

Research Note

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Assessing the Determinants of Life Satisfaction in a Canadian University Student Sample

Introduction

The demand for postsecondary education in Canada has increased significantly over the past decade.¹ According to Statistics Canada (2003a), the 2001 Census revealed that 28% of all individuals aged 25 to 34 possessed university qualifications, and 21% held a college diploma, and indicated that the phenomenal growth in the number of Canadians with a postsecondary education between 1991 and 2001 may be attributable to three key factors: the preference of the labor market for skilled workers to compete in a global and technologically advanced economy, the arrival of highly skilled immigrants, and the recession of the early 1990s that encouraged young people to continue their studies. During the academic year 2001-2002, Canadian universities enrolled a total of 886,800 full-time and part-time undergraduate students (Statistics Canada, 2004).

The strengthening of students' life satisfaction has been regarded as a vital mission of education (O'Neill, 1981). Life satisfaction, in addition to positive and negative affect, is an essential component of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener, Emmons, & Griffin, 1985). As noted by Hermon and Hazler (1999), the increasing creation of wellness programs in higher education is evidence of institutional efforts to enhance the psychological well-being, quality of life, and holistic development of students.

Earlier research has identified age (Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1994), stress (Chang, 1998; Makinen & Pychyl, 2001; Simons, Aysan, Thompson, Hamarat, & Steele, 2002), physical health (Chow, 2002; Pilcher, 1998), style of studying (Cheung, 2000), parenting style (Seibel & Johnson, 2001), lifestyle (Bailey & Miller, 1998), and personality constructs (Cha, 2003; Yetim, 2003) as significant determinants of life satisfaction among postsecondary students. Cross-national studies have also demonstrated that university students in Western, economically affluent societies express higher levels of life satisfaction (Dorahy et al., 2000; Schumaker, Shea, Monfries, & Groth-Marnat, 1993; Simpson, Schumaker, Dorahy, & Shrestha, 1996; Veenhoven, 1995). This study attempted to explore the construct of life satisfaction among university students in Regina and to identify the primary factors that affect students' satisfaction with life.

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Methodology

The data for this analysis were collected as part of a larger study that examined university students' lifestyle and health-risk behavior (Chow, 2005). Using a convenient sample,² 373 undergraduate students at the University of Regina participated in a self-administered questionnaire survey during the academic year 2002-2003. The sample comprised 109 (29.4%) male and 262 (70.67%) female students with a mean age of 21.6 years ($SD=4.73$). Caucasian students ($N=330$, 88.9%) and Canadian citizens ($N=359$, 96.8%) constituted an overwhelming majority of the sample. Students were primarily registered with the faculties of arts ($N=190$, 51.2%), administration ($N=35$, 9.4%), and science ($N=33$, 8.9%). With respect to marital status, most were single or had never married ($N=322$, 86.6%). As well, about half of the sample ($N=181$, 52.8%) reported an annual family income of over \$60,000.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener et al. (1985) was used to measure respondents' life satisfaction. As a scale constructed for the overall assessment of life satisfaction as a cognitive-judgmental process, it was found to be highly reliable³ (Cronbach's $\alpha=.763$). Respondents also expressed their degree of satisfaction with 13 specific aspects of life, including familial relationships, friendships, school performance, academic ability, employment, self-image, physical appearance, diet, and physical health.

Data Analysis

Life satisfaction. As shown in Table 1, the mean values for the five items ranged between 3.01 and 3.66. The item *I am satisfied with my life* received the highest mean score ($M=3.66$, $SD=.88$). In fact, more than two thirds of the respondents ($N=260$, 70.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with this item. Conversely, *If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing* is the item with the lowest mean score ($M=3.01$, $SD=1.22$). Nearly two fifths of the sample ($N=147$, 39.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Satisfaction with specific aspects of life. The mean values and standard deviations of the responses are presented in Table 2. The five areas receiving the highest ratings, in descending order, are as follows: relationship with father ($M=4.14$, $SD=1.19$); relationship with mother ($M=4.13$, $SD=1.20$); relationships with siblings ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.24$); relationships with friends ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.13$), and academic performance ($M=3.76$, $SD=.80$). On the contrary, the five aspects receiving the lowest scores, in ascending order, include: financial security ($M=2.61$, $SD=1.38$); employment ($M=3.23$, $SD=1.36$); diet ($M=3.25$, $SD=1.01$);

