
Satisfaction Levels (Qualitative Data)*

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I. Introduction

Qualitative data, which represents the subjective viewpoints of survey respondents, has long been employed in various types of analysis in fields such as sociology and psychology. In recent years qualitative data analysis has been performed with increasing frequency in economics as well.

In Japan, people’s values are diversifying, and a single word—such as “freeter”—can prompt a wide range of reactions. “Freeter” is a Japanese neologism combining the English word “free” (in the sense of “freelance”) with the German *arbeiter*, meaning laborer (in Japan *arubaito*, from the German *arbeit*, is a loan word referring to part-time work). A freeter is a young person who lacks steady employment and subsists on a series of short-lived part-time jobs. When the word was coined in the late 1980s, it had positive connotations of freewheeling bohemianism, but as the job market worsened thereafter, it took on an increasingly negative cast as more and more young people adopted this sort of lifestyle not out of choice but because they were unable to find full-time jobs. In a case like this, where a single word is the subject of varying impressions and interpretations, qualitative data analysis has the potential to aid greatly in gauging people’s true attitudes toward persons lacking fixed employment.

In Japan, “Lost Two Decades” of economic stagnation followed the burst of an asset price bubble in 1991, and the outlook for future economic growth remains dim. Under that situation, there is an increasing concern to the happiness levels under the low economic growth, focused on the questions of which factors contribute to happiness or subjective well-being, and what sort of yardsticks should be used to measure it.¹

In the current research environment, qualitative data is dramatically increasing in importance. In this paper, I will present qualitative-data statistics on satisfaction levels in two areas, namely job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Also, I will outline precautions to be kept in mind when handling qualitative data.

II. Statistics Used to Survey Satisfaction Level

Table 1 summarizes key statistical surveys containing questions pertaining to

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

¹ Refer to Ohtake, Shiraishi and Tsutsui (2010) for further information on research into happiness levels.

Table 1. Major Statistical Surveys with Questions Pertaining to Satisfaction Level

	Job satisfaction	Life satisfaction	Happiness level	Specific character of statistics
National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences (2008) (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan)	How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your work? Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (almost completely unsatisfied) or 6 (don't know / can't answer) • My job is rewarding and suits my abilities • I am free from fear of losing my job • I am able to take a sufficient amount of vacation time each year etc.	Question: Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with your lifestyle? Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (dissatisfied) or 6 (don't know / can't answer)	*Survey contains items pertaining to happiness level from 2009 onward. Question: How happy are you currently? Respond with a number from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy)	6,000 males and females aged 15 to 75 are surveyed. Survey was conducted every three years from 1978 to 2008. Happiness level has been surveyed since 2009.
Japanese General Social Surveys (JGSS) (2010)	Question: How satisfied are you with your current job? Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (dissatisfied)	How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your lifestyle? Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (dissatisfied) • Home life • Area of residence • Leisure time usage etc.	Question: Are you currently happy? Respond with a number from 1 (happy) to 5 (unhappy)	9,000 males and females aged 20 to 89 are surveyed. Two types of surveys conducted, face-to-face interviews and questionnaires handed to respondents and collected later. Surveys conducted continuously since 2000.
Japanese Panel Survey of Consumers (9th survey, 2011) (Institute for Research on Household Economics)	—	Question: Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with your lifestyle? Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (dissatisfied)	Question: Do you consider yourself happy or unhappy? Respond with a number from 1 (very happy) to 5 (very unhappy)	Panel survey of females aged 24 to 34, first conducted in 1993 with several follow-ups thereafter.
Japanese Life Course Panel Survey on Youth (2009) (University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science)	Question "How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your life?" includes the item "Job." Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (almost completely unsatisfied) or 6 (not applicable).	Question "How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your life?" includes the item "Lifestyle in general." Respond with a number from 1 (satisfied) to 5 (almost completely unsatisfied) or 6 (not applicable).	—	Panel survey of males and females aged 20 to 34, conducted in 2006.

Note: The statistical surveys shown above are only some of the relevant statistics available, and should not be seen as covering all of the territory.

satisfaction level. The first thing that strikes us about this table is the paucity of official statistics on a subjective topic such as satisfaction level. Indeed the only governmental survey we can use to track changes over time is the Cabinet Office's "National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences."

