

Determinants of life satisfaction in Canada: A causal modeling approach

Rose Branch-Allen¹ and John Jayachandran^{1a}

¹Concordia University of Edmonton, Edmonton, T5B4E4, Alberta, Canada

Abstract. Most research studies on Life Satisfaction/Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) have focused on one main determinant and a variety of social demographic variables to delineate the determinants of life satisfaction. However, very few research studies examine life satisfaction from a holistic approach. The aim of this study was to utilize a holistic approach to construct a causal model and identify major determinants of life satisfaction. This study utilized data from the General Social Survey, with a sample size of 19,597. Several multiple regression models were run sequentially to estimate standardized path coefficients for the causal model. Overall, above average satisfaction with life was reported by Canadian respondents. Respondents who were female, younger, married, from high socioeconomic status background, born in Canada, very religious, and demonstrated high level of neighborhood interaction had greater satisfaction with life. Similarly, respondents had greater life satisfaction if they had better health, social contact, leisure activities, more time with family and friends, more enjoyment with volunteer activities, and a greater sense of belonging to the community. Our results suggest that a holistic approach is necessary for understanding the causal process of life satisfaction. A significant number of causal connections contradict some of the findings in literature today. We have provided some possible explanations for these anomalies and policy implications.

Keywords: Causal model; holistic approach; life satisfaction; socio-demographic variables; subjective well-being.

1 Introduction

Canada is a pluralistic, multicultural society with an ethno cultural composition that has been shaped over time by immigrants and their descendants. Although Canada welcomes these immigrants, many will endure severe culture shocks, extreme weather conditions, isolation, barriers to obtaining jobs in their profession, and assimilation difficulties. Despite these life hurdles, surveys consistently report high life satisfaction for all Canadians.

^a Corresponding author: john.jayachandran@concordia.ab.ca

Life satisfaction can be defined as the cognitive component of subjective well-being (SWB) [41]. The terms SWB, life satisfaction and happiness are often used interchangeably [7; 9] and very few research studies have examined life satisfaction from a holistic point of view. In order to comprehend the interaction of socio-psychological factors with life circumstances in producing SWB, we need to understand the causal pathways leading to happiness, understand the processes underlying adaptation to events, and develop theories that explain why certain variables differentially influence the different components of SWB [15]. This study aims, therefore, to utilize a holistic approach to construct a causal model to identify major determinants of life satisfaction.

2 Literature review

2.1 Exogenous concepts

Empirical studies report, life satisfaction is related to age [2, 4, 9, 12, 13, 15, 19, 28, 52, 63], gender [5, 6, 56, 61], marital status [16, 34, 51, 56, 60], and household size [34]. With regard to socio-economic status and life satisfaction, while some studies report a negative [10, 20, 21, 22, 26, 27, 40], others suggest a positive [11, 29, 30, 33, 34] relationship.

Studies, in general, report respondents who are religious [24, 46, 62], and live in good neighborhood [25, 39, 34] seem to have greater satisfaction with life. On the other hand, life satisfaction differentials by ethnicity [34, 42] and location [8, 36] are complex and often confounded by other socio-economic and demographic factors.

2.2 Intervening concepts

Empirical studies conclude that subjective perceived health is associated with life satisfaction or happiness [9, 14, 19, 23, 43, 48]. It may also reflect certain personality traits and assess individuals' global welfare [47, 58]. Few recent studies suggest that the mental health dimension is more strongly associated with SWB than the physical health dimension [18, 44]. Others suggest the existence of a reciprocal relationship between health and happiness i.e., happiness also protects health [14, 54, 59].

Studies report that social contact with friends [38], participation in leisure activities [3, 45] and involvement in voluntary groups [17, 49, 55] lead to greater life satisfaction. Similarly, decreased levels of work-family conflict [1, 37] and domestic labour [31], increased quality time with family and friends [32, 53], and strong sense of belonging to community tend to improve social contact and life satisfaction [50].

2.3 Endogenous concept

Although there is a lack of agreement regarding the definition of life satisfaction [35], this research will adopt the definition as described by [57]: "Life satisfaction is conceived as the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favorably."

To the best of our knowledge, very few research studies have examined life satisfaction from a holistic approach. Therefore, the aim of this study was to utilize a holistic approach to construct a causal model and identify major determinants of life satisfaction in Canada.

Based on the literature review above on the possible causal connections between life satisfaction and other factors a causal model was constructed and presented in the causal path of Fig. 1.

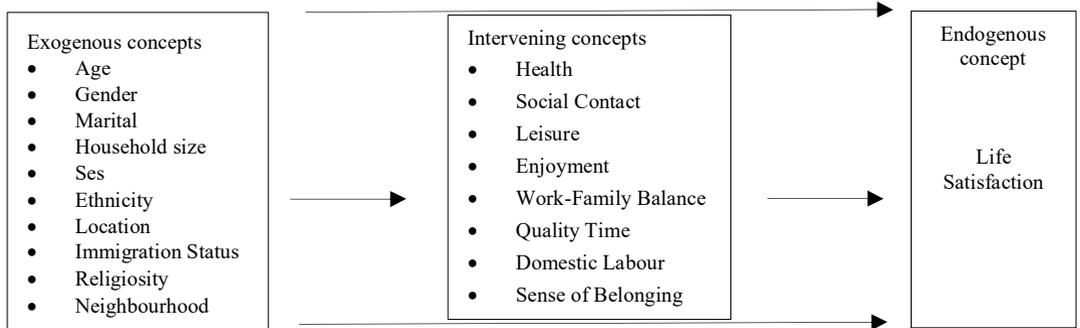


Fig. 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework.

