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## Impact of Subjective Feelings about the Environment on Personal Happiness and Satisfaction with Life in Korea

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In the developing countries people used to think that per capita Gross National Product(GNP) was a good measure of the quality of life, and that to live in a country of high per capita GNP meant a better quality of life. The quantitative aspects of living conditions, such as percentage of paved roads and average nutrient intake, were the national and individual goal to achieve. As economic conditions go beyond the level of 'work for survival', however, the meaning of quality of life has changed. The qualitative aspects of life including family life, cultural programs, and health are arousing more concern than before. The issues about the environment are the ones which recently began to draw Koreans' attention. Even though there are many other important problems (for example, national unification, economic recession, etc), many Koreans will not hesitate to choose the environmental problem as an urgent one to be solved. In fact until recently the dark smoke coming out of the chimneys of huge factories was regarded as a symbol of industrial development, and air- and water-pollution as inescapable and not-too-serious problems.

Many scientists realize that overexploitation of the ecosystem may destroy the very basis of our planetary survival: fuel shortage, nuclear power-plants accident, acid rain, urban smog, rain forest destruction, etc. In the developing countries there are even more serious environmental problems. Since the 1960s Korea has achieved rapid economic development, and, as a result, it is now facing various environmental problems. It is expected that the environmental issues will play more important roles in terms of quality of life in the future. Nevertheless it is not easy to answer how important it is, and how much of a role it is playing in deciding quality of life. Although there have been several studies dealing with the relationship between quantitative environmental conditions and satisfaction with life, subjective feelings about the environment have not drawn enough concern among social scientists.

This paper seeks to extend the previous researches on quality of life by introducing subjective feelings about the environment. It explores the impact of subjective feelings about the environment on personal happiness and satisfaction with life in Korea.

BACKGROUND

Social scientists including Sociologists have tended to exclude the physical environment from the list of research subjects, not because it was unimportant but because they thought it was not a proper variable in analysing society and human behavior (Humphrey and Buttel, 1982; Klausner, 1971). Since the main focus of sociological analysis is on social structures, human behavior, norms, institutions, classes, etc, the scholars took the external environment for granted. In industrially advanced countries, however, environmental problems have become important issues to both the professionals and the public at large since 1960s. The reason why the environmental problems became public issues is that the pollution problem and the exhaustion of natural resources were very serious and, as a result, the survival of human beings became questionable (Yang, 1995).

Many environmentalists and environmental sociologists agree that "... the most important reason for the environmental problems is the rapid economic development since the modern ages" (Ibid). Because there are inseparable relationships between the environment and quality of life, and economic development is responsible for today's environmental problems, the relationship among economic development, the environment, and quality of life should be made clear. There are abundant proofs in advanced capitalist societies that economic development does not always promise a good social welfare system and improve quality of life (Buttel, 1979; Hirsch, 1976). While economic development can be easily measured by existing indicators such as GNP, those related to the environment and quality of life are hard to define and measure.

Studies about the environment conducted in Korea until 1970s were scarce, due to the 'development first' policy. Beginning in the 1980s, the environment became one of the topics for academic researches. Nonetheless, most of the researches were somewhat far from social scientific concerns, because they started from the engineering, ecological, or medical perspectives. Although there were some studies with a social science perspective, they were mostly done to promote citizens' campaigns, and, as a result, quality of life was not the major issue in the studies.

In the developed countries, the environment has been an important variable in deciding quality of life. Campbell, Convers and Rodgers (1976) used the physical environment and natural environment in studying quality of life in the United States. In studying the case of Germany, Zapf (1987) included the environment as one of the eleven living conditions which influenced subjective well-being. In Japan, 'The environment and safety' is one of the eight indicators which construct 'Japan Life Indicators' (Japan EPB, 1991).

Although there are studies which try to connect quality of life with the environment, most of them focus on the development of quantitative indicators. Even though it is important in studying the environment to measure objective indices like pollution levels, it is more important to know how people think and feel

about them.

## DATA AND MEASURES

### Data

Data for this analysis comes from The National Survey of The Quality of Life done in 1996. The survey is the first nationwide one which deals with subjective aspects of quality of life in Korea. It is a national probability sample of 1,000 non-institutionalized persons age 20 and older. The sampling method is a probability proportionate to size sampling, and the survey method is by person-to-person interview. Sampling units are households within geographic clusters; consequently, multiple members of the same household may be included in the survey.

### Measures

Many social scientists used personal satisfaction and happiness when they studied subjective quality of life. Davis and Davis (1991) argue that actual individual welfare and sense of well-being are far more complex and subjective conditions than implied by descriptive social indicators based on aggregate data. Thus, a greater emphasis should be placed on the development of subjective social indicators, which are based, not on aggregate national data, but are instead obtained by means of surveys into subjective perceptions, attitudes and evaluations by individuals of aspects of their lives, including perceptions of their objective conditions.

Is a person with a high concern for the environment happier and more satisfied with life than others, or vice versa? Generally speaking, because it is not easy for a person with a low income to have a concern for the environment, having a concern for the environment presupposes a certain level of living standard. Because good living conditions tend to give a person greater happiness and satisfaction, we may conclude that a person with a high concern for the environment would have a relatively greater happiness and life satisfaction.

