

Objective Circumstances, Life Satisfactions, and Sense of Well-Being: Consistencies Across Time and Place¹

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A national survey of 118 New Zealand adults in 1980 provided social indicators data on life satisfaction and global sense of well-being. A comparison of these data with earlier findings in North American surveys shows that New Zealanders have similar distributions of satisfaction and happiness. The results also replicated the low correlations previously found between objective life circumstances and sense of well-being. The environmental model of happiness was further weakened by the observation that the rank-order of satisfaction means across 34 life domains was highly consistent ($r = .94$) between U.S. and New Zealand samples, and did not reflect the most obvious differences between the two societies. In light of these results, alternative models are suggested to point the way to a more truly psychological analysis of life satisfaction and enjoyment.

What is wrong with the following explanation of general happiness? Each person's life is set in a context of objective circumstances which are more or less advantageous. (1) These circumstances produce corresponding satisfactions and dis-satisfactions. (2) The sum of these satisfactions is experienced as a corresponding level of well-being. It therefore follows that (3) favourable life circumstances indirectly determine the level of well-being experienced.

The only problem with this model is that the data do not support it. Taking up proposition 1, the few known correlations between specific objective circumstances and their corresponding satisfaction ratings are low. In a large random sample of Americans, Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976) found circumstance-satisfaction r s of .23 and .24 for the domains of education and family income, respectively (pp 380-387). When 10 such demographic factors were combined by multiple classification analysis to predict an overall sum-of-satisfaction score, the R was

.41, accounting for 16% of the variance (Campbell, 1976).

The indirect link between the set of real circumstances and general happiness (proposition 3) was even less well supported with an R of .33. A more detailed discussion of this result is presented elsewhere (Kammann and Campbell, 1982) where it is concluded that marital status and unemployment are two circumstance factors that can be bracketed separately as having non-trivial and possibly causative associations with well-being. When these two factors are removed, objective circumstances are even more negligible as correlates of well-being.

An alternative approach to proposition 3 specifies that the key circumstances are of a more personal nature involving life-event changes interpreted as sources of objective stress. A close reading of that literature, however, combined with a series of unsuccessful studies at the University of Otago (Blackman, 1980; Dixon, 1981; Kammann and Flett, unpublished study) gives no encouragement in this direction, even when attention is focussed on events experienced as unpleasant, or on events freely nominated by the subjects.

There is better support for the link between sum-of-satisfaction and global well-being (proposition 2), with r s usually occur-

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ring in the range .70-.80. This result has been replicated in New Zealand (Note 1). Even here, there is reason to suspect that the observed correlations do not reflect a simple cause-effect relationship. For one thing, the sum-of-satisfactions score is much more stable over time than the measure of global well-being (Campbell, *et al.*, 1976, pp 65-66). It has also been found that the use of cognitive techniques to increase general happiness incidentally produces equally large gains in life-concern satisfactions, even though these were not attended to in the cognitive exercises (Lichter, Haye and Kammann, 1980).

Unless the American correlations are somehow dependent on their cultural context, they challenge the model stated in paragraph one both as a general theory of happiness, and more specifically as an interpretation of satisfaction measures used as "social indicators" to measure the quality of life (conceived as something "out there" to be modified by government policies and social action). However, the focus in social indicators studies is less on individual differences and more on group means and their trends over time. It is plausible that, while the life enjoyment of individuals is too complexly determined to reflect objective circumstances, these factors can be tapped more successfully in large-sample statistics.

It is not clear how this aggregate version of the environmental model would predict the rank-order of mean satisfaction scores among different life domains, but an inspection of those means shows the following pattern. Highest mean satisfactions occur in judgments of closest social ties (spouse, family, friends), the next highest involve other personal concerns (e.g. health, wealth, and self), somewhat lower ratings emerge for community and neighbourhood circumstances, while the lowest mean ratings obtain with national domains such as state of the economy, government, political leaders and taxes.