A second point is that there are two approaches to surveying job and life satisfaction. One seeks to assess overall job satisfaction or overall life satisfaction, while the other seeks to assess various individual factors that affect satisfaction level. For example, the Cabinet Office's "National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences" inquires into various aspects of job satisfaction such as motivation (i.e. degree to which a job is found rewarding), stability of employment, and vacation time. Meanwhile, the Japanese General Social Surveys (JGSS) breaks life satisfaction down into various survey items such as family life, area of residence, and ways of spending leisure time. As we shall see later, simply surveying overall level of job or life satisfaction does not lead to a clear picture of actual conditions. It is also essential to determine whether people consider themselves satisfied or not in each specific area. At the same time, there are studies that combine the results for various surveyed factors into comprehensive indicators of life satisfaction, happiness or subjective well-being. For example, since 2011 the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has been compiling the BLI (Better Life Index) as an assessment of life satisfaction and happiness in each of its member nations.

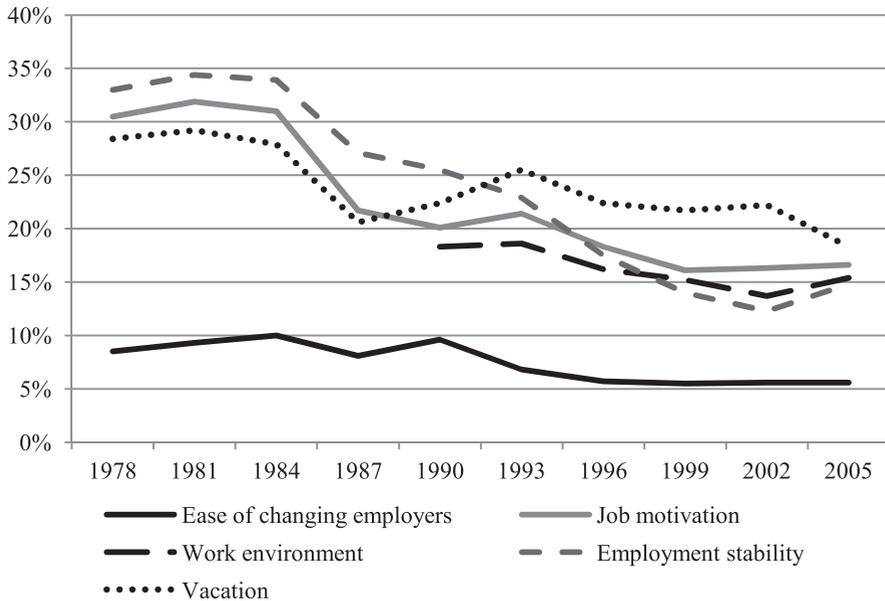
Third, it is important to note that in recent years, panel surveys evaluating satisfaction level have been carried out in Japan. Table 1 shows the Japanese Panel Survey of Consumers conducted by the Institute for Research on Household Economics and the Japanese Life Course Panel Survey on Youth performed by the University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science, but there are other panel surveys covering satisfaction level, happiness or subjective well-being, including those of the Global COE programs at Osaka University and Keio University. A panel survey enables researchers to track the progression of a certain individual's happiness level over time, and from a statistics perspective, is somewhat less difficult to analyze than purely subjective data. Difficulties with analysis will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

III. What Data on Satisfaction Level Tells Us

Thus far I have mentioned several surveys pertaining to job and life satisfaction. What do the results of these surveys tell us? Let us examine several issues in greater detail.

1. Job Satisfaction

The Cabinet Office's "National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences" features chronological data on job satisfaction. Figure 1 shows the percentages of people responding that they were



Source: Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, *National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences*.