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for the SWLS Items

	M	SD	N
1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal	3.39	.93	371
2. The conditions of my life are excellent	3.48	.97	370
3. I am satisfied with my life	3.66	.88	370
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	3.37	1.02	371
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	3.01	1.22	372

Table 2
Degree of Satisfaction with Various Aspects of Life

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1. Academic performance	3.76	.80	372
2. Academic ability	3.36	.68	372
3. Relationship with significant other	3.51	1.01	370
4. Relationship with father	4.14	1.19	373
5. Relationship with mother	4.13	1.20	373
6. Relationship with siblings	4.06	1.24	373
7. Relationships with friends	3.91	1.13	371
8. Physical health	3.57	1.01	370
9. Diet	3.25	1.01	371
10. Self image	3.52	1.00	373
11. Physical appearance	3.38	1.07	371
12. Financial security	2.61	1.38	373
13. Employment	3.23	1.36	373

academic ability ($M=3.36$, $SD=.68$); and physical appearance ($M=3.38$, $SD=1.07$).

Key determinants of life satisfaction. To disentangle the determinants of life satisfaction, a summated score based on the 5-item SWLS was computed and used for ordinary-least squares (OLS) regression analysis. Eleven predictor variables⁴ were used. The overall OLS regression model, as shown in Table 3, was found to be significant ($F=18.963$, $p<.001$) and explained 34.6% of the variation in life satisfaction. Sex ($\beta=-.09$, $p<.05$), family income ($\beta=.150$, $p<.001$), academic performance ($\beta=.144$, $p<.001$), self image ($\beta=.225$, $p<.001$), physical health ($\beta=.175$, $p<.001$), familial relationships ($\beta=.169$, $p<.001$), relationship with significant other ($\beta=.092$, $p<.05$), and relationships with friends ($\beta=.108$, $p<.05$) were found to be significantly associated with life satisfaction. Put succinctly, female students and those who reported a higher income performed better academically and expressed a higher level of satisfaction with self-image, physical health, familial relationships, relationship with significant other, and relationships with friends were found to be more satisfied with life.

Discussion and Conclusion

This investigation has provided evidence that university students in Regina were generally satisfied with their lives, particularly in regard to their academic performance and their relationships with father, mother, siblings, and friends. Moreover, female students and those who indicated a higher family income obtained a higher grade point average and reported a higher degree of satisfaction with their self-esteem, physical health, familial relationships, relationship with significant other, and relationships with friends expressed a significantly higher level of life satisfaction.

Notably, self-image emerges as the strongest predictor. This finding is consistent with results from earlier research (Chow, 2002; Harter, 1999; Huebner & Alderman, 1993; Lackovic-Grgin, Dekovic, Milosavljevic, Cvek-Soric, & Opacic, 1996; Leung & Leung, 1992; Neto, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 1988),

Table 3
Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients for Effects of Sociodemographic and Background Variables on Life Satisfaction

	<i>b</i>	<i>β</i>
1. Sex	-.706	-.090 *
2. Employment status	.150	.020
3. Family income	.347	.150 ***
4. Academic performance	.649	.144 ***
5. Self image	.808	.225 ***
6. Physical health	.622	.175 ***
7. Familial relationships	.617	.169 ***
8. Relationship with significant other	.331	.092 *
9. Relationships with friends	.438	.108 *
10. Academic stress	.168	.043
11. Financial stress	-.148	-.057
(Constant)		2.676
<i>F</i>		18.963 ***
<i>R</i> ²		.366
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		.346
<i>N</i>		.373

p*<.05; *p*<.01; ****p*<.001.

