



Aspirations and life satisfaction in Japan: The big five personality makes clear[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between two types of aspirations: intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations hypothesized by Self-determination Theory, and life satisfaction in Japan. A total of 474 Japanese undergraduates (286 males, 184 females, and 4 unknown; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.88$, $SD = 1.10$) participated in a survey. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the Aspiration Index had the same hypothesized factor structure as that found in previous studies. Path analysis by structural equation modeling showed that intrinsic aspirations were positively correlated with life satisfaction, while extrinsic aspirations were negatively related. In addition, controlling for the effects of the Big Five personality traits provided a clearer relationship between aspirations, particularly extrinsic aspirations, and life satisfaction. Discussion describes concerning method to evaluate the relationship between aspirations and subjective well-being more accurately.

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1. Introduction

Most individuals have some kind of aspirations, and many of them hope to understand which aspirations are related to life satisfaction with in their country. Within the last two decades, the connection between aspirations and subjective well-being (SWB) has become a topic of interest among psychological researchers across nations (e.g., Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000).

One of the frameworks for understanding aspirations that has been widely researched is the differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations, which was posited by the Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory claims that intrinsic aspirations lead to SWB and that extrinsic aspirations interfere with it, although the basic notion has been tested and requires additional evidence across cultures and nations (Ryan et al., 1999). Meanwhile, although it was not stated explicitly, accumulation of research concerning this topic provided a comprehensive hypothesis that extrinsic aspirations that interfere SWB were supported only in wealthy countries, not in poor countries. Therefore, if we conducted the same research design in Japan, which is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and where no report regarding this issue exists, we would obtain additional

evidence supporting the comprehensive hypothesis; that is, extrinsic aspirations were negatively correlated with SWB in Japan.

The present study first developed the Japanese version of the Aspiration Index, which is scale to assess aspirations within the Self-determination Theory, using a back translation procedure and validated the structure of the Aspiration Index in a Japanese sample. In addition to the initial investigation of a Japanese sample, the present study demonstrated the necessity to control for personality traits when investigating the relationship between aspirations and SWB in order to obtain clearer result. Although personality traits are known to be one of the most consistent predictors of SWB (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003), previous studies of this topic have not controlled for personality traits. In other words, previous results might have been distorted based on this consideration. Thus, the present study examined whether the Big Five personality traits would clarify the relationship between aspirations and SWB. Besides, although SWB includes several components (e.g., emotional responses, life satisfaction, and domain satisfaction) and has been measured by several indicators (e.g., happiness, positive mood, and low depression), the present study focused on life satisfaction, which is one of the main indicators of SWB (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

1.1. Intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations

The Self-determination Theory distinguishes between two types of aspirations: intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. Intrinsic aspirations involve self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and physical fitness, while extrinsic aspirations include financial success, attractive

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appearance, and social recognition (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) developed the Aspiration Index to measure the aspirations that were hypothesized in Self-determination Theory. Studies focusing on the two types of aspirations have revealed that outcomes related to SWB are differentially associated with extrinsic and intrinsic aspirations (Kasser, 2002). In general, an emphasis on extrinsic aspirations has been found to be negatively associated with SWB, whereas placing higher value on intrinsic aspirations was positively associated with SWB (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Hence, self-determination theorists have hypothesized that the pursuit of intrinsic rather than extrinsic aspirations is more likely to yield SWB.

The fundamental research studies that examined the psychological functions of intrinsic versus extrinsic aspirations and formed the basic premises of Self-determination Theory were conducted using U.S. samples (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). However, Ryan et al. (1999) expressed primary concern whether the constructs of the Aspiration Index had similar structures across cultures to support the theoretical hypothesis and whether the meanings of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations were the same across cultures.

1.2. Cultural meanings of aspirations

The theoretical claim that intrinsic aspirations lead to higher levels of SWB and that extrinsic aspirations yield lower levels of SWB is not culturally restricted. This assumption, although highly generalized, continues to be tested in ongoing research. In a German sample, Schmuck, Kasser, and Ryan (2000) found that high ratings of the relative importance of intrinsic aspirations were significantly and positively correlated with SWB, whereas a focus on extrinsic aspirations was negatively associated with SWB. Kim, Kasser, and Lee (2003) reported that placing a higher value on intrinsic aspirations relative to extrinsic aspirations was associated with SWB in U.S. and Korean samples.