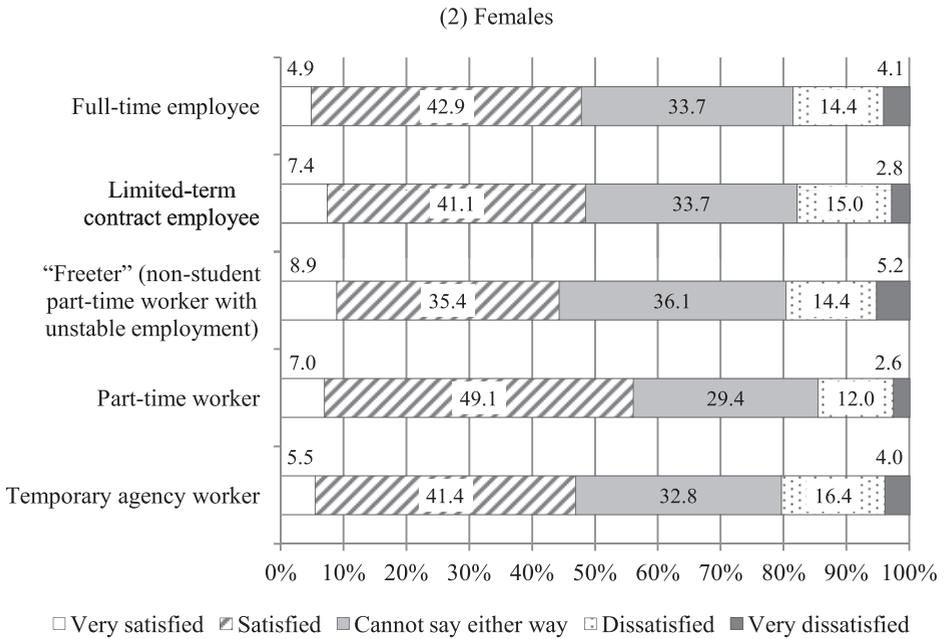
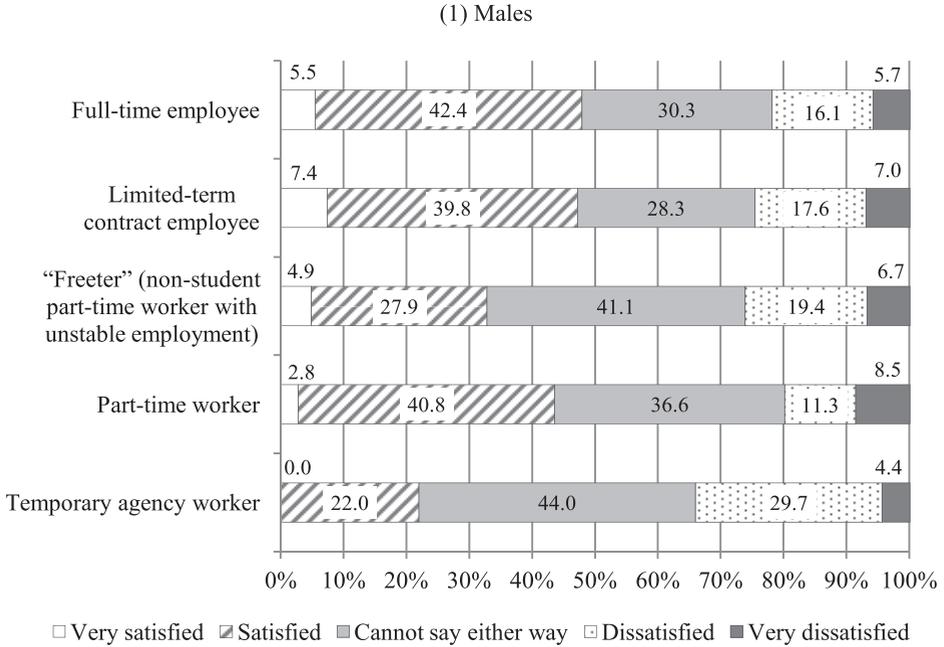
Note: Percentages are the total of respondents who indicated they were “satisfied” or “pretty satisfied.” For each aspect, the respective questions were: Job motivation: “My job is rewarding and suits my abilities,” Work environment: “My work environment is consistently comfortable,” Employment stability: “I am free from fear of losing my job,” Vacation: “I am able to take a sufficient amount of vacation time each year,” Ease of changing employers: “I feel it would be easy to change to an occupation of my choice.”

Figure 1. Percentage of People Who Consider Themselves Satisfied

“satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their work.² During the 1970s, when the survey was first launched, and the 1980s, figures for motivation, employment stability and vacation time were all high, but all of these dropped off steeply thereafter, and overall job satisfaction has been trending continually downward. Over the past 30 years, the greatest drop has been in employment stability. At the same time, “ease of changing employers” has remained at more or less the same low level over the same 30 years. Looking back over these three decades, we find satisfaction levels declining across a wide range of aspects.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2004) performed a regression analysis to determine the degree to which individual factors such as wages and working hours

² “Job satisfaction” pertains to the subjective viewpoints of persons performing jobs, and thus the statistical target group should be limited to working persons. However, no data limited to working persons has been released, and the statistics cited here are percentages of all those surveyed, working or non-working.



Source: RECRUIT Works Institute, Survey of Working Persons (2010).

Figure 2. Satisfaction Levels by Employment Status

influence overall job satisfaction. The coefficients expressing these degrees of influence indicate that (i) the most influential was job motivation, followed by (ii) wages, (iii) skill development and (iv) working hours. The results also indicate that even full-time workers are losing motivation as they fail to find rewarding jobs amid a stagnant economy. The relative importance of job motivation, compared to wages, highlights the growing obsolescence of the notion that “the purpose of work is to earn money.” Even when looking at job satisfaction levels comprehensively, there is a need for careful examination of each factor’s impact on the whole.

