STUDENT WELL-BEING: ARE THEY BETTER OFF NOW?

ABSTRACT. Past and present well-being of university students from Canada and the United States are compared. Ratings for the domains of health, recreation, self-esteem, and education decreased significantly between the 1984 measures and the 1992 measures. Canadian students generally rated the domains lower than did students from the United States. Self-discrepancy measures tended to decrease and hope measures for the United States students indicated less hopefulness now than in 1984. In general, student perceptions of well-being seem poorer now than in the past.

A path analysis revealed that MDT predicted 39 percent of the variance for satisfaction and 45 percent for happiness. Empirical support is provided for most of the hypothesized paths and for self-esteem and social support as conditioners of well-being. The results are consistent with cultural convergence and theories of well-being that incorporate both actual world changes and individual perception of those changes.

STUDENT WELL-BEING: THEN AND NOW

The present study compares the well-being of United States and Canadian university students in two temporally separated samples (1984 and 1992). We have two major purposes. The first is to examine change in well-being indicators over time. The second is to test, using path analysis, the Multiple Discrepancies Theory (MDT) proposed by Michalos (1985).

MDT developed in part because earlier studies of Quality of Life (QOL) found that economic and other objective measures predicted only about ten percent of the variance in QOL or subjective well-being (Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976). MDT states that satisfaction and happiness, here used as equivalents of expressed well-being or QOL, are predicted by seven perceived discrepancies. Data from a large, international study have shown that 30 to 50 percent of
the variance in student well-being is commonly predicted using MDT, quite a considerable improvement over 10 percent.

MDT is phenomenological in that it is based on self reports. Self reports of well-being are definitive measures, they are the ultimate criterion of how one feels about one's quality of life, health, satisfaction, and happiness. To paraphrase a spiritual of early Black America, nobody (else) knows the trouble, job, satisfaction, or happiness, I've seen or experienced. In fact, a considerable literature indicates the importance of these subjective reports. For example, self-reported health has been found to be a better predictor of longevity than doctors' predictions (Idler and Kasl, 1991; Mossey and Shapiro, 1982).

Further, measures of subjective well-being, as well as personality traits, show good reliability and stability across time (Costa and McCrae, 1980; Pavot and Diener, 1993). In spite of the influence of context effects such as sunny or rainy days, item characteristics, and item placement, the stability of subjective well-being reports remains as a predominant research outcome (Costa et al., 1989; Heady and Wearing, 1989). For most, the stability of self-report is no doubt supported by the stability of our environment, and our environmental choices as well as by enduring personality traits.

However, most of us are naive realists. If important domains in the environment or in our world change markedly, we do notice those changes and our perceptions and self-reports are influenced. An important feature of Multiple Discrepancies Theory is that these perceptions are processed as self based comparisons. This is like saying we are change detectors, psychologically as well as physiologically. Are things different than they were? Are they different than we expected them to be? Are they different than we want them to be? Are things different for me than for similar others? In general, Multiple Discrepancies Theory posits that personal satisfaction and happiness are predicted by such comparative global discrepancies, and that these discrepancies are in turn influenced by comparative estimates about real world domains such as health, finances, and recreation activity.

MDT further posits the influence of conditioners or self characteristics such as self-esteem, social support, age, ethnicity, and education. It commonly occurs in student population that many of the self condi-