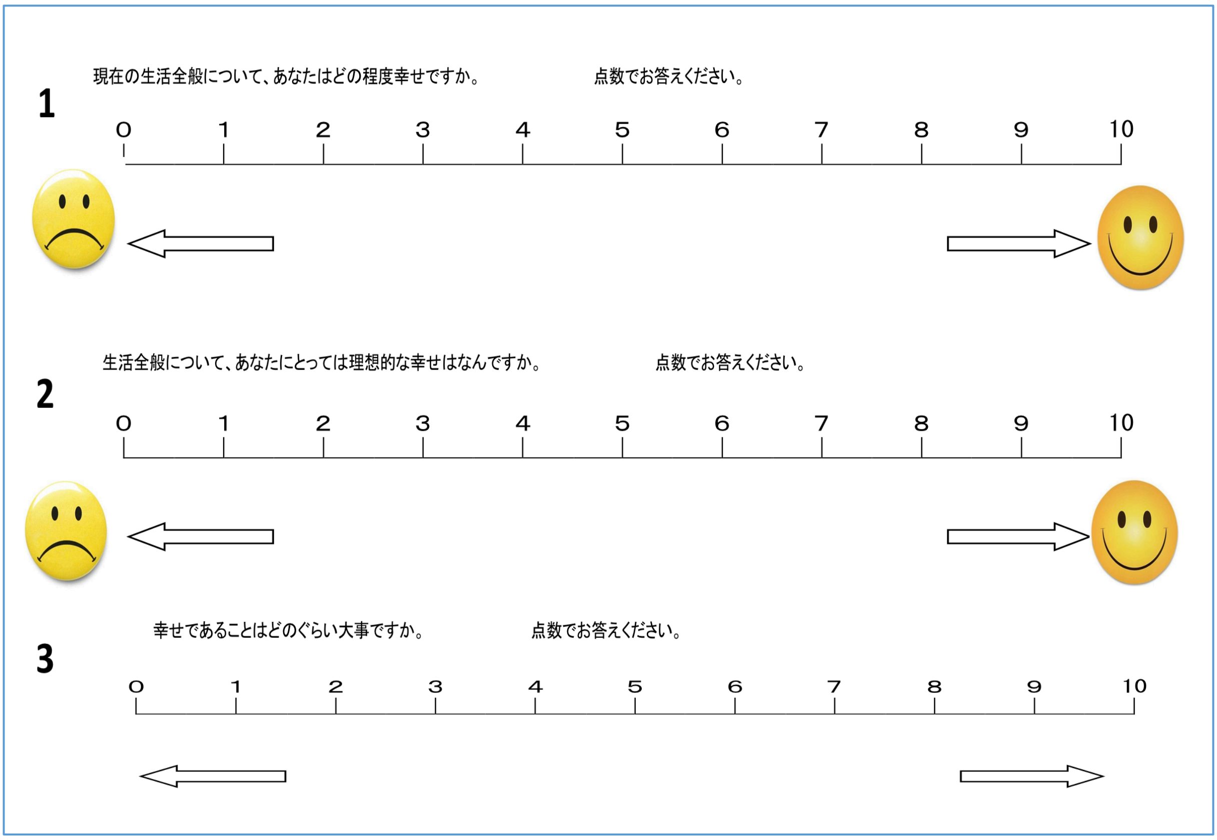
> Family (*kazoku*), spouse (*haigūsha*), partner (*pātona*), lover (*koibito*), boyfriend (*kareshi*), girlfriend (*kanojo*), friends (*tomodachi*), work (*shigoto*), colleagues (*dōryō*), freedom/liberty *(jiyū),* time (*jikan*), administration *(gyōsei),* politics *(seisaku),* the economy *(keizai),* money *(okane),* hobbies *(shumi),* TV *(terebi),* purpose of life (*ikigai*), health (*kenkō*), alcohol (*sake*), food/eating (*shoku*), living environment (*seikatsu kankyō*), living/housing (*sumai*), education (*kyōiku*), nature (*shizen*), religion/belief (*shūkyō*), safety/security (*anzen anshin*), village (*mura*), hamlet (*shūraku*), town (*machi*), district [in a town] (*chiku*), internet (*intānetto*), social media (*SMS*), old-style cellphone (*keitai*), smartphone (*sumaho)*, and “community telephone” (*oshirase tanmatsu*).

