

Research Note

Henry P.H. Chow
University of Regina

The Determinants of Life Satisfaction: High School Students in Regina

Introduction

Enhancing the quality of life of people is regarded as the cornerstone of health promotion, which seeks to empower people to improve their overall health and well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Epp, 1986; Raphael, 1996). High school students face myriad stressors and challenges in the academic environment. The high school environment has been depicted as one that has a large number of students, more rigid academic tracking, less emotional and instructional support from teachers, and greater emphasis on high academic achievement than that of a middle school.¹ It is also an environment that exposes adolescents to greater pressures to engage in antisocial behavior and to more intense peer pressure (Barber & Olson, 2004; Isakon & Javis, 1999; Seidman & French, 1997). As earlier studies have shown that life satisfaction among children and adolescents is strongly related to their academic achievement (Baker, Terry, Beridger, & Winsor, 1997; Noddings, 2003) and mental health (Lewinsohn, Redner, & Seeley, 1991; Park, 2004), in this article I explore the level of life satisfaction and its correlates among high school students in Regina.

Methodology

The data for this analysis were collected as part of a larger study that was undertaken to explore the educational experience and health-risk behavior among high school students in Regina (Chow, 2008). Using a snowball sampling method, a total of 262 students attending 14 high schools in Regina participated in a self-administered questionnaire survey. The sample comprised 102 (38.9%) male and 160 (61.1%) female students. Respondents ranged in age between 14 and 19, with a mean age of 15.92 years ($SD=1.15$). Caucasian students ($n=228$, 87.4%) made most of the sample. Nearly all respondents ($n=258$, 99.2%) were Canadian citizens. Over half the sample ($n=128$, 52.5%) indicated Catholicism as their religious affiliation. With respect to parents' education, a significant proportion of the respondents' fathers ($n=151$, 59.5%) and mothers ($n=178$, 68.2%) had received some postsecondary education or completed college or university. As regards socioeconomic status, slightly

Henry Chow is an associate professor and graduate program coordinator in the Department of Sociology and Social Studies and an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. He received his doctorate in sociology and equity studies in education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. His areas of interest include the sociology of education, criminal justice, and ethnic studies. He can be reached at the Department of Sociology and Social Studies, University of Regina, 3737 Wascana Parkway, REGINA SK S4S 0A2, Canada; Tel: 306-585-5604; Fax: 306-585-4815; E-mail: Henry.Chow@uregina.ca.

more than half of the sample ($n=133$, 51.0%) indicated that they belonged to a middle-income family.

Data Analysis

Life satisfaction was a single-item measure on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). Most of the students indicated that they were satisfied ($n=146$, 55.9%) or very satisfied ($n=39$, 14.9%) with their lives. It is notable that slightly more than one fifth ($n=56$, 21.5%) made use of the *uncertain* category. Relatively few students expressed dissatisfaction ($n=20$, 7.7%). To disentangle determinants of students' life satisfaction, a multiple ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression analysis using 13 predictor variables² was performed.

As shown in Table 1, the overall OLS regression model was found to be significant ($F=13.725$, $p<.001$) and explained 38.70% of the variance in life satisfaction. Time spent on studying and homework ($\beta=-.136$, $p<.01$), time spent on voluntary work ($\beta=.116$, $p<.05$), time spent on paid employment ($\beta=.132$, $p<.05$), time spent on school activities ($\beta=.109$, $p<.05$), psychological well-being ($\beta=.488$, $p<.001$), relationship with father ($\beta=.115$, $p<.05$) and relationship with mother ($\beta=.181$, $p<.05$) were found to be significantly associated with life satisfaction. Put succinctly, respondents who reported a more positive relationship with their mother, expressed a more positive relationship with their father, indicated a higher level of psychological well-being, spent more time on paid employment, devoted more time to school activities, and spent less time studying and doing homework were found to demonstrate a higher level of life satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis identifies a number of important correlates of life satisfaction among high school students. First, the results lend credence to the vitality of relationships with parents on students' life satisfaction (Leung & Leung, 1992; Park, 2005; Sastre & Ferriere, 2000; Shek, 1997; van Wel, Linssen, & Abma, 2000). Congruent with earlier research, this study provides further support for the positive association between psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons, 1986; Yanez, 2006). Moreover, students who spent less time on studying and doing homework were found to be more satisfied with their lives. Perhaps these individuals experience less academic stress. Concerning participation in school activities, as in earlier studies (Gilman, 2001; Piko & Keresztes, 2006; Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2004), students who devoted more time to school activities reported a higher level of life satisfaction. In fact earlier research has demonstrated that participation in extracurricular activities may play a meaningful role in successful adolescent development (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson & Verma, 1999; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Marsh, 1992). Participation in extracurricular activities affords students valuable opportunities to develop mentoring or coaching relationships, develop personal relationships with peers who share similar interests, and possibly interact with other adults from the school or community who provide support for the activity (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Smith, 2003).