demonstrating that individuals who accept themselves in a positive manner and believe that a similar viewpoint is shared by others will develop a more positive evaluation of their overall life conditions. There is also evidence in the literature that socioeconomic status significantly affects life satisfaction (Sam, 2000; Simons et al., 2002; Zumbo & Michalos, 2000). In the light of the high costs associated with university education, the finding that students who had a higher family income were more satisfied with life is not surprising. With respect to sex, female students exhibited a higher level of life satisfaction (Dorahy, Schumaker, Simpson, & Deshpande, 1996; Simpson et al., 1996).

This survey also corroborates findings from earlier studies (Bailey & Miller, 1998; Cheung, 2000; Gilman, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000; Hong & Gianakopoulos, 1994) that academic performance and life satisfaction are positively related. In addition, this study provides substantial support for the strong association between life satisfaction and satisfaction with family members, significant others, and friends (Chow, 2002; Dew & Huebner, 1994; Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Maton, 1990; Seibel & Johnson, 2001; September, McCarrey, Baranowsky, Parent, & Schindler, 2001). Finally, the present study also underscores the significance of physical health on life satisfaction (Chow, 2002; Pilcher, 1998).

To conclude, this research effort has disentangled the key factors that affect life satisfaction among university students in Regina. The information could be used by counselors and educational workers to aid in the design of interventions and support services that might serve to enhance the quality of life for

university students. As this study reports data based on a limited group of undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in a prairie city, caution must be exercised in interpreting the results. Continued research attention should be devoted to postsecondary student populations in other geographical locations. Further exploration of variation across types of both institutions (i.e., universities and community colleges) and students (e.g., full-time vs. part-time) would also be informative.

Notes

1. The possession of postsecondary credentials has often been conceived as one of the major determinants of later-life economic success and status attainment (Anisef, Ashbury, & Turritin, 1992; Blundell, Dearden, Goodman, & Reed, 1997; Hearn, 1992; Hunter & Leiper, 1993). The 2001 Canadian Census provided strong evidence for the association between education and earnings. Particularly in 2000 more than 60% of Canadians in the lowest earnings category obtained a high school education or less, whereas more than 60% of those in the top category possessed a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Recent studies have also demonstrated the strong link between higher education and non-economic benefits. Specifically, university students have been found to possess a broader range of general skills, participate more actively in community and voluntary organizations, show greater interest in politics, express more democratic and tolerant views, create a more educationally supportive home environment, live a healthier lifestyle, and enjoy better physical and psychological health (Bynner et al., 2003).
2. This study was based on a sample of undergraduate students enrolled in various sociology classes during the fall session of the academic year 2002-2003. The 373 participants were registered with various faculties, schools, or institutes, including administration, arts, education, engineering, fine arts, human justice, journalism, kinesiology, science, and social work.
3. To further explore the scale structure with this university student sample, a principal component analysis with a Varimax rotation over the 5 items of the SWLS was performed. All the items were loaded on a single factor (eigen value=2.66), accounting for 53.2% of the total variance.
4. Sex (1=male; 0=female) and employment status (1=employed part-time or full-time; 0=not employed) were measured as dichotomous variables. Family income ($M=3.62$, $SD=1.63$) was a continuous variable based on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (\$20,000 or under) to 6 (\$100,001 or over). Degree of satisfaction with familial relationships ($M=4.02$, $SD=.98$), relationship with significant other ($M=3.51$, $SD=1.00$), relationships with friends ($M=4.01$, $SD=.89$), self image ($M=3.52$, $SD=1.00$), physical health ($M=3.57$, $SD=1.01$), and academic performance ($M=3.76$, $SD=.80$) were measured on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Respondents' frequency of experiencing academic stress ($M=4.23$, $SD=.91$) and financial stress ($M=3.39$, $SD=1.38$) were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very infrequently) to 5 (very frequently).

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