

## **SUBJECTIVE LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG URBAN MALAY CIVIL SERVANTS IN MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

Quality of life (QOL) has two main dimensions: objective and subjective. Both dimensions are equally important in determining the overall quality of life of a person (Mahadzirah et al., 2008). Hence, a comprehensive measure of people's life satisfaction should ideally take into account these two dimensions. Empirical data for the measure of quality of life in Malaysia however has largely employed objective indicators (MQLI, 2004) and were used mainly in quantitative research. This situation has left research on subjective life satisfaction or well-being largely unexplored or limited. In light of the above, one may ask: if the MQLI has shown high score on the objective indicators, how far does this score reflect upon the people's subjective life satisfaction. This study thus focuses on exploring subjective life satisfaction among urban Malay civil servants in Malaysia. Being qualitative in nature, the research is concerned mainly with the *emic* than the *etic* views and perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Framed within a modified Allardt's model of welfare and MQLI, the study explores the subjective meaning of life satisfaction among the staff members of a Malaysian public university namely Universiti Teknologi MARA or UiTM. Sixteen respondents from four different categories of the University's administrative staff working at its main campus in Shah Alam, Selangor were engaged in the research. Data collected via in-depth interviews were later verified through written feedback validation (WfV) form. Preliminary findings have shown that the responses centered around two main themes namely satisfying non-living needs and satisfying the living needs with the

former being the main priority of the respondents. These findings have significant bearing upon development policy in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Subjective Life Satisfaction and Well-Being, Urban Malay Civil Servants, Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI)

**JEL Code:** Z13

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this paper is to report the findings of a study on subjective life satisfaction among the urban Malay civil servants who worked in a public university in Malaysia. The findings are only part of a larger study which was prompted particularly by the 2004 and 2011 reports on Malaysians' quality of life which showed the increase in the overall composite of Malaysian Quality of Life Index or MQLI. In the light of this increase, one wonders whether Malaysian urban dwellers are also satisfied subjectively with their lives and would thus ask the following question: how far does this 'objective achievement' reflect on the subjective life satisfaction among Malaysians. The results of the study have shed some light on this question.

### 1.1 Background

At present, about sixty seven percent of Malaysians are living in urban areas (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011-2015: 248). Therefore, the concern over the well-being of the urban residents remains one of the important considerations in the Malaysian government's development policy. In order to improve the quality of life and well-being of these urban dwellers, various socioeconomic strategies have been implemented as detailed in the Tenth Malaysia Plan (Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015). However, the empirical data on quality of life measure in Malaysia have largely been based on the objective indicators (MQLI Reports for the years 2004 and 2011). This means that there is a lack of research on the subjective satisfaction or well-being in Malaysia. This study was carried out to fill this gap. Specifically, the study explored and probed into the views and experiences of the Malay civil servants working at a higher learning institution in Malaysia namely Universiti Teknologi Mara or UiTM in Shah Alam, Selangor regarding subjective life satisfaction. The study was hoped to provide meaningful insights on the meaning of well-being among the subjects.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Works on quality of life have indicated that it has two dimensions represented respectively by objective and subjective indicators ( Rapley, 2003;Diener and

Suh, 1997; Campbell et al., 1976; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Veenhoven, 2008). Objective indicators refer to social data independent of individual evaluation, whilst subjective indicators represent the individual's own appraisal and evaluation of social conditions. Due to the importance of both, Diener and Suh (1997: 192) indicated that it is good to combine both when conducting research on the quality of life to overcome the limitations of research focusing on only one dimension. In this context, it is noticeable that some researches have been carried out along this line (Liao, 2009).

Despite the merits of research combining both dimensions as suggested above, this study limited itself to exploring the subjective life satisfaction among respondents. This was due to its lacking in the past and present research exercises as indicated earlier. Unlike the objective indicators, the subjective well-being is primarily concerned with the respondents' own internal judgment of well-being rather than that of the policy makers, academics or others. Among the works on subjective well-being, most focused primarily on the level and causes of subjective well-being and adopted primarily self-report survey. Campbell et al. (1976) and Andrews and Withey (1976) were among the earlier researchers who studied the perception of life satisfaction among the American people in the mid-seventy. In the light of the above works, it can be said that concern for quality of life remains significant for evaluating the living conditions or welfare of a nation. This is truly so in the context of Malaysia.

