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Is Fatalism Related to a High Level of Subjective Well-Being in Japan?

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1 Introduction

Fatalism has long been recognized by the founders of sociology as a basic type of mind (Acevedo 2005; Dohrenwend 1959). For instance, Durkheim argues that fatalism is a feeling of powerlessness, hopelessness, and vulnerability due to social experience of oppressive regulation (empirical fatalism (Acevedo 2008a, 2008b; Liu and Mencken 2010)). On the contrary, according to Weber fatalism is a psychological consequence of theology (cosmological forces control a person's life) (Theological Fatalism (Acevedo 2008; Liu and Mencken 2010)). Scholars generally agree that fatalism is a central concept in social psychology as well as anthropology (Acevedo 2005; Cohen and Nisbett 1998; Goodwin and Allenn 2000; Liu and Mencken 2010).

According to these discussions on fatalism as an important social attitude, many scholars are interested in the psychological consequences of fatalism, such as whether fatalism has any positive or negative psychological effects on individuals.

Fatalism is thought to have negative psychological consequences by the fathers of sociology, who emphasized the submissive nature of fatalism. For Durkheim, fatalism is one of important determinants of suicide, 10.14943/bgsl.148.l21

namely fatalistic suicide. And for Weber, fatalism, such as belief in Karma, divides society into unequal status groups in Indian and ancient Chinese empire. Recent sociological and social psychological empirical studies also clarified the negative effects of fatalism on individual's mental health.

For instance, in four former soviet countries such as Ukraine, fatalism is correlated with low mental health (Goodwin et al. 2002). In East Asian societies such as Taiwan, belief in karma (Liu 2008), supernatural belief, and belief in a supreme god are correlated with low level of mental health such as psychological distress and happiness (Liu et al. 2011; Liu et al. 2012)

On the contrary, some scholars not only reject Durkheim and Weber's argument on the submissive nature of fatalism but instead propose the precise opposite of it, that is the notion of the combination of efforts to change the situation through fatalistic acceptance of the way things are (Liu and Mencken 2010). They think that although fatalistic world views to some extent admit the supernatural control of fate and life outcomes, fatalistic worldviews by no means connote complete changes in life conditions and stimulate actions to achieve secular and otherworldly benefits.

An excellent example of the positive consequence of fatalism is Calvinist idea of predestination and free will and Buddhist ethics that those who do good can have a good life in the next life (Liu and Mencken 2010).

One empirical studies on Mainland China clarified the positive relationship between fatalism and a high level of happiness (Liu and Mencken 2010).

In this paper, I examine how fatalism is related to subjective well-being (SWB) in contemporary Japan. In chapter 2, I overview fatalism in

Japan and predict how fatalism is related to subjective well-being in Japan. In chapter 3, I explain my methodology including dataset, variables and analytical strategy. In chapter 4, results of analyses are explained. In the final chapter, implications and future directions are discussed.

2 Fatalism in Japan

The reasons to examine fatalism in Japan are as follows; 1) Japan is one of the most fatalistic societies in the world, 2) fatalistic ethics are embedded in Japanese folk beliefs and various new religions which are highly related to Japanese folk beliefs, 3) fatalistic coping strategies in stressful events prevail in contemporary Japan.

With regard to the first point, the latest wave of the World Values Survey shows that Japan is one of the most fatalistic societies in the about 55 societies surveyed (Figure 1). Interestingly, not all of East Asian societies are fatalistic. For instance, Taiwan is not so fatalistic. This result implies that fatalism is a very important mentality in Japan.

With regard to the second point, fatalism is often said to be “the very essence” of Japanese mentality and way of thinking (Minami 1953), which is an effective “tool” used by ruling class to rule people such as farmers, merchants and low class samurai in Tokugawa era (Minami 1953: 116–117). The key idea of Japanese fatalism is the way of thinking that various events are determined by supernatural being and cannot be changed by human power. Events are determined by heaven (tenmei 天命), karma (inga 因果) and the law of nature (shizen-no-nagare 自然の流れ) (Minami 1953: 115–118, Tsushima et al. 1986: 74–75). Because events cannot be changed by human power, resignation is highly evaluated (akirame 諦め). To live a better life, it is important to accept our present

life and bad events (urkeireru 受入れる).