Once all tokens were placed (tokens identified as irrelevant were to be omitted from the board), we then used the board and the placement of the tokens to start an in-depth conversation about the variables to learn more about the meaning attached to them, the reasons for their placement and their specific realization in the lives of our interviewees.

### *Part 3: Linking to quantitative research*

As a way of wrapping up the interview, we handed the interviewees one visually appealing sheet featuring three quantitative survey questions on happiness (see Figure 2). All three questions offer the same Likert-scale from 0 to 10 as answer option. In response to the linguistic and cultural variability of terms encompassing issues of happiness, we used suggestive smileys instead of words to identify the extremes of the scales.

**FIGURE 2**: Survey questions as wrap-up to qualitative interview



1 現在の生活全般について、あなたはどの程度幸せですか。 点数でお答えください。

2 生活全般について、あなたにとっては理想的な幸せはなんですか。 点数でお答えください。

3 幸せであることはどのぐらい大事ですか。 点数でお答えください。

Question 1 on the general state of happiness is posed in the same wording as in most large-scale surveys in Japan, asking “These days, all things considered, how happy do you feel?”. The single-item measurement enables us to tie in to the quantitative research strand, as well as to understand how interviewees rate their state of happiness in comparison to others. It helps us put the overall view of life satisfaction as extrapolated from the chart and conversation in part 2 into perspective.

Question 2 “In your opinion, what is the ideal level of happiness?” is important in light of our understanding that Japanese are not universally subscribing to the Western concept of "the happier the better", as discussed by Uchida (2014). In contrast to the linearity of the Western concept, which is based on self-esteem, individual achievement and personal attainment, the Japanese idea of happiness is more likely to be seen as fluctuating in a cyclical, sine-wave fashion, in which happiness is a transitory experience and rather based on interpersonal connectedness and balance between self and others. Cultural psychologist Uchida explains the low levels of happiness among Japanese in international comparisons by the equally low ideal state of happiness at 6.5 on a scale of 0 to 10, from least happy to most happy (whereas in the US and Europe it is approximating a 10 (Uchida, Ogihara and Fukushima 2015). She explains this with the desire by Japanese to not be at the top of the sine-wave, as that would mean a decline in happiness in the future. The ideal is to still be on the upswing of the sine-wave, as that would signify still a continued increase in happiness for the near future.

Question 3 “How important is it to be happy?” is an additional attempt at making a cultural argument. While many studies tacitly presuppose the desire for happiness to be universal, and happiness seemingly the ultimate goal of life, cultural anthropological as well as cultural psychological research has demonstrated that happiness is far from being an unquestionable good in every cultural context and under certain conditions even seen as socially non-desirable. Uchida (2014: 483) shows that the desirability of happiness in the United States lies at close to 98 percent among their surveyed population, whereas in Japan, happiness is considered desirable by only 68 percent.

## Findings

Findings from the interviews about happiness and life satisfaction in rural Japan, and how location matters to people’s well-being are discussed in greater detail in Holthus and Manzenreiter (forthcoming). Here we can only provide glimpses into the richness of the data first and foremost in reflection to the methodology used here.

### *Part 1: Diversities of definitions*

In this first part, interviewees provided either abstract definitions or general comments on the terms happiness, sadness, anxiety, worries, hope, failure, success, or shared concrete examples of when they recall feeling or having felt happy, sad, worried, etc. These concrete examples range from “large” to “small” incidents. Examples of “small” incidents are the 33-year old owner of a small café, who roasts his own coffee, saying he is happy if he managed to roast a particularly tasty coffee that day, or if he has customers happy with his coffee on a given day. A working mother in her late 30s identifies the time spent together with the family in their newly built home, doing trifle things such as dining, playing games or watching TV as times she feels happy.

An example of “large” happiness is often tied to understanding happiness through the interrelatedness of the self to others, in many instances family. “If everyone is healthy and gets along with anyone else, I can be happy,” was a mantra we heard particularly often from elderly interviewees. But also a chef and restaurant owner in his early 40s referred to family health and family time as source of his well-being, which he contrasted with his former self that would have sought happiness rather in fleeting pleasures of surfing, snowboarding, gambling, and gaming.

