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MATERIAL AND NON-MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE LIFE
SATISFACTION OF URBAN RESIDENTS IN HONG KONG

The relationship between material well being and life satisfaction has perennially been a focus of investigation in recent years. The interest in this area, as McCall (1975) stated, represents a feeling on the part of many people that modern industrial society, despite impressive gains in affluence, ease of communication, and leisure, has not made any significant overall progress in improving man's lot.

Previous research findings in this area, however, are not as consistent as we would expect. Although many studies have shown that life satisfaction is positively associated with material well being (cf., Gurin, Veroff and Feld, 1960; Inkeles, 1960; Wessman, 1959; Bradburn and Caplovitz, 1965; Rogers and Converse, 1975), some studies have found no relationship (such as Easterlin, 1973; and Duncan, 1975; Schneider, 1975).

Much of the inconsistencies, in our opinion, stems from confusing the level of analysis. It is important to note that the correlation between material well being and life satisfaction can be established at two different levels, namely, the individual level, at which an individual's material condition is correlated with his own state of satisfaction, and the regional level, at which the material standard of a region is

correlated with the summary state of satisfaction of all the individuals in that region. Methodologically, findings established at one level cannot be inferred to the other. It seems that most, if not all, of the studies that do not lend support to a positive relationship between material well being and life satisfaction are established at the regional level. The relationships between material well being and life satisfaction at both the individual and the ecological levels have succinctly been summarized by Easterlin's statement (1973) that "In all societies, more money for the individual typically means more individual happiness. However, raising the income of all does not increase the happiness of all."

Studies on the relationship between material well being and life satisfaction in Asia are relatively few, although there are numerous such studies in the United States and other countries (Easterlin, 1974). A study that is worth mentioning is the one directed by Robert E. Mitchell (1969) in the urban areas of five Southeast Asian countries in 1967-68. It was found that 33 percent of the urban residents in Hong Kong were unhappy, whereas comparable figures were 15 percent in Taipei, 11 percent in the six major cities of Western Malaysia, 8 percent in Singapore, and 3 percent in urban Bangkok-Thonburi. According to Mitchell's study, Hong Kong had a much

higher rate of personal unhappiness than had other Asian cities. This finding is quite surprising because by the time his research was conducted, Hong Kong had a higher level of economic development than most of the countries under study. Hence, the economically more advanced society turned out to have a higher rate of unhappiness. However, it should be noted that Mitchell collected his data during the summer of 1967, when residents in Hong Kong were suffering from a serious political turmoil, with widespread bomb threats, strikes, shortage of food supplies and the shadow of a communist takeover. These events might have had an adverse effect on the psychological well being of its people although the extent of this effect cannot be precisely determined. Moreover, Mitchell did not correlate material well being and happiness at the individual level. Consequently, there is no way to tell what kinds of people are the most happy as well as the most unhappy. From a policy making point of view, this information is very important because if we want to convert the unhappy citizens into the happy ones, we need to know what makes them unhappy.

The objective of this paper is to analyze and elaborate the relationship between material well being and life satisfaction on the basis of the data collected from a sample of individuals in the urban areas of Hong Kong in 1974. In light of the similar studies conducted

in other countries, we hypothesized that among urban residents in Hong Kong, material well being would lead to greater satisfaction with life, and that the relationship would be independent of some social background factors such as sex, age, and education. In the latter part of this paper, attempts will be made to elaborate the relationship for the purpose of identifying some of the ways in which material conditions may interact with non-material factors in their effects on life satisfaction. As will be explained later, it is our proposition that individuals in relatively good material conditions would be more concerned with their super-material pursuits than those in poorer material conditions. Some of the implications will be discussed.

METHOD

Data were drawn from the Biosocial Survey conducted jointly by the Social Research Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Human Ecology Group of Australian National University in 1974. A proportionate stratified sample of 3,983 household heads between the ages 20 to 59 were selected from the urban areas of Hong Kong. Census districts and housing types were used as criteria for stratification, and the sampling fraction for each stratum was .62 percent (for details of the sample design, see Chan and Lau, 1974). Information

from respondents was collected through personal interviews with a standardized questionnaire. The response rate was about 71 percent. Unsuccessful interviews were replaced by cases randomly selected from a supplementary list.

