



Social Well-Being in Vietnam: Designing and Preliminary Results from a Sampling Survey

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Abstract

The main intent of this paper is to summarize the process of the 2015 sampling survey on social well-being in Vietnam (SWB survey), which was a part of the Senshu-led Consortium on social well-being research in Asia. The survey was carried out by a research team from the Institute of Sociology of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, in order to measure the level of happiness and life satisfaction among Vietnamese adults currently living in the country's Northern, Central, and Southern regions. With a sample size of 1,202 men and women aged 20 and over, the survey sample represented the national population structure in terms of age and sex, as well as rural-urban breakdown. Data quality control was ensured through careful training of interviewers, questionnaire design and pre-test, and strict supervision in the field to ensure a high response rate. Preliminary results showed a fairly high level of happiness of the respondents. Although Vietnam is still a developing country characterized by low income and many hardships, the results suggest that cultural norms and values, national tradition, and other non-economic factors have a significant influence on high life satisfaction. The paper concludes with a strong recommendation for undertaking in-depth and comprehensive analyses, utilizing the 2015 SWB data, particularly in comparative perspectives with Japan, South Korea, and other Asian country members of the SWB Consortium.

Keywords

social well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, sample survey, data quality

Well-being is a culturally universal feature of human beings. At all historical times, well-being is always a goal for humankind to pursue and achieve. In the 1960s, the science of well-being expanded beyond philosophical reflections to include the empirical sciences, particularly psychology and sociology in Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere (Dang 2012).

Helliwell (2003) maintains that well-being is influenced by multi-level factors. At the macro level, well-being relies heavily on the quality of social factors, such as wealth, justice, freedom, and policies that help improve these things. At the

intermediate level, it depends on factors such as institutional autonomy at work, or the care regime, and institutional reforms. At the micro level, well-being depends on individuals' abilities, such as the feeling of happiness, independence, and social skills. Education and treatment can improve these factors.

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In the studies of Western authors, well-being is often interpreted as satisfying individual needs within a specific social context, including the need for material items and spirituality. Well-being is the measure of a person's rating of his or her life. In other words, it is a measure of how much people are satisfied with their lives. The concepts of "happiness" and "life satisfaction" have similar meanings and are often used as substitute terms for the concept of "well-being." Veenhoven (2003) defined well-being as "the sum of joy and suffering." It is the overall evaluation of a person about his life. This concept differs from one wherein quality of life includes only all that is good.

However, because well-being is subjective, it is difficult to measure (Helliwell 2003). The strength of the concept of "satisfaction" is its emphasis on the subjective aspect of well-being. It includes good objective aspects, especially for philosophers. Therefore, people often use the term "subjective well-being" to avoid confusion. The concept of social well-being is overall self-evaluation of life. People often feel whether their expectations are being met. However, satisfaction does not mean that there will not be things to complain and worry about. Many people are quite satisfied with their overall lives, but they may have anxiety and are not free of worry.

In most studies on social well-being, it is important to report the conceptual problem encountered. The topic is right at the core of Sen's economic and philosophical work (Sen 2017). Most basically, he was asking the question – what is happiness? Well-being is concerned with a person's achievement: how *well* is his or her *being*? The opportunities are not judged only by the results achieved, and therefore not just by the level of well-being achieved. Scholars and economists have to be about truth, and must measure and report happiness and well-being.

In today's world, the study of well-being has become a real science. In most countries around the world, it is indispensable for managers and policy makers to adjust social policies for sustainable development. However, research on social well-being in

Vietnam has not been set out adequately, and there is big gap to fill. Social well-being is a relatively new topic in Vietnam, both in terms of social policy and research.

Rapid socio-economic changes and international integration in Vietnam are transforming social relationships and people, at the family and community level and beyond to society. Such changes in the current living conditions include income, employment, livelihood, working conditions, food, clothing, housing, transportation, health care, education, lifestyle, entertainment, security, laws, values, and ideology. These factors inevitably change people's perception of well-being and happiness. It is essential to evaluate the nature of this transformation in a specific and detailed way through an empirical study.

The Social Well-Being Survey (SWB) was conducted in Vietnam in the fall of 2015, with the technical and financial support of Senshu University's Center for Social Well-being Studies. The lack of an earlier survey on social well-being motivated the collection of data for this study in the form of the ICSLV (International Comparative Surveys on Lifestyle and Values) survey. We are aware that there are differences across social strata in people's perception about social well-being. We will evaluate this difference in a specific and detailed way using the above SWB survey. In this paper, we first describe the characteristics of the survey to introduce its design and scope. Second, we will explain the process of the survey. Finally, we will present some preliminary results from the data analysis, which can lay a foundation for more sophisticated and advanced work in the future.