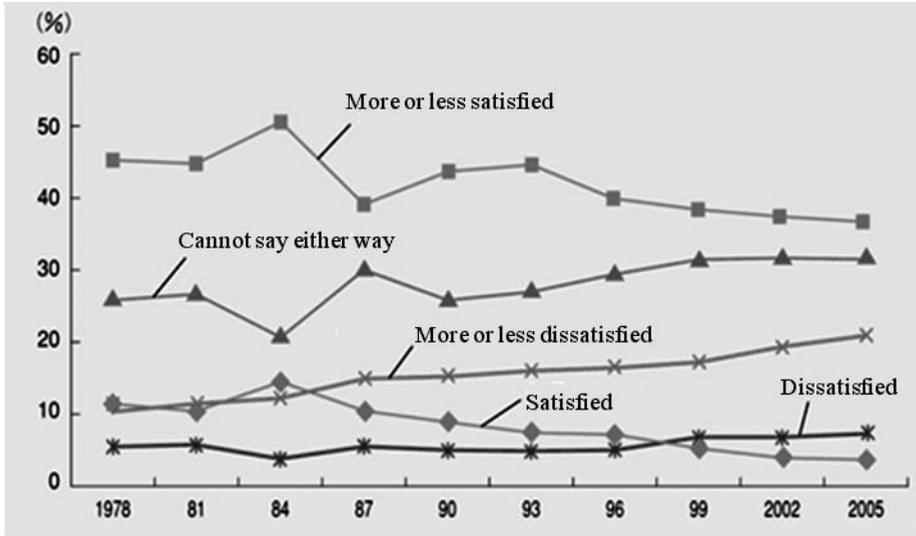
The 1990s were a decade of economic doldrums in which irregular employment grew increasingly common. Work motivation tends to be low among irregularly employed workers, and we may infer that the increasing number of workers with low motivation dragged down average job satisfaction levels across the board. Evidence to support this interpretation can be found in figures for job satisfaction level by employment status. Figure 2 shows the latest job satisfaction data broken down by gender and employment status, and we find that there are not enormous differences between full-time employees and others. Among male respondents, nearly 50% of full-time employees and contract employees consider themselves “very satisfied” or “satisfied,” and the figure is above 40% for part-time workers as well. The numbers are somewhat lower for irregularly employed part-timers (“freeters”) at about 30% and temporary agency workers at around 20%. Responses from female workers were much the same.

If there is not such a dramatic difference between the job satisfaction levels of full-time workers and others, it seems that the great drop in job satisfaction levels over the past 30 years is best explained by the difficulty in finding rewarding jobs that spur motivation amid a sluggish economy. With few prospects for growth, companies are faced with the tasks of cutting costs and maintaining high productivity levels, and continue to hire a bare minimum of workers even as workloads grow ever larger. Under these circumstances, even full-time workers are being sapped of motivation.

2. Life Satisfaction

Next, let us examine trends in life satisfaction levels. According to the Cabinet Office’s “National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences,” the percentage of people responding that they were “satisfied” was already low at 10.9% in 1978, but by 2005 had declined to a mere 3.6% (see Figure 3). Even the total for “satisfied” and “more or less satisfied” combined was only 35.8%, the lowest rate ever reported. Meanwhile, the total for “more or less dissatisfied” and “dissatisfied” rose from 15.6% in 1978 to 28.3% in 2005. The decline in percentage of people who are satisfied with their lives, matched by a corresponding rise in percentage of those who are dissatisfied, indicates a general decline in life satisfaction levels over the past three decades or so.

What characteristics stand out among people who are satisfied with their lives? Figure 4 shows differences in life satisfaction levels by gender and age group. Regardless of



Source: Prepared on the basis of the *National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences*, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan.

Notes: 1. Percentages of respondents to the question “Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with your lifestyle? Circle one response.”