As indicated earlier, the empirical data for the measure of quality of life in Malaysia have been largely generated through quantitative researches which employed objective indicators. It can also be observed that since 1990 the MQLI has been employed as the main index to measure the Malaysians' quality of life (see MQLI 2004). With MQLI, Malaysia's quality of life has been measured along the eleven domains which are income and distribution, working life, transport and communications, health, education, housing, environment, family life, social participation, public safety, culture and leisure. Each domain has its own sub-indicators and the total number of all sub-indicators are forty two and these seem to capture mainly the socioeconomic aspects of people's life (MQLI, 2011).

This study argues that although the two MQLI reports for the respective years of 2004 and 2011 have shown increases in the overall composite index of MQLI, the question can still be asked as to whether such an 'achievement' really reflects the subjective satisfaction of the Malaysians. Hence, the main task of this study was to generate insights beyond objective indicators of life satisfaction especially on

the subjective meaning of well-being as derived from the respondents' own views and experiences.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Conceptual/theoretical Framework

To conduct and guide the research within certain conceptual/theoretical framework, the study has used two theoretical and instrumental apparatuses respectively namely the Allardt's theory/model of basic needs and the MQLI. As mentioned earlier, the latter covers eleven domains of quality of life while the former proposes three types of basic needs which correspond to three basic human needs termed as having, loving and being (Allardt, 1993: 93). Although Allardt's approach was developed to study the needs in developed societies, it was also found to be applicable to developing countries like Malaysia. With some modifications to suit the nature of Malaysian society, Allardt's model was hence benefitted to understand the subjective well-being of the respondents.

Table 1 describes the logical connection between and consolidation of the three main components namely the interview questions, the MQLI domains and the Allardt's types of basic needs to form the framework of this study.

**Table 1 - Conceptual/theoretical Framework**

ALLARDT'S TYPES OF NEEDS	WHAT IT MEASURES?	MQLI'S ELEVEN DOMAINS	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
<b>HAVING</b>	Level of living and environmental conditions	Income, health, education, housings, public safety, working life, transport and communication, environment.	Subjective views, feelings and experiences of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with living conditions
<b>LOVING (SOCIAL NEEDS)</b>	Relationships with others	Family life, Social Participation	Subjective views, feelings and experiences of social relations - happiness/unhappiness-
<b>BEING NEEDS (NEEDS FOR PERSONAL GROWTH)</b>	Relationship with externalities	Culture and leisure	Subjective views, feelings and experiences of alienation and personal growth
<b>SPIRITUAL NEEDS</b>	Spirituality and religiousness	Not in MQLI	Subjective views, feelings and experiences of spiritual needs

The addition of a spiritual domain to the Allardt's original model was meant to gain further insights on this aspect from the respondents who were all Muslims. It is within this conceptual/theoretical framework that this study was operated.

### **3.2 Research Design**

The research is qualitative in nature and it adopts a case study design which involves an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon, social unit or system bounded occurring in a bounded context (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005; Creswell, 2007). The method was preferred in view of the fact that studies on life satisfaction and well-being have been mostly quantitative in nature without much probing into the subjects' complex understanding and experience of life satisfaction.

### **3.3 Selection of Respondents and Data Collection**

Some selection criteria were firstly developed to ensure that the collected data would reflect insights of a certain category of the social group within predefined demographic characteristics. In this qualitative research, selection criteria are not meant for developing a sample size that is assumed to be fully representative of the population under investigation in the way that a quantitative research might do. The criteria were developed with the aim of seeing meaningful themes that would emerge first at the generic collective level, which is the main focus of the study, and perhaps would also shed initial light on their possible variation according to the different categories of respondents as defined by the said criteria. Initial reflections from any study are important for it to be further expanded. For example, a quantitative research involving larger sample size or even the whole population may be suggested to understand further the issues derived from these initial reflections.

Guided by such criteria, a total of sixteen participants were selected from the four categories representing four respective grades in civil service schemes. The subjects chosen were all above eighteen years old and married. Two males and two females were selected from each category. In addition to that, half of the subjects were purposely selected from among those of ten years of working experience and another half with less than five years' experience.

