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MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD SITUATION: SATISFACTION IN THE SLUMS OF CALCUTTA

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ABSTRACT. Eighty three people in the slums of Calcutta, India were interviewed, and responded to several measures of subjective well-being. The respondents came from one of three groups: Those living in slum housing, sex workers (prostitutes) residing in brothels, and homeless individuals living on the streets. They responded to questions about life satisfaction and satisfaction with various life domains, as well as to a memory recall measure of good and bad events in their lives. While the mean rating of general life satisfaction was slightly negative, the mean ratings of satisfaction with specific domains were positive. The conclusion is that the slum dwellers of Calcutta generally experience a lower sense of life satisfaction than more affluent comparison groups, but are more satisfied than one might expect. This could be due, in part, to the strong emphasis on social relationships and the satisfaction derived from them.

KEY WORDS: adjustment, income, India, life satisfaction, positive psychology, poverty, quality of life, subjective well-being

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There is, perhaps, no city in the world that is so commonly thought of as synonymous with “poverty” than Calcutta, India. By some estimates forty per cent of India’s population and as many as fifty per cent of the children in Calcutta live beneath the poverty line (OFFER, 1999). Its notorious nickname, “the black hole of Calcutta” conjures an image in the minds of many westerners of a metropolis full of miserable people. Higher income is associated with many positive outcomes ranging from increased longevity (Wilkenson, 1996) to better health (Salovey et al., 2000) to greater overall life satisfaction (Diener and Oishi, in press). Conversely, low income is often associated with higher crime and poorer health (Diener and Diener, 1995). Thus, because of the dire poverty in
Calcutta, it is possible that it is, in fact, the pit of misery envisioned in the popular imagination. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted with people living in poverty to determine the effects of severe material deprivation on subjective well-being (SWB). Do higher crime rates and poorer health, to the extent they exist in a community, necessarily produce a lower sense of well-being? At a more fundamental level, are the extremely poor of the world miserable, and if not, why not?

The characters in Dominique La Pierre’s (1983) popular novel set in Calcutta, *The City of Joy*, provide a courageous and hopeful counterpoint to the “black hole” stereotype. Far from exhibiting the despondency normally attributed to extreme poverty, they struggle courageously in the face of dire circumstances, finding joy wherever they can. La Pierre (1983) presented a fictional model of strengths and positive psychology, whereas much of the existing research on poverty has focused on deficits. Is the stereotype of Calcutta’s poverty too bleak, or are the characters in *City of Joy* too romantic? The present study attempts to answer these questions by interviewing members of Calcutta’s poorest communities – slum dwellers, sex workers, and pavement dwellers – in order to assess their life satisfaction, and suggest explanations of the results.

Maslow (1954) advanced the theory that basic physiological needs such as food and water need to be fulfilled before one can attain self-actualization. We hypothesize then that individuals with greater income, and therefore greater access to basic need fulfillment, will experience a greater sense of well-being. Income has been shown to be a moderate predictor of individual well-being (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1993) and a reliable predictor of SWB at the national level (Diener et al., 1993; Veenhoven, 1991). Veenhoven (1991) proposed that income has the largest effect on SWB for those at the lowest economic levels. That is, the ability to fulfill basic needs such as food, shelter, and sanitation could have a more dramatic impact on an individual’s well-being than the ability to vacation or maintain a private vehicle. Veenhoven’s theory gains support from Lane (1991), who reported that negative affect (NA) decreased as people’s income rose, but that this occurred only at the lowest economic levels. In an analysis of international data provided by Veenhoven (1993) and Michalos