With regard to the third point, fatalism is also said to be a coping strategy in Japan. For instance, Japanese improve low SWB by recognizing stressful events as destiny etc. and accepting them (Minami 1953: 127). In addition to this, fatalism has been a core element in Japanese folk religions and most New Religious Movements (NRMs). For instance, fatalistic way of thinking and attitudes are important keys to salvation in many NRMs in Japan. Believers in new religions are encouraged to accept destiny and be grateful to gods, human society and other people (Tsushima et al. 1986: 74-75). Contrary to the sociological notion that fatalism is related to individual submission, fatalism has been thought to be one of coping strategies for deprived people.

These positive evaluations toward fatalism are often discovered in many recent books related to human relationships, business, spirituality, therapy and so on. One of the best examples is, *How to Handle Those Taking Delight in Harrassing Others* (他人を攻撃せずにはいられない人) by, which is one of the best seller paper back written by a psychoanalysts Katada Tamami (片田珠美) (Katada 2013). After explaining various types of people taking delight in harassing others such as authoritarian, segregationist in work place or family, the author advised her readers:

You should accept/be resigned to the situation that such persons are around you. That is life. “To accept or to be resigned to” is “to look at the world more clearly” (Katada 2013: 187).

If you want to prevent them, you should not expect them to become gentle persons. The only thing you can do is to change your mind (Katada 2013: 191).

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Figure 1 Cross-national comparison of Fatalism (Online Analysis of 6th Wave of World Values Survey (<http://www.worldvalues-survey.org/WVSONline.jsp>) 26. May. 2015)

Although fatalism is believed to be related to a high level of SWB among Japanese, whether it is true or not has not yet been examined at the nation-wide level. For this reason, this study examines the relationship between fatalism and SWB in Japan using nation-wide sampling data.

In addition to this, previous empirical researches have studied Western societies and recently some East Asian Societies such as Taiwan and Mainland China. For this reason, this study attempts to fill the gap by examining Japan, which is one of the most fatalistic societies in the world.

According to earlier discussions, I predict that 1) Fatalism will be associated positively with a high level of SWB in Japan. 2) Fatalism will improve SWB of respondents of those with a low level of SWB, such as the lower class or the poor health in Japan through its buffering effects.

3 Data, Variables, and Method

3-1 Data

Data come from Japanese dataset of sixth wave of the World Values Survey. Respondents are 18 years old or older including both male and female (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>). This dataset is suitable for this study because it contains indices of both fatalism and SWB.

3-2 Variables

3-2-1 SWB

Happiness and life satisfaction were used as indices of SWB. Happiness is the affective and emotional evaluation of life (Ellison 1991), which is measured by a 4-point scale. Respondents were asked “taking

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all things together, would you say you are...”. Life satisfaction is measured by a 10-point scale. Respondents were asked “all things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Using this card on which 1 means you are “completely dissatisfied” and 10 means you are “completely satisfied” where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?” Principle component analysis was conducted on these two measures to combine them into one variable. Eigenvectors of both happiness and life satisfaction was .701 and proportion was .811.

3-2-2 Fatalism

Respondents were asked “some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means “no choice at all” and 10 means “a great deal of choice” to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out. “This measure taps secular fatalism and does not measure country specific fatalism such as theological fatalism. Despite this limitation, it is a global measure of fatalism used in cross-national analyses (Acevedo 2008a, 2008b). It is worth analyzing this measure in Japan.

3-3-3 Background Variables

Background variables include *age* (in real, recoded so as younger respondents' age in real to be higher), *male* (male=1, female=0), *higher-education* (with higher education=1, without higher education=0), *employed* (employed=1, unemployed=0), *unmarried* (married=1, not married (including divorced or separated)=0), *no child* (not having child=1, having child=0), *bad health* (Q: all in all, how would you describe your

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	S.D	Min	Max
SWB	7.8E-10	1.274	-4.600	1.944
Happiness	3.221	.652	1	4
Life Satisfaction	6.994	1.934	1	10
Fatalism	5.193	1.972	1	10
Age	50.364	16.029	18	80
Male	.497	.500	0	1
Unhigher-Education	.740	.439	0	1
Employed	.655	.475	0	1
Unmarried	.297	.457	0	1
No Child	.248	.432	0	1
Bad Health	2.420	.839	1	4
Low Class Identification	3.309	.848	1	5

Note: N=1899

state of health these days? Would you say it is: (1) very good, (2) good, (3) fair, (4) poor), and *low-class identification* (Q: would you describe yourself as belonging to the: (1) upper class, (2) upper middle class, (3) middle class, (4) lower middle class, (5) lower class)

3-3-4 Analytical Strategy

OLS regression analyses are used. Firstly, I clarify the relationship between fatalism and SWB with the net effect of control variables. Secondly, I clarify the respondents with low SWB. Thirdly, I examine whether fatalism has stress buffering effects, that is interaction effects of fatalism and respondents with a low SWB.