Life satisfaction was measured by the questionnaire item: "Generally speaking, are you satisfied with your daily life (your status, things you do, and the situation around you, etc.)?" This item was often used in previous studies on life satisfaction (cf., Gurin, et al., 1960; and Bradburn, 1969). Responses to the question were grouped into three categories: low (very or quite dissatisfied), medium (in-between), and high (very or quite satisfied).

Material well being was measured by four indicators; they were (1) total income of the household, (2) type of housing, (3) total size of the household's living space, and (4) facilities and appliances inside the household as observed by the interviewer. Scores on these four indicators were summed for each respondent and then grouped into four levels to form a scale of material well being. Analyzing the internal consistency of the scale, we found that the total scale was strongly correlated with each of its indicators; the gamma coefficients were .93 with total income, .92 with

housing type, .96 with living space, and .94 with household facilities. The scale, therefore, appears to have a high degree of reliability.

Sex, age and educational status were introduced as control variables. Age was divided into four categories: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59. Educational status was also divided into four levels, i.e., no schooling, primary school or private tutoring, secondary school, and post-secondary school.

RESULTS: SATISFACTION & MATERIAL CONDITIONS

63.7 percent of the respondents under study reported that they were very or quite satisfied with their lives, whereas 24.5 percent gave a neutral response and only 11.9 percent were reportedly quite or very dissatisfied. Apparently, the proportion of dissatisfied individuals was much smaller than that of satisfied individuals.

As previously reported, Mitchell (1969) found that 33 percent of his Hong Kong respondents were unhappy in 1967-68. This study, however, found that only about one out of ten individuals were dissatisfied with their lives in 1974. Comparing the findings of these two studies, it appears that the urban residents in Hong Kong have become happier over these years. But, it

should be reminded that the difference might be a result of the massive civil disorders at the time of Mitchell's survey.

Table 1 shows the relationship between life satisfaction and material well being. The gamma coefficient was .36, and the relationship was statistically significant at the .001 level. Our hypothesis was thus confirmed. In other words, the higher the levels of material well being, the higher the degree of life satisfaction among the urban population in Hong Kong.

TABLE 1. LIFE SATISFACTION BY MATERIAL WELL BEING

Satisfaction	Material Well Being			
	IV(Low)	III	II	I(High)
	%	%	%	%
Low	17.6	10.8	7.6	6.6
Medium	34.0	24.3	19.3	9.3
High	48.4	64.9	73.1	84.1
(N)	(1213)	(1396)	(662)	(517)

Gamma = .36; p < .001;

Life satisfaction was also related to sex and education, but not to age. The gamma coefficients were .14 with sex, and .13 with education, both significant at .01 level. In general, the female and the better educated tended to express a higher degree of life satisfaction. In view of these findings, we should ask: would the relationship between life satisfaction and material well being be affected by sex and educational status? Besides, although age is not related to life satisfaction, we would also like to know whether the relationships between material well being and life satisfaction are equally strong in different age-groups.

It turned out that in the control analyses, the original positive relationship between life satisfaction and material conditions persisted. The partial gammas for the separate control on age, sex, and education were .36, .36, and .35 respectively; they were almost the same as the original zero-order gamma (.36). Furthermore, Table 2 shows that the relationship between life satisfaction and material conditions remained positive and statistically significant in various age, sex, and educational subgroups.

It was observed in Table 2, however, that the relationship became relatively weak among the youngest group of individuals (gamma = .27) but stronger among

the oldest ($\gamma = .48$). These findings seem to be consistent with the observation made by Davis (1940) and others. It was argued that unlike the later stage of life, young adulthood is a time for hope and exploration. At the starting point of a life career, the young adult usually attaches greater importance to the opportunity for development rather than to immediate material rewards, or he may be more idealistic and so tend to glorify lofty ideals rather than material achievements. Accordingly, we would expect that the older people would attach greater importance to immediate material success than future opportunities.