Table 1
Unstandardized and Standardized Ordinary Least-Squares Regression
Coefficients for Effects of Sociodemographic
and Background Variables on Life Satisfaction

	<i>b</i>	β
01. Sex	-.051	-.029
02. Age	-.042	-.056
03. Religion	-.140	-.079
04. Socioeconomic status	.091	.083
05. Physical health	.061	.065
06. Time spent on studying & homework	-.022	-.136 **
07. Time spent on school activities	.017	.109 *
08. Time spent on voluntary work	.035	.116 *
09. Time spent on paid employment	.010	.132 *
10. Relationship with father	.045	.115 *
11. Relationship with mother	.078	.181 **
12. Psychological well-being	.093	.488 ***
13. Academic performance	.010	.012
(Constant)		1.053
F		13.725 ***
R ²		.417
Adjusted R ²		.387
N		253

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

In addition, time spent on paid employment was found to be predictive of the outcome variable. Students who devoted more time to a paid job expressed a higher level of life satisfaction. The recent Canadian General Social Survey noted that by most life quality measures, high school students were not considered highly time stressed. Young people whose primary activity was attending high school were found to devote approximately four hours to their education and between seven and eight hours to entertainment (Franke, 2003). A "light" paid job, therefore, would not drastically change the time high school students spent on their studies. Finally, the positive association between time spent on voluntary work and life satisfaction is not unexpected because research has shown that volunteering boosts self-esteem and self-confidence and increases life satisfaction (Harlow & Cantor, 1996; Wilson, 2000). Adolescents who volunteered tended to have higher educational aspirations, higher grade point averages, higher academic self-esteem, and a stronger intrinsic motivation toward school work (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998).

In summary, this analysis makes a contribution to the literature on adolescents' subjective well-being. Specifically, the major factors affecting students' life satisfaction have been disentangled. Through greater understanding of the determinants of this outcome variable, educators, counselors, and community health professionals will be better equipped to design intervention strategies that enhance students' quality of life. As this study was conducted on a limited group of high school students in a Prairie city, caution

must be exercised in generalizing the results. An agenda for future research should include an exploration of variation across types of schools (e.g., public vs. private) and student populations (Caucasian vs. minority students), as well as an examination of the availability of students' coping resources on life satisfaction.

Notes

1. Middle schools are considered an intermediate step between elementary school and high school. They usually consist of two to three grades, spanning some combination of grades 7-10. Students in middle schools are generally within one or two years of age of each other. Having a relatively homogeneous group of adolescents in the same school who are undergoing the same set of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical changes, away from older youth, allows teachers to be in a better position to meet students' needs (Lipps, 2005).
2. Thirteen predictor variables were used in the OLS regression model for life satisfaction. Sex (1=male; 0=female) and religion (1=Protestant or Catholic; 0=other) were dummy coded. Age was measured in years ($M=15.92$, $SD=1.15$). Time spent on various activities including studying and homework ($M=6.04$, $SD=5.45$), paid employment ($M=8.61$, $SD=11.35$), school activities ($M=4.56$, $SD=5.54$), and voluntary work ($M=1.03$, $SD=2.83$) were measured in hours per week. Socioeconomic status ($M=3.37$, $SD=.79$) was an ordinal scale ranging from 1 (*low-income family*) to 5 (*high-income family*). Relationship with father ($M=6.19$, $SD=2.20$) was a two-item scale based on respondents' degree of agreement (from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*) with the following statements: (a) I am getting along well with my father ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.22$); and (b) If I need advice on something other than school, I often go to my father for advice ($M=2.49$, $SD=1.30$). This scale was found to be reliable, with an alpha reliability coefficient of .699. Relationship with mother ($M=7.39$, $SD=2.02$) was a two-item scale based on degree of agreement (from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*) with the following statements: (a) I am getting along well with my mother ($M=4.02$, $SD=1.02$); and (b) If I need advice on something other than school, I often go to my mother for advice ($M=3.37$, $SD=1.30$). This scale has an alpha reliability coefficient of .656. Academic performance was based on respondents' self-reported grade point average ($M=4.2$, $SD=.97$) assessed on a five-point scale (1=*Grade E or below 50* to 5=*Grade A or 80-100%*). Physical health ($M=3.39$, $SD=.95$) was measured on a five-point scale (1=*poor*; 2=*fair*; 3=*good*; 4=*very good*; 5=*excellent*). Psychological well-being was assessed by respondents' frequency of feeling sad ($M=3.32$, $SD=.86$), lonely ($M=3.75$, $SD=.98$), depressed ($M=3.78$, $SD=1.08$), like crying ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.08$), stressed ($M=2.67$, $SD=1.02$), and hopeless ($M=4.15$, $SD=1.06$) in the past three months on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*always*) to 5 (*never*). A composite score was computed by summing these six items ($M=21.34$, $SD=4.54$). This psychological well-being scale was found to be highly reliable, with an alpha reliability coefficient of .840.

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