The relationship, however, between personal concern for the environment and personal happiness and satisfaction with life is very complex. Living in a place with good objective conditions (for example, clean air in the countryside) may mean bad welfare or health facilities. Also, a high concern for the environment may mean a high frustration level; in other words, a high concern for the environment may result from poor environmental conditions and resulting high dissatisfaction.

Moreover, in Korea, there are more important things than the environment which influence the quality of life. For instance, due to extremely low income level, residents of a community may give priority to the

economic development of the area instead of preservation of the forest.

From this context, subjective feelings about the environment may not have a meaningful relationship with quality of life measured by happiness and satisfaction with life. Thus, I examine the following hypotheses:

1. A subjective feeling that the environment is getting worse does not have a meaningful relationship with personal happiness.
2. A subjective feeling of the urgency of the environmental crisis does not have a meaningful relationship with personal satisfaction with life.

To measure personal happiness and the satisfaction with life, I use the following questions, respectively; "Considering everything, do you feel happy these days?", "Overall, how much are you satisfied with your life in Korea?" To measure the degree of subjective feeling that the environment is getting worse, I use two questions; "Which aspects of life in Korea do you think are getting worse?" and "On the other hand, which aspects of life in Korea do you think are getting better?" If a person chooses the environment for the first question, s/he is classified as a person feeling the environment is getting worse. If a person chooses the environment for the second question, s/he is classified as a person feeling the environment is getting better. Finally, if a person does not choose the environment for any of the questions, s/he is classified as one in the middle.

The question asking "How urgent do you think each of the following environmental problems are?" is used to measure subjective feelings of urgency towards the environmental crisis. For nine environmental problems (toxic waste, nuclear waste, domestic waste, water pollution, air pollution, soil pollution, destruction of the forest, and over-population) respondents are asked to mark from 'very urgent' to 'not urgent at all'. The total score for the problems is used for the analysis. Table 1 shows the means of each variable.

**Table 1. Variable Summary**

Variable	Mean	Range
Percentage of the Respondents Feeling the Environment is Getting Worse	52.5%	
Score of the Urgency of the Environmental Crisis	37.2	5 through 45
Personal Happiness	3.25	1 through 5
Personal Satisfaction with Life in Korea	3.55	1 through 5
Proportion Living in Large Cities	.49	
Proportion of Male Respondents	.50	
Age	38.8	
Educational Level	Highschool Graduate	

## RESULTS

Table 2 is a crosstabulation of subjective feeling about the environment and personal happiness. As shown in the table, subjective feeling that the environment is getting worse does not have any meaningful relationship to personal happiness ( $p=.0650$ ). Ironically, from the fact that those who feel the environment is getting worse show a higher proportion of being happy than other groups, there is a negative relationship between subjective feeling about the environment and personal happiness, although there is

one's expectation level and to change one's reference points.

**Table 2. Crosstabulation of Personal Happiness and Subjective Feeling of the Environment**

Personal Happiness	Subjective Feeling of the Environment		
	Getting Worse	No Change	Getting Better
Not Happy at All	1.3	2.1	4.3
Not Happy	12.0	13.6	8.7
So-So	48.3	52.9	59.8
Happy	30.2	26.4	23.9
Very Happy	8.2	5.0	3.3
Total	100.0	100	100.0
(N)	(524)	(382)	(92)

$\chi^2=14.71$      $df=8$      $p=.0650$

no statistical significance.

The result of regression analysis of satisfaction with life on independent variables is presented in Table 3. In the regression, the dummies for living in large cities and sex are not significant. On the other hand, age, educational level, and subjective feelings of urgency about the environment are significant. The reason why educational level shows negative significance is that the more educated a person is, the higher the desire for good living conditions becomes. Also, because older people are more likely than younger people to enjoy the current economic condition, which has improved compared to the past, age variable shows positive significance. The limit of the table, however, is that the proportion of variance explained is only 4.43%.

Table 3. Regression Results for Personal Satisfaction with Life in Korea

Predictor	Regression Coefficient	Standardized Beta
Living in Large Cities	.3340	.0182
Sex	-.0743	-.0397
Age	.0122	.1487***
Urgency of the Environmental Crisis	.0124	.0687
Education	-.0454	-.0889*
(Constant)	2.8617	

Adjusted R2 = .0443  
F = 10.2661\*\*\*

\*: p<.05 \*\*\*: p<.001

In general, the satisfaction with life goes up with the improvement of objective living conditions. Nonetheless, it may not be the case, because the improvement of objective living conditions tend to raise one's expectation level and to change one's reference points.

## DISCUSSION

In this analysis I have examined the relationship between subjective feelings about the environment and personal happiness and satisfaction with life. According to the results, subjective feeling that the environment is getting worse has no relationship to personal happiness, and subjective feelings of urgency about the environmental crisis have a statistically significant relationship to personal satisfaction with life, but the proportion of variance explained is small. On the basis of the results of this study, the environment, despite its growing importance, does not yet play a central role in deciding personal happiness and satisfaction with life in Korea.

I cannot, however, devalue the importance of the environment in quality of life. The reasons why the environment has a weak influence on quality of life is that, first, the environment is still not the most important variable compared to other necessities such as income level over poverty, and, second, many Koreans do not think that the current environmental situation has reached a real crisis.

Increase in pollution following economic development and population increase has given Koreans negative impacts on the quality of life. Considering that this results from strategy centered on development, from now on, government policy should focus on enhancing quality of life.

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