THE SAMPLING DESIGN AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY IN VIETNAM

As aforementioned, the survey was conducted in three provinces/cities in the three most populated regions. They are Hanoi in the Red River Delta, Da Nang in South Central, and Can Tho in the Mekong Delta. These

are the most populated areas and represent 1/4 of Vietnam's total population. In each of these provinces, two communes and one ward were selected, for a total of nine communes for the study. This stage involved the random selection of communes with probability proportional to size. In each of the chosen provinces, about 400 households were selected, which leads to a total sample of 1,202 households that were interviewed for this survey. Interestingly, 25.2% of the households were located in urban areas and 74.8% in rural areas.

The SWB survey sampling design was conducted in two stages. The first stage was the selection of 30 enumeration areas ("EA") (10 EAs in each of 3 provinces), and the second stage was the selection of 40 households in each selected EA, resulting in a total sample size of 1,200 households. The EAs were selected using the Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) method based on the square number of households in each EA.¹ To ensure the sampling frame was accurate and up to date, EA leaders of the sampled EAs were asked for collection information of all households regardless of registration status of the dwelling before the actual fieldwork. Because the same number of households was chosen from each commune regardless of the number of households in the commune, in the analysis we should apply weights to adjust for differences in the probabilities of selecting the households across the communes. All households on the resulting lists were found to have either temporary or permanent registration in their current place of residence.

THE SURVEY PROCESS

The SWB survey was carried out in Vietnam from July to October 2015. The survey was conducted by a research team from the Institute of Sociology (IOS) that is familiar with the project and the substance of the study. In the field, the team was assisted by local collaborators for locating households and for obtaining interview consents.

The survey questionnaire was composed

in English based on the draft provided by the Senshu team and then translated into Vietnamese. It was pretested and revised for social and cultural appropriateness. Most questions relate to many aspects of people's lives, including social, physical, and economic. Each of these aspects can be judged by several standards; for example, the social environment can be evaluated for the safety it provides and for the fairness it achieves.

Before the official start of the main fieldwork, a survey pretest was conducted during the beginning of July 2015. The pretest's purpose was to identify steps and test the survey questionnaires. Interviewer training took place in each of the provinces and involved the local collaborators. In each of the provinces, a team of six people worked together in pairs. They were supported by the field supervisors and coordinators. In each of the communes/wards, the interviewers worked together. In each of the randomly selected households, the head of household was invited to be interviewed for household information. The head of household was an adult man or woman in the age group of 20-70 years, who could provide information about the household and the social well-being of himself/herself.

The fieldwork was successfully completed on October 30, 2015. In general, the survey was welcomed by local authorities, and people were enthusiastic to participate in the interviews and meetings. Data collection was conducted employing enumerators. To ensure the quality of the data collected, enumerators were supervised through quality control mechanisms, which included direct supervision in the field, random and daily checking data checking, and performance evaluations. Missing cases were minimal in number and the non-response rate was quite small. Overall, 1,202 Vietnamese adults participated in the SWB survey. Following the survey fieldwork, data entry and data cleaning took place in Hanoi in November and December 2015. This research stage required the team to actively design relevant forms for data entry and coding of the

answers. Currently, the data set is being cleaned and prepared for analysis.

In addition to the quantitative survey using questionnaires, the research team conducted a small number of in-depth interviews with key informants and individuals to provide insight to explain the survey results. The in-depth interviews have been transcribed. This important step of combining quantitative and qualitative information will help us conduct a meaningful and synthesized analysis of the survey data.

THE DATA QUALITY

Survey data can be used to obtain a breakdown by many characteristics, such as province, rural-urban, gender, and age. The size and structure of the population, including the age and sex structure, depends on the respondents sampled in the 2015 SWB survey. Therefore, when comparing the age-sex structure of different populations, it is important to pay attention to the differences in respondents of different surveys. Below are some of the validating results of the current data set of the 2015 SWB survey. The accuracy of population data by age and sex directly affects the accuracy of a range of

social and demographic indicators.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the age structure of the Vietnam Intercensal Demographic Survey (2014 VN-ICDS) and our survey (2015 SWB). The age structure is characterized by 5-year age groups. Figure 1 shows that, in general, the age structure curve of the 2015 survey is slightly higher than that of the 2014 survey. The results show a similar pattern of age distribution between the two surveys. To some extent, the population of the 2015 SWB survey represents the age structure of Vietnam as produced by the national survey of 2014 VN-ICDS. It should be noted that the 2015 SWB survey, unlike previous national population surveys or censuses, did not sample from the entire population. People in the army and police force and diplomats were not reached and covered by the sample. Therefore, the age structure of the 2015 SWB sample is somewhat different from that of the national population revealed by the 2014 VN-ICDS (Figure 1).