In short, it has been demonstrated that in Hong Kong there was a positive relationship between life satisfaction and material well being, and that the relationship was independent of age, sex, and educational status. This finding is consistent with Cantril's fourteen - nation survey (Cantril, 1965) in which economic matters stand out as the most conspicuous human concern.

TABLE 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFE SATISFACTION AND MATERIAL WELL BEING AMONG VARIOUS SEX, AGE, AND EDUCATIONAL SUBGROUPS.

	Gamma	Significance	N
Sex			
Male	.37	.001	1626
Female	.36	.001	2162
Age			
20 - 29	.27	.001	1052
30 - 39	.39	.001	814
40 - 49	.35	.001	1109
50 - 59	.48	.001	813
Education			
No schooling	.37	.001	732
Primary/tutoring	.34	.001	1728
Secondary	.34	.001	1026
Post-secondary	.38	.05	301

BEYOND MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS: SENSE OF PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

It should not be misunderstood, however, that life satisfaction is simply a matter of material well being.

Maslow (1954) has called our attention to the "hierarchy of human needs". It was postulated that human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency and that higher needs cannot be aroused until the more basic ones are gratified. The basic needs are physiological and safety needs, while the higher ones are those of belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. It is noted that gratification of the basic needs primarily depends on material conditions. In view of Maslow's postulate that the basic needs, if they are not met, dominate the individual's behavior, we would expect that people in poor material conditions are more concerned with the meeting of the basic rather than higher needs. On the contrary, since people in better material conditions have had no difficulty in meeting their basic needs, they come to be concerned with their higher needs. The needs that occupy Maslow's hierarchy, be they belongingness, esteem, or self-actualization, are in fact the needs for a sense of personal fulfillment. In other words, once an individual has reached a certain level of material well being, what he strives for in his life is a sense of being able to fulfill his psychosocial or non-economic needs such as

being accepted by friends and relatives, being recognized as a person of worth, and living in a meaningful way.

Based on Maslow's postulate, we scanned the questionnaire to identify the following three items which are closest in meaning to the sense of personal fulfillment: (1) Do you feel somewhat lonely even among friends? (2) Would you say that nothing ever turns out for you the way you want it to? (3) Do you sometimes wonder if anything is worthwhile anymore? Responses to each item were dichotomized and then the scores on the three items were summed for each individual to form a scale of sense of personal fulfillment. It should be reported that intercorrelations among the three items were all statistically significant at the .001 level. The gamma coefficients were .61 for the relationship between first and second items, .67 between first and third, and .68 between second and third. The scale, therefore, appears to have an acceptable degree of internal consistency.

Table 3 shows that life satisfaction was positively associated with the sense of personal fulfillment. In other words, individuals who had greater sense of personal fulfillment were more satisfied with their lives as a whole. The relationship was found to be independent of sex, age, and education. The partial gammas for the

separate control on sex, age, and education were also about the same as the zero-order gamma (.24). Besides material conditions, therefore, non-material considerations such as the sense of personal fulfillment were also an important source of life satisfaction. It should be noted that similar findings were found in some previous studies (cf., Fellows, 1965; Phillips, 1967; and Beiser, 1974).