The idea of happiness as a shared sensation within familial bonds is intriguing also to individuals that see themselves in relation to an alternative or future self, to a life they could have led, or will eventually be able to experience. One woman in her early 60s wondered how life would have become if she had got married, whereas two single men in their forties fantasized about the increase in happiness if or once they married. And a married woman in her early 30s, even though already considering her happy due to the love to her husband, wishes for a child, assuming a further elevation in happiness.

Last but not least, in some instances people would reduce their sense of happiness to the most basics, for example by being appreciative of the simple things in life, living a "life like everyone around" or a "normal life", some used the term of *futsū no shiawase* "normal happiness", or a "life in which nothing bad is happening", a life "with the absence of [natural] disaster". To be happy like the imagined "everyone", *hitonami no shiawase*, turned up in the conversation with a middle-aged villager who also emphasized nature and social relations as the many invisible things characterizing rural life in contrast to city life. He contemplated but could not decide whether the scarcity of things in rural areas or the rich availability of material goods in the city are sources of happiness or unhappiness. For the young wife of a Buddhist priest, however, the joy of the simple things in life and the gift of living a life in ease and free of burden were at the forefront of her thoughts on happiness.

The frequent mentioning of disaster in the context of happiness, anxiety and worries is likely to have been affected by the recollection of the Great Kumamoto Earthquake, which struck the area two years prior to the interviews, severely damaging many homes, facilities, and roads and which disrupted daily life for many residents. With the area living to a large part off tourism, the effects continue to be felt by many entrepreneurs. One shop owner in his 40s linked his sense of happiness with the "gratitude for the things you usually take for granted but there is not such a thing, this is something I learnt from the disaster". Last but not least, a few mentioned at the outset that "they never really thought about happiness" (75 year old, married store owner), before delving into providing us with stories of their experiences of happiness or by trying to formulate definitions.

This first part of the interview pointed us to how influenced definitions and understanding of emotions are through any kind of personal experiences. Happiness is very much an interpretative process, embedded in social networks and across personal biographies. Not one definition exists in people's heads, complicating the interpretation of quantitative surveys.

We greatly benefitted from part 1 also in its function as an ice-breaker into the interview and essentially conversation. While people sometimes found it hard to response in a concise way, they were usually surprisingly frank and open when it came to personal reminiscences.

### *Part 2: The multidimensionality of life satisfaction*

The use of the chart and placing the many token facilitated the conversation with our interviewees, who were often very pleased by seeing their final arrangement. We saw that they accepted the outcome as a visualization of a current slice of their life, and in more than one case people thanked us the interviews as they experienced it as enjoyable and as a kind of a psychoanalytic therapy session. For example, we know that in the region the life domains of highest significance for leading a happy life are very likely to be (1) family (respective partner); (2) health; (3) friends; (4) wealth, and (5) a sense of purposeful living (if not food or alcohol). And we also know what for our sample is of the least importance for a happy life, namely (1) television; (2) politics; (3) religion; (4) education; (5) the economy.

In informal conversations prior to our interviews during earlier fieldwork we had people tell us how important the free telephone, which the local government had installed in all households and which even comes with a screen to see the other party, was praised by the locals. They said it helped them to stay in contact with family and friends in the region. The ability to see the other person on this particular phone, is also thought to be of high value to the administration and also in larger terms the potential for long-distance health check / care of the elderly population, that has difficulty to reach a doctor’s office or a hospital, which often in rural areas requires the use of a car to get to there. So naturally we thought this material item would rank rather high in its importance for life satisfaction, yet we were mistaken. It did not matter much at all to the lives of our interviewees, even though we heard about its convenience from many. Smart phones and the internet take a much more dominant role for the life satisfaction of people– even in remote, rural Japan.

To the best of our knowledge, this bullseye chart of “the self and its life satisfaction” is a first in the application for happiness research - among sociologists at least. It came out of our desire to (a) make the interviews less “abstract” for the interviewees, to (b) use the chart element as a starting point for detailed questions to follow thereafter, (c) to be able to cover the multidimensionality of happiness and life satisfaction in a comparably short period of time of an hour or hour and a half of interview time, (d) to understand the importance of some elements in people’s lives in relation to other elements in their lives, and (e) by making visible and understanding clusters of elements, namely how some elements are clustered together on the chart by the interviewees, whereas other tokens are placed on the board in far distance from other token. All these relationships can be portrayed by giving our interviewees such a visual tool, allowing us to get into complexities of relationships of the different aspects and relationships in their lives, but which would have otherwise been extraordinarily difficult to extrapolate from our respondents in such comparably short interview times.