Several researchers have reported controversial results regarding the effects of extrinsic aspirations by testing the theoretical claim. Ryan et al. (1999) conducted a cross-cultural study in U.S. and Russian samples and found that only the attainment of intrinsic aspirations predicted life satisfaction in the U.S. sample, and that both intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations enhanced life satisfaction in the Russian sample. Sabzehara, Ferguson, Sarafraz, and Mohammadi (2014) found that the likelihood and attainment of extrinsic aspirations were positively correlated with self-esteem in an Iranian sample. Similar results showing that extrinsic aspirations have a positive effect on SWB were found in a Chinese (Leke, Gingras, Philippe, Koestner, & Fang, 2010) and Hungarian sample (Martos & Kopp, 2012). Furthermore, Frost and Frost (2000) in a Romanian sample and Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, and Villar (2012) in a Spanish sample found that extrinsic aspirations were not significantly correlated with SWB.

A key perspective when considering the possible explanations for these different findings may be the sample's economic situations. For some of the samples, extrinsic aspirations might represent the means by which they can achieve more important intrinsic aspirations (e.g., contributing to society or helping people in need). Martos and Kopp (2012) indicated that life goals labeled as extrinsic or materialistic have a different meaning in Hungarian society. These participants might not be imbued with the pursuit of external rewards exclusively; but, might represent an inner striving for achievement and/or a type of work ethic. Grouzet et al. (2005) found that financial success was farther from hedonism and closer to safety and physical health goals in poorer than wealthier cultures. Similarly, the finding that financial success aspirations and intrinsic aspirations are closer in poorer than wealthier countries might reflect individuals' strivings in poorer nations to make enough money in order to ensure their basic welfare. The priority that people give to extrinsic aspirations compared to intrinsic aspirations increases in situations of existential, economic, and interpersonal threat (Grouzet et al., 2005). This discussion is reminiscent of Maslow's theory of human needs. Maslow (1943) hypothesized that there are at least five sets of needs arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency:

physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization and individuals are motivated by the desire to satisfy these needs. When a need is fairly well satisfied, the next higher need emerges. Compared to intrinsic aspirations, extrinsic aspirations are related to the lower level of need in Maslow's hierarchy. Therefore the role of extrinsic aspirations is more highly valued in a non-wealthy country where individuals try to satisfy a subordinate need according to Maslow's theory.

The finding that intrinsic aspirations were important for obtaining SWB is consistent with studies conducted in wealthy Western countries as well as poorer countries. The difference was the effect of extrinsic aspirations on SWB. While extrinsic aspirations were not related to SWB and were even detrimental to it in wealthy Western countries, they contributed to SWB, albeit to a lesser extent than intrinsic aspirations, in poorer countries. Myers (2000) suggested that income, which is one of the factors associated with extrinsic aspirations, is moderately related to SWB; however, increases in income beyond a base level fail to improve SWB. Cultural difference in the role of financial success (i.e., extrinsic aspiration) is a factor that cannot be ignored (Brdar, Rijavec, & Miljković, 2009).

A considerable amount of research testing the theoretical hypothesis regarding aspirations has been conducted worldwide. However, there are no reports of studies conducted in Japan, which is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. What would the results be in a Japanese sample? If our hypothesis is correct, we would obtain the result that extrinsic aspirations are negatively correlated with SWB, while intrinsic aspirations are positively correlated with SWB.

1.3. Personality traits, aspirations, and well-being

One of the considerable factors when testing the relationship between aspirations and SWB was personality traits. In a systematic review of the literature, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) concluded that personality traits determine the types of aspirations and having aspirations was related to SWB as well as personality traits. Roberts and Robins (2000) investigated the relationship between personality traits and major life aspirations. They found that economic (having a high-status career) and political influence (being influential in public affairs) aspirations, which are considered as extrinsic aspirations in Self-determination Theory, were positively correlated with the personality trait of extraversion. They also found a positive relationship between aspirations regarding social relationships, which are considered as intrinsic aspirations in Self-determination Theory, and the personality traits of agreeableness and neuroticism. Otero-López and Villardefrancos (2013) showed that materialism, which has been conceptualized as a personal value relating to a set of centrally held beliefs about the relevance of possessions and can be considered one of the features of extrinsic aspirations, was positively correlated with neuroticism and extraversion, and negatively correlated with openness and agreeableness. Visser and Pozzebon (2013) found that intrinsic aspirations were characterized by high agreeableness and conscientiousness, and extrinsic aspirations were associated with low agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. These results indicate a possible distortion effect of personality traits on the relationship between aspirations and SWB.

Romero et al. (2012) implied a need to control for the effects of personality traits in order to investigate the relationship between SWB and aspirations beyond the effects of personality traits. In Romero et al.'s (2012) study, as extrinsic aspirations were strongly correlated with personality traits compared to intrinsic aspiration, the relationship between extrinsic aspiration and life satisfaction would change after the effect of personality traits was regulated. In addition, personality traits are also known to be one of the most consistent predictors of SWB (Diener & Lucas, 1999). The present study used the most well-known and studied personality traits in the field of psychology, the Big Five personality traits (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & John, 1992): extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness as the control variables when testing the relationship between aspirations and SWB.

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