TABLE 3. LIFE SATISFACTION BY SENSE OF PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

Satisfaction	Fulfillment			
	0 (Low)	1	2	3 (High)
	%	%	%	%
Low	36.5	24.9	14.6	9.0
Medium	17.6	27.8	23.2	23.4
High	45.9	47.3	62.3	67.6
(N)	(74)	(334)	(824)	(2540)

Gamma = .24; p < .001;

TABLE 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SENSE OF PERSONAL FULFILLMENT AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG VARIOUS MATERIAL WELL BEING SUBGROUPS

Material Well Being	Gamma	Significance level	N
IV (Low)	.19	.001	1147
III	.16	.01	1327
II	.34	.05	636
I (High)	.52	.001	503

Let us now examine whether or not the sense of personal fulfillment would have differential effects on life satisfaction among individuals in different levels of material conditions. Table 4 shows that in every level of material well being, the relationship between material well being and the sense of personal fulfillment remained positive and statistically significant. It was, however, observed that in general the higher the level of material well being, the greater was the gamma coefficient of their relationship. These findings lend support to the hypothesis derived from Maslow's postulate. In other words, the sense of personal fulfillment was more conducive to satisfaction with life among individuals in better rather than poorer material conditions.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we analyzed and elaborated the relationship between life satisfaction and material well being on the basis of the data collected from a probability sample of 3,983 urban residents in Hong Kong. It was found that most respondents (about two-thirds) were satisfied with life as a whole. Only a small portion (about one-tenth) reported dissatisfaction.

The degree of life satisfaction was found to be positively associated with the level of material well being. The relationship was independent of sex, age, and educational status. It was suggested that material well being permits an individual to meet his personal needs and therefore leads to satisfaction with life.

To elaborate on the relationship between satisfaction and material conditions, we took into account non-material conditions. In view of Maslow's postulate on the hierarchy of human needs, we proposed that non-material conditions would produce differential effects on the life satisfaction of individuals with different levels of material well being. We maintained that the so called higher needs on Maslow's hierarchy were largely the search for personal fulfillment and integration. It was found that the sense of personal fulfillment was positively associated with life satisfaction, and that

the relationship was independent of sex, age, and education. More important was that the effect of the sense of personal fulfillment on life satisfaction was stronger among individuals in better material conditions.

The proposition about the positive relationship between life satisfaction and material well being has been repeatedly confirmed by empirical studies in various countries. The present study confirmed the proposition in the context of Hong Kong, and hence contributes an additional item of evidence to the cross-cultural validity of the proposition.

A more important implication of the present study is about the interaction effects of material and non-material conditions. Using three empirical items as indicators of non-material conditions, this study shows that non-material conditions tend to have a stronger impact on the life satisfaction of individuals with a higher level of material well being. These findings lend support to Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of human needs.

The present study also has a practical implication. The findings suggest that if we wish to make the relatively poor people happier, efforts should be directed to improving their material conditions, such as better housing and more adequate facilities inside and outside

the household. Their personal happiness is mainly dependent upon the extent to which their basic physiological and safety needs are satisfied. For those individuals in better material conditions, however, emphasis should be placed on improving their sense of personal fulfillment such as relationships with friends and relatives, and participation in community affairs as well as the pursuit of meaningful life goals. As they have managed to meet their basic needs, they come to be concerned with the higher needs, such as the needs for affection, acceptance, and self-actualization.

Before ending this paper, some notes of caution are needed. First, the conclusions in this paper were based on the analysis of individual, rather than aggregate, data. What is true for the individuals may not be true for the aggregates. Second, this study dealt with the "global" life satisfaction rather than the satisfaction with specific domains of life. Although the global assessment is of interest in itself, further studies are needed to analyze the impact of material and/or non-material conditions upon the satisfaction with different aspects of life in Hong Kong (see, for instance, Beiser, 1974; Levey and Guttman, 1975; Rogers and Converse, 1975; and Schneider, 1975). Third, this paper has adopted the social causation approach, which assumes that better material or non-material conditions

cause a greater satisfaction with life. As suggested by Easterlin (1973), the converse may be true, i.e., the more satisfied individuals are more productive and dynamic and are thus likely to achieve a higher level of material or non-material well being. In view of our theoretical rationale concerning human needs, it makes sense to assume the direction of relation from material or non-material conditions to satisfaction. Quite probably, however, there is a circular causation. The causal priority between these two sets of variables apparently constitutes a meaningful area for further research (Pelz and Andrews, 1964; Lee, 1976).

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