### *Part 3: Happiness as goal - between reality and ideal*

Current levels of happiness range for our respondents on the scale of 0 to 10 between 1 and 10. A 48-year old female shop owner, single, who found herself financially exhausted due to the slump in tourism after the earthquake, is the one who rated her happiness the least, whereas a married woman with a ten-year old son, a fairly satisfying profession, as well as a strong religious household saw herself on the highest rung of the happiness ladder. The majority however ranked either a 5 or 8 or in-between these values. A recent in-migrant into the area, a man in his early 30s, has a girlfriend living far away from Kyushu. This long-distance relationship, coupled with few financial means for frequent meetings, cut the rating of his current state of happiness to 5, explaining that happy as he is right now, he feels half and incomplete: “Moving in together with her, building a house and setting up a family, that would be great, and that would make up a full ten.”

Not only do we see great variability in happiness levels, but also in what people consider as ideal levels. Most people would see the ideal level of happiness above their current level, which shows their awareness of something lacking in their current life. 10 of the 23 interviewees saw the ideal level of happiness on the upper extreme of the scale. Interesting to see that even more people agree that it is very important to be happy (15 out of 23). Despite the many findings that can be drawn from the conversations with interviewees after marking their three answers, but which do not find room here, we certainly can conclude that “the happier the better” as the underlying understanding of happiness in quantitative surveys is shown not to be a universal concept, if this small, unrepresentative sample of interviewees here can at all be seen as indicative.

## Concluding remarks

Due to space limitations here, the specifics for living in rural Japan and the meaning for happiness and life satisfaction could not be elaborated on. Also, interlinking all three parts of the methodology applied here remains an ongoing analytical challenge (see Holthus and Manzenreiter (forthcoming). Evaluating the benefits of the methodological approach, however, we can say that the quality of findings as well as ease of conducting the interviews exceeded our expectations by far.

The bullseye chart got a lot of praise from our interviewees, and they became alive and very talkative. We believe this method would be applicable to different cultural context beyond Japan and also easily adaptable to very different social groups. Tokens could easily be adjusted to only feature images. The visual aid of the chart provides stimulation for high quality conversation, because it manages to portray the different factors in relation to each other, to be provided with an evaluation about the strength of these indicators, also in relation to each other. This complexity could not be grasped without any visual tool. Yet instructions are extraordinarily simple, which makes it appealing to many different types of interviewees. We very much hope that this method will be tried out in many different cultural contexts, with different types of interviewees, the young and the old, the high and low educated, from different social classes and different walks of life.

What we did not however check is the test-retest validity of the chart findings. Would people place the chart the same way the next time they would be asked to? Certainly the replicability would have to be addressed in future applications. Yet we envision our developed method here to be easily adjustable and adaptable to different cultural contexts. It is easy enough to use even in societies with limited education, as the tokens could be images rather than words. Even research with children on their happiness and life satisfaction could be done this way. We hope that in the future, researchers will adapt this approach to their cultural contexts to improve or test our method. Last but not least, in our increasingly visual world, to have tools like this board-game chart, which cater to that, are beneficial, they help getting into the topic fast, are pleasant for interviewee and interviewer, and also help in visualizing research findings to the academic community thereafter.

## Acknowledgements

We want to thank everyone whom we met in the two locations of our research in Kumamoto prefecture. The administration, the shop owners, the residents, they all took us into their homes or offices, they helped smooth the way into the communities, and they were patient with our many questions. We are grateful for the interviewees who shared their very personal stories with us.

Thanks also go to Mariko Konishi and Kumpei Shirai for transcribing the interviews and to both the University of Vienna and the German Institute for Japanese Studies for their financial support of this research project. And last but not least, Barbara likes to express her gratitude to the Minister of State for Happiness and Well-being in the UAE, Her Excellency Ohood Al Roumi, spearheading the Global Dialogue on Happiness and Wellbeing, for inviting me to join an inspiring global network and exchange of like-minded scholars, practitioners and officials, who all strive to understand what essentially makes the world a happier place.

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