CORRELATES OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN*

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents the results of an attempt to relate socioeconomic status, family status, social participation and personal disruptions of statuses and roles to an index of life satisfaction in rural sectors of Northern Wisconsin. While income, education and occupational status and level of living explain very little of life satisfaction, social participation variables explain somewhat more and disruptions of marital ties, job, physical well-being and residence explain most. Analyses by age and sex show that contacts with friends, relatives and church attendance are more important for the young, employment for the middle-aged and village residence more important for the older persons. The analysis supports the notion that life satisfaction results from the discrepancy between the aspirations and expectations of the individual and his ability to satisfy them within his environment. Education is negatively associated with subjective well-being when other variables are controlled. The influence of social involvement upon life satisfaction suggests the need for a modification of the aspiration-attainment model to include the integrative-expressive as well as the adaptive-instrumental processes of the individual.

Assessing subjective well-being opens opportunities for contributing to social theory as well as to public policy. It provides a basis for understanding the consequences of the personal and social characteristics of the individual for their perceived well-being in different social, cultural and natural contexts. The use and the rationale for subjective indicators is supported by an increasing number of national and international studies in the past decade and a half (Gurin et al., 1960; Allardt, 1963; Cantril, 1965; Bradburn, 1969; Dalkey, 1972; Abrams, 1973; Andrews and Withey, 1973; Rodgers, 1975; Campbell, et al., 1976; Clemente and Sauers, 1976; Mason et al., 1975).

This study attempts to understand the roots of subjective well-being in a specific region of Wisconsin which is undergoing change. Much of the recent work on subjective well-being uses the concept of satisfaction in which the individual directly assesses his or her situation (Andrews and Withey, 1974). Life satisfaction as a measure of subjective well-being is assumed to derive from an overall assessment of satisfaction in various life domains (Campbell et al., 1976, pp. 75-93). Assessment of satisfaction in the domains as in...
overall life satisfaction is based upon comparing one's actual situation with certain standards including aspiration levels, expectations, personal needs and personal values (Campbell, et al., 1976, pp. 13–17). This basis of satisfaction stems from the work of Lewin (1944) and others concerned with the discrepancy between levels of aspiration and attainments in the area of work satisfaction (Morse, 1953; Zaleznik, 1958; and Vroom, 1960).

Research on subjective well-being has included a variety of indicators including happiness, satisfaction in general and in specific areas and ratings of life experiences. There is a lack of an overall theory of how subjective well-being relates to objective conditions and life experiences. Using the broadly defined concept of alienation, Otto and Featherman (1975) arrived at the following definition: “the discordance in the individual’s perception of the real and the ideal”. However, the real and the ideal are generally understood to apply to the individual’s social environment, while life satisfaction or dissatisfaction may also involve physical conditions such as climate or health. Life satisfaction is, then, a very inclusive measure, and the causes of dissatisfaction are likely to be multiple and complex. Nevertheless, it is a simple measure of well-being having conceptual validity and if related to objective conditions and experiences, can be usefully related to social policy.

In this paper, we explore the contribution of three major sets of variables to life satisfaction. The first set includes socioeconomic status variables — education, occupation of household head, income and level of living. These variables reflect achievement, status and resources in our society, and could be expected to relate positively to life satisfaction. However, these factors, particularly education, tend to raise aspirations and goals so the higher expectations of the educated may offset the positive effects of increased ability and social status.

The second set of variables pertain to social participation and integration. Informal participation not only provides a sense of integration and acceptance, but also provides a context within which a person can reconcile his values, and standards with his situation (Otto and Featherman, 1975). Involvement with friends and relatives is an indication of accepting one’s social context as well as providing a resource for information and support in solving problems. Certain types of formal social participation, however, indicate dissatisfaction with existing conditions with the hope of improving them. Whether the person lives alone and whether married or not indicates