ABSTRACT. A number of psychological processes (e.g., social comparison, aspirations) may explain why people differ in their satisfaction with various life domains. This study compared the impact of a number of such processes on satisfaction judgments in a sample of 149 college students. Social comparison and positive affect were strong predictors of satisfaction across most domains. Objective conditions and aspirations were predictive of satisfaction in few domains. The relevance of Multiple Discrepancies Theory (Michalos, 1983) for the present findings is discussed. Limitations of the present study are noted and suggestions for future research are offered. Researchers need to focus on the reasons underlying the predictability of different domains from different processes.

In research on subjective well-being, three relatively independent factors emerge: positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction (Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976). One of the more replicable findings in this area has been that objective life circumstances correlate poorly with subjective judgments of well-being. For example, Wilson (1960) found very low correlations between objective measures of income, spending money, dates, grades, and satisfaction. Partly as a result of the poor predictability of objective factors, researchers have turned to psychological or ‘judgmental’ theories of subjective well-being (e.g., Michalos, 1983). These researchers maintain that objective circumstances usually have an indirect influence on happiness, which they suggest is directly controlled by internal psychological processes. Even when people live in favorable circumstances, they will often adapt to them or their aspirations will rise, and therefore the objective circumstances alone may not produce long-term satisfaction.

A number of psychological models or processes have been proposed to explain why people vary in their satisfaction with various life domains. These models seek to explain the processes by which life circumstances are mediated and result in subjective judgments of satisfaction. However, these models have rarely been empirically tested against one another. In this study five such models or processes were examined and compared in order to understand...
their impact upon satisfaction judgments. The five models can be briefly described:

(1) Positive affect – the degree to which one experiences joy, happiness, etcetera in each life domain. Although it appears that life satisfaction and positive affect should be highly correlated, Andrews and Withey (1976) found that they loaded on different factors. However, Cameron (1975) presents evidence to show that affect is involved in the appraisal of life satisfaction. Thus, independently of other more cognitive judgmental factors, simply experiencing positive affect in a domain may raise one’s evaluation of that area.

(2) Negative affect – unpleasant emotions which are associated with the domains. One may be satisfied or dissatisfied with a domain primarily on the basis of emotions experienced in reference to it. Warr, Barter, and Brownbridge (1983), Zevon and Tellegen (1982) and Diener and Emmons (1984) indicate that positive negative affect are independent. A comprehensive review of this question (Diener and Emmons, 1984) suggests strong evidence for some independence in the processes underlying positive and negative affect. Thus, we examined the separate influence of positive and negative affect as well as their joint contribution to satisfaction.

(3) Social comparison – how the person believes he or she compares to proximal others in the domain. One may be satisfied as long as one thinks he or she is doing better than others (Freedman, 1978).

(4) Aspirations – having high hopes and desires in an area. Several researchers (e.g. Fordyce, 1972) have theorized that high aspirations are impediments to satisfaction.

(5) Change – conditions have recently improved or deteriorated. Adaptation theorists (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman, 1978) maintain that only recent changes can move satisfaction away from the neutral point. Thus, recent change could lead to happiness or unhappiness. For example, Brickman et al. report that lottery winners were no happier than nonwinners, and took less pleasure in mundane activities. Apparently these individuals had habituated to their windfall. However it could be that recent change most influences affect because it is more subject to adaptation, whereas social comparison is a critical component for satisfaction, because satisfaction rests more on a cognitive-judgmental process.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relative contributions of each of the hypothesized psychological processes to judgments of satisfac-