The sex ratio is used as a measure of the male and female composition of the population and is defined as the number of males per 100 females. This percentage is greater than 100 if the number of men is

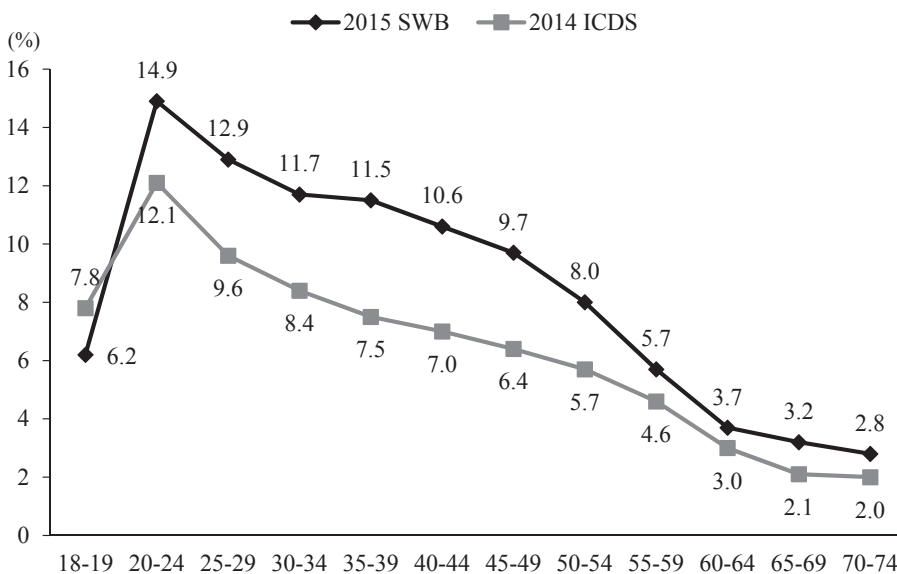


Figure 1. Age Structure of the Survey Populations

larger than the number of women and vice versa. In developing countries with relatively high life expectancy, such as Vietnam, the sex ratio of the total population is usually less than 100. In many developing countries with low life expectancy, however, the sex ratio of the population is generally greater than 100. The results show that the sex ratio of the population from the 2015 SWB survey is 98.8 and 97.3 from the 2014 VN-ICDS. These ratios are not significantly different

between the two surveys, which indicates the accuracy of the 2015 SWB data.

Figure 2 presents the sex distribution of the 2014 VN-ICDS and the 2015 SWB surveys. It is possible to directly compare the sex compositions of the populations across the two surveys. These figures are virtually equal for both men and women, suggesting that the quality of the 2015 SWB survey is good.



Figure 2. Sex Distribution of the Survey Population

Urbanization is one of the most important development targets of countries around the world, partly because of the role that urban centers play in economic growth and productivity. There are considerable differences in the urbanization levels between the two surveys. According to the 2015 SWB survey results, the urban population accounted for 25.8%, which is relatively lower than the national figure of Vietnam (approximately 34%). The migration of people may be the primary reason for this difference in the rural-urban population breakdown. The more economically developed regions in Vietnam, especially the large cities and urban areas, are attractive to migrants. According to the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey, “Improving incomes is considered to be one of the main reasons of migration” (GSO

2016). A vast number of migrants rushed to large cities. In fact, temporary migrants without a permanent household registration are not included in the SWB sample because they are considered “outer provincial labor” and not part of the official population of the cities. Had these migrants been included in the sample and study population, the proportion of urban population in the 2015 SWB survey would have been higher and closer to the national level of Vietnam.

SOME PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In this section, preliminary results from the 2015 SWB survey will be presented to provide tentative findings. The survey used a series of questions to determine the

levels of happiness and life satisfaction. Two measurement scales were constructed to enable us to describe and quantify levels in social well-being. The respondents were asked the following questions: (1) “How happy are you currently?” and (2) “How satisfied are you currently with life overall?”

Vietnamese adults provided positive responses to the questions. One of the prominent findings from the SWB survey is the high level of satisfaction reported by the respondents (Figure 3). A majority

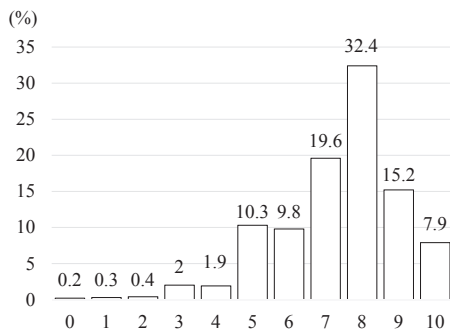


Figure 3. How Satisfied Are You Currently with Life Overall?