This after-the-fact organization of the findings could merely reflect a fortuitous pattern that occurred in a particular overseas survey in 1972. It is entirely possible that a different cultural context would produce a very different rank-ordering on the basis of local conditions. The present study tests this

hypothesis with survey data collected in New Zealand in 1980. To the extent that the domain satisfactions are imperfectly correlated between the two societies, the suggested pattern in the rank-order of domains is merely circumstantial or imaginary. To the extent that objective differences between the two contexts can further predict differences in satisfactions, the environmental model is supported.

It is necessary, therefore, to consider what differences might be expected between American and New Zealand satisfactions on the basis of national circumstances at the times of the surveys. An obvious case is the level of wealth in the two countries which is represented by a 1.6 to 1 ratio between American and New Zealand gross national products per person in 1974. Furthermore, the effect of the recession beginning in 1973 has been more severe in New Zealand in terms of percentage changes in unemployment, real cost of living and overseas debt, and in the rates of inflation. Such differences should be reflected directly in satisfaction with *family income*, and *standard of living* and indirectly in terms of *house or flat, goods and services*, and possibly *chances of getting a good job*.

Furthermore, New Zealand income tax rates would be considered oppressive in the United States, and should produce less satisfaction with *the taxes you pay* (even though American citizens actually make up some of the difference with state, city, sales and property taxes).

The general greenness of New Zealand and its low population density should produce more satisfaction with *conditions of the natural environment*, while the lower rate of crimes, and particularly violent crimes, should increase the perception of *safety in the neighbourhood*. These factors might also affect perception of the *community as a place to live*.

At the level of cultural stereotypes, New Zealanders might expect to find that their family- and community-oriented lifestyle is confirmed by higher satisfaction ratings in respect to *marriage, family, things done with the family* and *spare-time activities*.

At one level, then, the present paper simply asks if the results observed in U.S. stud-

ies in 1972 are relevant to New Zealand in 1980, regarding (a) the low correlations across individuals between objective circumstances and global well-being and (b) the national ordering of life domains in terms of their mean satisfaction scores. At a more theoretical level, if both of these patterns are confirmed, our rejection of the common sense model in paragraph one can be more confident, and the need for alternative models becomes more compelling. Although the sampling technology in the New Zealand study is not as thorough (or expensive) as in the U.S. studies, it will be seen that this did not distort the results.

Method

Samples

The New Zealand results come from a sample of 118 New Zealand adults over the age of 17 surveyed by a postal questionnaire in March, 1980, from a national sample of 500 addresses in all New Zealand telephone directories. The initial number of returns was 197 (39.4%) but due to a design error in the questionnaire package, a key section was frequently omitted reducing the number of subjects to 118.

This sample consisted of 44 males and 74 females for a 37:63% sex ratio. It has been a persistent problem in all of the survey projects on well-being carried out at the University of Otago that females are more willing to participate than males, producing typically about a 40:60 male-female ratio. This situation is not unique to New Zealand or the lack of interviewer methods; the parallel American samples obtained by the Survey Research Centre typically yielded a 43:57% male/female ratio (Andrews & Withey, p. 431).

Otherwise, the New Zealand sample appears to be approximately representative of the New Zealand adult population. The median age was 36.8 years with 5th and 95th percentile ranks at 18.5 and 68.4 years, respectively. Median family income in 1979 was \$11,800 with 5th and 95th percentile ranks of \$4,500 and \$41,000. The median education level was 4th Form high school with 5th and 95th percentile ranks at 2nd Form and university Bachelor's degree. Further evidence will be reported in the Results to indicate that the New Zealand data are not affected by the self-selection of the sample.

American data on the relationship between environmental factors and overall subjective well-being come from a national random sample conducted by the University of Michi-

gan Survey Research Center on 2,164 adults in July and August of 1971 with an 80% participation rate (Campbell *et al.* pp. 511-512).