3 Data, Measures, and Methods

3.1 Data

Data were derived from the General Social Survey (GSS) that gathers data on social subjects in order to monitor changes in the living conditions and well-being of Canadians over time and to provide immediate information on specific social policy issues of current or emerging interest. The target population for the GSS was all persons 15 years of age and over residing in Canada and the sample size was 19,597.

3.2 Measures

The concepts for the study were chosen according to both data availability and their relevance to life satisfaction as revealed in the literature. The concept of health was measured by self-report of health, various health problems reported by respondent, sleep problems, and stress. Social contact was measured by socializing of respondent with family members, friends, and others at homes, bars, and clubs. The concept of active leisure was measured by participating in sports, physical exercise or outdoor activity. Whereas the concept of passive leisure measured by activities such as reading books, listening to music, watching T.V or attending various events. The concept of enjoyment included activities enjoyed with family, friends, and volunteer activities. Other concepts in the proposed causal model were measured as provided in the literature.

4 Methods

In order to establish causal connections among various factors several multiple regression analyses were performed: (1) first, each intervening concept was regressed on various exogenous concepts as predictors and, (2) an overall model to predict life satisfaction was regressed on both exogenous and intervening concepts simultaneously.

5 Results

Table 1 shows that older respondents those who are in poor physical and mental health ($B = .117$), with less social contact ($B = -.149$), more time on passive leisure activities ($B =$

171) and less time on active leisure activities (B=-.051), less time with family and friends (B=-.058), less enjoyment with volunteer activities (B=-.100), and more time on domestic labour (B=. 141) tend to have lower satisfaction with life. On the other hand, older respondents, who have a better work-family balance (B=. 064), more quality time (B=. 196), and a greater sense of belongingness to society (B=-.081) seem to have greater satisfaction with life. Similar findings are noted for males, respondents in married or common-law unions, live in large households, and from high SES in this study.

Table 1. Correlations and standardized multiple regression coefficients for the causal model

	health	socont	lepassive	leactive	enjfamfr	enjvol	balwrkfam	qualtime	domlabr	belong	lifesat
age	.117* (.110)	-.149 (-.161)	.171 (.319)	-.051 (-.010)	-.058 (-.053)	-.100 (-.001)	.064 (.085)	.196 (.437)	.141 (.092)	-.081 (-.228)	-.020 (.060)
gender	-.094 (-.081)		.081 (.046)	.092 (.077)		-.127 (-.148)	.044 (.040)	.147 (.058)	-.208 (-.196)		-.043 (.003)
marital	-.053 (-.044)	.099 (.166)		-.043 (-.056)	.178 (.208)		.028 (.041)	-.027 (-.085)	.117 (.195)	-.045 (-.070)	.093 (.121)
houssize		.088 (.199)	-.034 (-.196)		.154 (.203)			-.115 (-.282)	.159 (.130)		
ses			-.120 (-.083)	-.068 (-.085)			-.023 (.007)	-.175 (-.117)	-.046 (-.021)		.026 (.034)
ethnicity				.039 (.034)	.046 (-.016)	.051 (.008)	-.060 (-.032)			.054 (-.046)	.044 (.064)
location	-.025 (-.022)		.024 (-.001)	.026 (.008)			.026 (.009)		-.049 (-.059)	.031 (.078)	
yrimmig					.042 (.021)	.048 (.004)			-.041 (-.010)	.079 (.078)	-.021 (-.062)
relgisty	.032 (.010)	-.021 (-.011)	.063 (-.006)		-.043 (-.041)	-.210 (-.218)				.165 (.228)	-.027 (-.098)
neighood	-.041 (-.012)	.023 (-.007)	-.030 (.070)	.032 (.012)		.037 (.067)	.055 (.064)		-.035 (.040)	-.150 (-.234)	.019 (-.107)
lifesat	-.426 (-.554)	.023 (.082)	-.057 (-.037)	.012 (.064)	.016 (.081)	.052 (.150)	.097 (.295)	.172 (.302)	-.014 (.008)	-.167 (-.298)	

*Bold: Standardized multiple regression coefficients (beta); Significance level = .05
 () Pearson's correlation coefficients

Respondents born in North America who spend more time on active leisure activities (B=. 039), more time enjoying with family and friends (B = .046), more enjoyment with volunteer activities (B=. 051), less time on balancing work family life (B = -.060), a greater sense of belongingness to society (B = .054), seem to have greater satisfaction with life.

Regardless of respondents' location or immigration status, factors such as poor health, passive leisure activity and domestic labor seem to lower life satisfaction. On the other hand, factors such as active leisure, better work-family balance, and a greater sense of belongingness to society tend to increase satisfaction with life. Religiosity seems to have strong influence on life satisfaction through participation in volunteer activities and sense of belongingness to society.

6 Discussion

The exogenous to endogenous results from this causal model concur with most of the findings in Warner Wilson's study [60]. In general, respondents who have greater social contact, participate in active leisure activities, enjoy family time and have more fun and enjoyment, quality time with friends and family, and better balance of work and family life seem to have greater satisfaction with life. These results suggests that a holistic approach is necessary for establishing determinants of life satisfaction and that life satisfaction is not merely comprised of positive or negative effect. The findings also indicate that being healthy, Canadian born; participating in spiritual activities, volunteering and participating

in leisure activities in addition to living in an urban city with a good job contributes to greater life satisfaction. Some of our results do contradict with findings in literature today.

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