2. Percentage of respondents answering “Don’t know / Can’t answer” omitted.

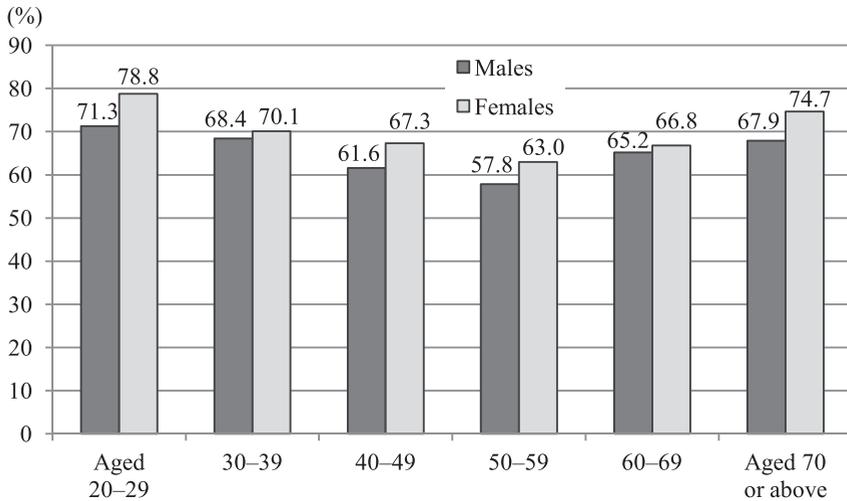
Figure 3. Overall Life Satisfaction Level

gender, satisfaction levels are lowest among people in their 50s, and get progressively higher as people grow younger or older. Satisfaction levels are slightly higher for females than for males regardless of age group. These findings provide further evidence that life satisfaction level is largely defined by factors other than income level.

Here I will note two analyses of the factors defining life satisfaction level. The Cabinet Office (2007) performed a regression analysis to elucidate factors that elevate life satisfaction, and found the following criteria to have significant positive impact on satisfaction levels:

- Sufficient time spent with family members
- Interaction with neighbors and members of the local community
- Interaction with co-workers
- Living with at least one other person
- Being married
- High income

One can intuitively grasp the correlation between higher incomes and higher levels of life satisfaction, but these findings show that other factors are also important, such as personal connections with family, neighbors and co-workers.



Source: Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, *National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences*.

Note: Percentages are the total of respondents who indicated they were “satisfied” or “pretty satisfied.”

Figure 4. Life Satisfaction Levels by Age Group

Toda (2012) employed the findings of the Japanese Panel Survey of Consumers, conducted by the Institute for Research on Household Economics, to investigate the degree to which women’s life satisfaction levels are affected by length of working hours and employment status. The findings indicated that among married women, those working shortened hours, non-regular employees, and those with long working hours (49 hours or more per week) had lower life satisfaction levels than full-time homemakers. The inference based on the fixed-effect model is that household income has a significant impact, but even controlling for household income, we find considerable disparities based on employment status and working hours.

3. Summary

This paper has sought to examine the chronological progression of job satisfaction and life satisfaction levels, and to clarify the factors that define these satisfaction levels. This task entails looking not only at overall job and life satisfaction, but also at levels of satisfaction with the various constituent elements of work and lifestyle. A large volume of previous research has focused on factors other than income that act to define satisfaction and happiness levels, and here as well the findings indicate that focusing on income alone is neither appropriate nor effective in a country of diversifying values such as Japan today.

IV. Precautions regarding Analysis of Qualitative Data

This paper has made a number of inferences based on comparisons of qualitative data, particularly data on satisfaction levels. However, there are several precautions to keep in mind when interpreting such data.

First, satisfaction level data is based on the subjective responses of survey respondents. Regarding the subjects and objects of perceptions in the social sciences, as discussed by Inoki (2012), interpretations depend on analysis of subjective feelings reported by studies' target groups. There are always latent questions, such as to what extent Ms. A's "very satisfied" and Mr. B's "very satisfied" should be treated as identical responses. This is particularly problematic in international surveys of attitudes and perceptions. For example, in Japan, when people are asked to choose from five options the responses tend to cluster in the middle, but in some other countries responses tend to cluster at the two extremes. When analyzing data of this sort, it is vital to keep in mind that response trends differ based on nationality.

Second, in qualitative data analysis it is difficult to pinpoint a cause and effect relationship between any two variables. The relationships between variables are rarely as simple as in economic modeling, and with any two given variables, there is generally a possibility that a third variable is influencing both. Some methods such as covariance structure analysis are well suited to analysis of collected data, but as this method depends on the collection of the data, there is a possibility that findings for surveys containing the same questions may differ radically depending on target group or timing of the survey. Regression analysis results, as well, depend on the subjective feelings of respondents and thus can be interpreted as entailing what in econometrics is known as "measurement error," making it difficult to obtain the desired estimation for the regression model. One possible means of addressing these difficulties is to gather panel data and then estimate a model with controls for individuals' specific fixed effects. Panel data ought to be effective in tracking changes in individuals' satisfaction levels resulting from significant life events, and also in specifying cause and effect relationships with a reasonable degree of precision.

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