The United States satisfactions data come primarily from four national random samples of American adults over the age of 16 as collected through the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, and as presented in Chapter 8 of Andrews and Withey (1976). The *N*s were all in the range 1000-1500 with participation rates ranging from 74 to 76%. The times of the four samples and their short names are:

May 1972	May
November 1972 (1)	Nov-a
November 1972 (2)	Nov-b
April 1973	1973

In addition, five of the 34 life areas were also included in subsequent Omnibus Surveys (Appendix N) as follows:

October 1974	1974
April 1976	1976

As the results of these various surveys were highly consistent where items were repeated, results have been averaged to create a single U.S. distribution for each satisfaction item, but the survey sources are listed along with the results. It will be seen that most of the data were collected in 1972. Further details on the American samples are given in Andrews and Withey (pp. 20-22, 388-390, 431-434).

Questionnaires

A total of 34 satisfaction rating items was selected from Andrews and Withey (1976) on the basis that the items reflected a broad sample from the three-dimensional space of life domains determined by Smallest Space Analysis (pp. 37-49), and were those for which full response distributions were also presented (Chapter 8). These items were presented in the New Zealand survey as a single questionnaire within the larger package of questionnaires that have been described elsewhere (Note 1).

Respondents in the New Zealand study were instructed to observe that satisfactions were rated from 7 down to 1 corresponding with the seven steps of the same delighted-terrible rating scale used, and thoroughly evaluated, by Andrews and Withey (1976). The seven labels were: delighted, pleased, mostly satisfied, mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied), mostly dissatisfied, unhappy, terrible.

In respect of correlations between environmental factors and overall well-being, subjects also filled out a questionnaire on demographic variables, and a general well-being inventory. The demographic factors consisted of sex, age,

family income, highest education, marital status, broken home in childhood and birth order. They also filled out the Eysenck Personality Inventory from which the extraversion score is relevant here.

Marital status was coded 1 for currently married, occurring in 71 out of the 118 cases, versus 0 for single, separated, divorced, or widowed. Broken home was scored 1 if either parent died or there was a divorce in the subject's childhood, occurring in 14 of the 118 cases; otherwise, it was scored 0. Birth order was coded by ranks.

The inventory of well-being used for this analysis was Affectometer 1, a 96-item scale that appears to have excellent psychometric properties (Kammann, Christie, Irwin & Dixon, 1979).² It is relevant to note that this scale is correlated at .74 with the Index of General Affect used by Campbell *et al.*, (1976) and that these two well-being scales have produced the highest loadings on a general well-being factor from a factor analysis of 13 alternative scales (Note 1).

Results

Sample Bias

Evidence for a possible bias in the New Zealand sample was first considered in terms of five other measures of well-being not otherwise discussed in this paper (Note 1) on which the New Zealand distributions could be compared with earlier US/UK distributions. The agreement was very good, with the means of the New Zealand satisfactions averaging .12 SDs below the overseas means (using US/UK SDs), and the SDs averaged 12% less, both within the range of sampling variability.

Although the Affectometer 1 scores could not be compared with any normative overseas data, a special analysis was made on the distributions of satisfaction scores as averaged across the entire set of 34 life domains. Table 1 shows that the New Zealand sample used the delighted-terrible scale comparably with the U.S. samples obtained by Andrews and Withey (1976).

² Affectometer 1 has since been revised into a 40-item scale (Affectometer 2) containing two 20-item subscales each of which gives a highly reliable measure of well-being in about three minutes. Copies of this scale and information on its psychometric properties, normative data, and scoring procedures are available from the author.