Two main data collection instruments namely an in-depth interview and written feedback validation (WFV) were used. The latter was used mainly for triangulation in order to ensure the accuracy and validity of the collected data (Stake, 2010: 123). In principle, the purpose of using WFV is similar to that of

Bloomberg’s critical incident instrument which is as an “effective technique for enhancing data collection” ( Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008:83).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

This study adopted a thematic technique of data analysis in dealing with the collected data. In assisting the analysis, the computer software NVivo was used to help with data management. The analysis process was guided mainly by the research questions set earlier and this technique involves three main stages namely a) descriptive coding, b) interpretative coding and c)thematic analysis coding(King and Horrocks 2010: 150).

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis have revealed two higher order themes reflecting the *emic* description of subjective life satisfaction. They were a) satisfying living needs/conditions, and b) satisfying non-living needs/conditions. A few sub-themes have emerged under each of these two themes. The higher order themes and their associated sub-themes are summarized in Table 2 as follows:

**Table 2 - Higher Order Themes and Sub-Themes**

HIGHER ORDER THEMES	SUB-THEMES
4.1 SATISFYING LIVING CONDITIONS/ NEEDS	4.1.1 Ability to fulfill the basic needs
	4.1.2 Ability to maintain current standard of living
	4.1.3 Ability to improve in quality of life
	4.1.4 Ability to maintain moderate lifestyles
	4.1.5 Being grateful to God with the “ <i>rezeki</i> ”
4.2 SATISFYING NON-LIVING CONDITIONS/ NEEDS	4.2.1 Freedom from illness
	4.2.2 Having a stable family
	4.2.3 Spiritual comfort

It can be concluded from the results that the subjective life satisfaction among the urban Malay civil servants of UiTM can be said to have centered around two main themes: satisfying the living conditions and satisfying non-living needs as briefly explained above.

First, the results revealed that almost all participants admitted the importance of satisfying their living needs. However, what was more important for them was that the income they earned was able to satisfy these needs in moderation. This finding is found to be consistent with the quantitative findings of subjective well-being carried out by Diener & Biswas-Diener (2002) and Easterlin (1995) which showed that money does not buy happiness. The finding also reflects the nature of the civil servants’ secured employment because they still felt that life was good despite a smaller earning they changed to a new job. Generally, this means that

for most participants, living a moderate life is the main reason that contributed to their life satisfaction.

Second, the results again revealed that satisfying the non-living needs was the participants' preference compared to the living needs. This means that need like having a stable family which is closely related to the loving needs in Allardt's scheme is the main priority in their lives. This finding is consistent with the findings of some other studies ( Appleton & Song, 2008; Liu, 2006; UN World Happiness Report, 2011 ). Reflections on this importance could be derived from such determinants as being able to spend time with family members, being married and having a stable family. UN World Happiness Report (2011) had also found that social connection is important to subjective well-being than material well-being.

Lastly, the results have shown that spiritual comfort also contributed to people's life satisfaction. The study found that spiritual or/and religious factor played important role in taking care of the respondents' inner life and this consequently had led to a higher level of their life satisfaction. Many earlier researches had also revealed a positive relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction including the ones conducted in the Western Judeo-Christian societies ( Ellison & Gay, 1990). Despite this importance, it is interesting to note that MQLI did not include the spiritual dimension as one of its domains.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

This study did not aim at generalization but to generate meaningful insights and themes on subjective life satisfaction among the respondents through a qualitative study. Broadly guided by a modified Allardt's basic needs theoretical model and MQLI, the study has been able to produce some interesting findings on the way life satisfaction was perceived and experienced by the respondents within and beyond the developed theoretical framework.

Based on the findings of this empirical study, it can be suggested more confidently that the development policy in Malaysia should look into and consider more seriously this dimension of societal development. As shown by the findings of this study, the material and the physical development alone do not seem to be everything for a good living or for life satisfaction of the people. Balanced development is not to be measured solely by objective indicators which are most socioeconomic in nature. This means that Malaysia should firstly alert her citizens on the difficulties and stresses facing them now and in the future especially in the midst of the nation's effort to become a developed country by 2020 and then

remind them of the need for being more concerned with the non-living needs such as family development, a healthy life and spiritual and religious development which would help them to better cope and deal with more complex life challenges.

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