4 Results

In model 1, we can say fatalism is significantly and positively related to a low level of SWB with the net effect of other control variables. As

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Table 2 Multiple Regression Analyses (OLS) on SWB

	Correlations		Model 1		Model 2	
	r	Sig	β	Sig	β	Sig
Fatalism	-.338	***	-.226	***	-.225	***
Age (Young)	-.035		-.046	+	-.047	*
Male	-.117	***	-.087	***	-.084	***
Unhigher-Education	.015		-.034	+	-.030	
Employed	-.041	+	-.033		-.032	
Unmarried	-.261	***	-.192	***	-.187	***
No Child	-.155	***	-.026		-.029	
Bad Health	-.409	***	-.321	***	-.323	***
Low Class Identification	-.364	***	-.231	***	-.226	***
Fatalism * Age (Young)					-.042	*
Fatalism * Male					.032	
Fatalism * Unhigher-Education					-.000	
Fatalims * Unmarried					.002	
Fatalism * Bad Health					-.072	***
Fatalism * Low Class Identification					-.036	+
R ²			.359	***	.367	***
Adj.R ²			.356		.362	

Note: *** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 +p<.10 N=1899 VIF<2.000

for the low SWB respondents, younger respondents, male, respondents with unhigher-education, unmarried respondents, respondents with bad health and respondents with low class identification are negatively and significantly related to a low level of SWB.

Then I made interaction terms with fatalism and these low SWB respondents to examine whether fatalism has stress buffering effects.

In model 2, three interaction terms are significant. Fatalism and age, fatalism and bad health, and fatalism and low class identification. Interestingly, they are negatively related to SWB. For instance, respondents with bad health and fatalistic value are significantly less happy.

5 Summary and Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between fatalism and SWB in Japan using nation-wide sampling data. The first prediction was that fatalism will be associated positively with a high level of SWB. Contrary to this prediction, this paper shows negative relationship between both variables. The second prediction was that fatalism will have buffering effects on the respondents with a low level of SWB (stress buffering effects of fatalism). Contrary to this prediction this paper shows that fatalism may have stress deteriorating effect.

Following the results, two points are discussed in the following part. The first point is “Why Japanese are fatalistic?” Contrary to the guiding principle in life that fatalism has positive psychological consequences, fatalism is related to low level of SWB in Japan. This result is similar to the results of former soviet countries and Taiwan (Goodwin et al. 2002; Liu 2008; Liu et al. 2011; Liu et al. 2012). Japan is not a unique society as for the relationship between fatalism and SWB. So the next to be considered is that despite the negative relationship between fatalism and SWB, why Japan is one of the most fatalistic society? What is the merit of being fatalistic for Japanese?

The second point is “is fatalism a “good” coping strategy?” Fatalism is thought to have deteriorating effect among “deprived” Japanese (younger people, lower class people, people with bad health). These results imply that fatalism does not improve mental health of deprived Japanese. On the contrary, prevalence of fatalistic way of thinking, coping strategy, advices may be psychological burdens especially for them. For instance, they may feel more depressed, helplessness, lower self-efficacy and so on. We should reconsider whether fatalism is a

“good” coping strategy in Japan.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, since this study is based on cross-sectional data, we cannot draw a definite conclusion about the causal order of the relationship between fatalism and SWB. Panel data is needed. Secondly, the index of fatalism is simple. It could not measure some unique aspect of Japanese fatalism such as belief in karma and resignation. More sophisticated measures are needed. Thirdly, we need to examine fatalism and other outcomes such as political and democratic attitudes, medical and health behavior. Fatalism has been clarified to be related not only to SWB but also other social attitudes such as democratic attitudes and health behavior. For instance, research on former soviet societies has clarified that fatalism are related to undemocratic attitudes and low frequency of voting (Goodwin and Allen 2002). In addition to this, Latino respondents with high level of fatalism tend not to use papanicolaou smears (Chavez and Mishra 1997). Through examining the effects of fatalism on various social attitudes, we can understand more clearly how fatalism is related to Japanese well-being.

Despite these limitations, this study is among the first to evaluate the relationship between fatalism and SWB in Japan using nation-wide sampling data. Future studies should investigate the patterns and dynamics of the associations between fatalism and SWB in contemporary Japan.

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