Our in-depth interviews offer insights into what is on the minds of Vietnamese adults today. When asked to name the three things that make for a good life, Vietnamese people answered good health, family relationships, and wealth/money. Connectedness with close ones (family and friends) is related to well-being. Lifestyle choices such as being active, getting a good night’s sleep, doing exercises, and engaging in relaxing/tourist activities are also associated with higher well-being. Most respondents are likely to participate in many activities inside and outside of their households. They like getting along with members of their family and friends, and most maintain optimistic feelings when they face with hardships. Health and, most particularly, relationships have a strong impact on well-being.

Economically, the Vietnamese people believe that their lives are improving.

of respondents reported a high level of happiness (Figure 4). Overall, about one in two Vietnamese adults are highly satisfied with their lives (55.2%), whereas one in four adults are unsatisfied with their lives (25%).

As shown in Figure 4, a high proportion of respondents are happy. Despite the difficulties, life currently looks bright for Vietnamese adults. About 78% of the respondents reported being happy and optimistic with their current lives.

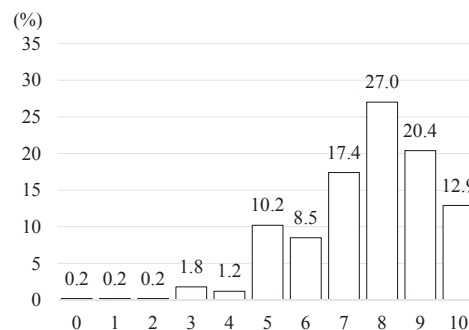


Figure 4. Social Wellbeing: How Happy Are You Currently?

Although Vietnamese adults said that acquiring valuable assets was a sign of success and made them happy, the in-depth interview results showed that houses, land, cars, expensive clothes, and other luxurious goods do not necessarily account for social well-being, which is closely linked to life satisfaction and happiness. These things are not translating into an improvement in overall happiness.

A positive sense of well-being and attitude towards life is important to examine. In response to the question, “How did your own life circumstances change, or how do you think they will change?,” the survey respondents provided positive answers. The data in Figure 5 show that people think positively about change in their own lives both in the past and in the future as they age. Those who are able to live in the moment and be present reported higher well-being scores.

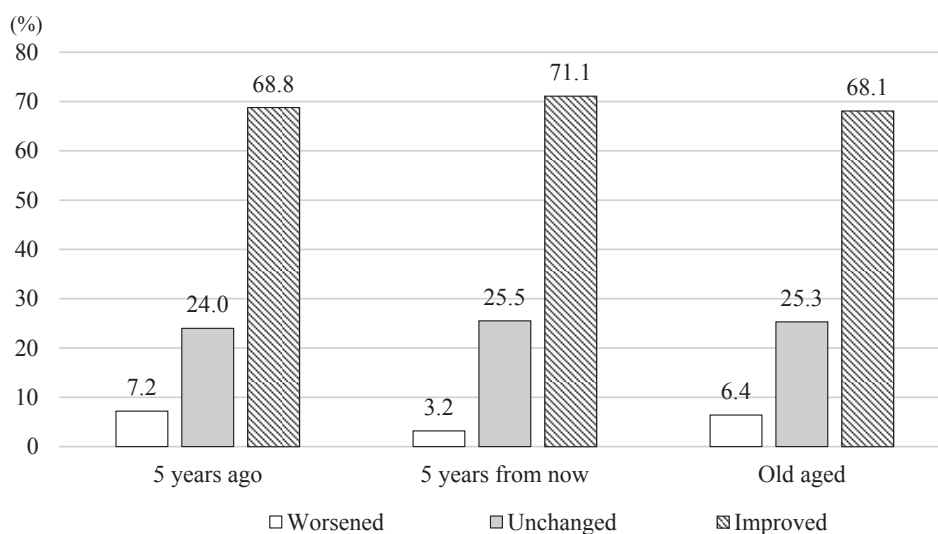


Figure 5. How Did Your Own Life Circumstances Change?

As part of the SWB Consortium survey series, 1,202 Vietnamese adults responded to a series of questions. The 2015 SWB survey utilized different measures of well-being that have been adopted in global studies. Overall, the survey respondents reported a positive attitude and high level of happiness and satisfaction. Vietnamese adults are likely to be happier in the future. The preliminary findings also suggest a wide range of factors and activities that Vietnamese people could examine to improve their well-being. This idea can continually be explored and further discussed in a more comprehensive analysis.

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Notes

1. Designed by the General Statistical Office (GSO), the 2009 Population and Housing Census, the most recent census in Vietnam, used the same frame for the selection of EAs.

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