Table 1: Means of 34 Percentage Response Distributions

Scale Step	Mean %	
	U.S.	N.Z.
7 Delighted	10.65	6.82
6 Pleased	26.12	25.03
5 Mostly Satisfied	30.74	31.62
4 Mixed (etc.)	17.97	20.82
3 Mostly Dissatisfied	7.85	9.12
2 Unhappy	3.76	3.94
1 Terrible	2.85	2.56
Total	99.94	99.91
Mean Score	4.91	4.79

Correlates of Well-Being

In order to compare the correlations between circumstances and overall sense of well-being, Campbell's life cycle variable was reinterpreted as a married/not variable since marital status appears to account for virtually all of the variation in the Index of Affect across the categories of the life cycle (Campbell, 1976, Figure 1). A possible exception is that single women over the age of 30 scored as high on affect as married people in general; however, the unstated *n* is certainly small here and in the other seven cases unmarried people of both sexes had lower affect.

Table 2: Correlations Between Circumstances and Overall Well-Being

Circumstance Variable	Campbell (1976)* <i>eta</i>	This Study† <i>r</i>
Life cycle/Married-not	.24	.31
Family income	.18	.10
Education	.10	.14
Age	.08	.18
Sex	.02	.02
Broken home	—	-.19
Birth order	—	-.05
Extraversion	—	-.11

* Well-being on Index of Affect, *N* = 2164, U.S.A., 1971.

† Well-being on Affectometer 1, *N* = 118, New Zealand, 1980.

Table 2 shows that the correlations between objective circumstances and overall well-being are no higher in New Zealand than in the United States. The New Zealand data further suggest that a broken home in

childhood, birth order position, and extraversion are also negligible predictors of well-being. (The broken home result should be seen only as probe since there were only 14 cases in the sample.) The one factor emerging as predictive is the married/not variable and this is consistent with the life cycle correlation in the American data.

These data are not offered in support of a null hypothesis conclusion, which is logically untenable, but as supporting a near-null hypothesis. For example, the 95% confidence limits around a middling r value of .10 are $-.08$ and $.28$ in the New Zealand sample, and $.06$ and $.14$ in the U.S. sample. Although some of the correlations observed in Table 2 are significantly different from $.00$, that fact merely distracts from the size of the effect which is the focus here.

Domain Satisfaction

The Pearson r between the means across the 34 areas was $.94$, with an r of $.71$ for the SDs. A complete listing of the response distributions (converted to percentage format for comparability) is given in the Appendix to this report. There it can be observed that New Zealanders were, contrary to expectations, slightly *more* satisfied with income, standard of living, and house or flat (item 24, 29, 10), and were equal to Americans in satisfaction with goods and services, chances of getting a good job, taxes and neighbourhood safety (items 22, 27, 34, 12).

The only area in which objective circumstances correctly predicted the difference in national responses was that New Zealanders felt slightly better about the conditions of the natural environment (item 28). There was no support for a favourable stereotype of the New Zealand lifestyle as reflected in satisfactions with spouse, marriage, things done with the family, spare time activities or the community as a place to live (items 1, 2, 3, 14, 6).

Discussion

It may first be remarked that the across-the-board consistency between the New Zealand and American results establishes the transferability of studies on life satisfactions and happiness between these two cultural contexts. This high level may not be surpris-

ing in respect to the response distributions, and the low correlations between objective circumstances and global well-being. More newsworthy for social indicators and quality-of-life research is the almost identical rank-order of the domain satisfactions which suggests that even these mean effects are insensitive to environmental factors, both foreseen and unforeseen. An inspection of related data from Australia (Heady and Wearing, 1981) demonstrates that the agreement is at least tri-national.

Of course, the case against the environment model is restricted to the range of circumstances under discussion. While it is plausible to generalize from New Zealand, Australia and America to western societies as a group, the conclusion may not apply elsewhere. In a worldwide survey, Gallup (1976) found significantly lower average happiness levels in under-developed countries. Unfortunately, the data presented are too sketchy for a more exact interpretation, including an estimate of the size of this effect.

With that caveat, and a reserve clause for marital status and unemployment as noted earlier, it appears that objective life circumstances have a negligible role to play in a theory of happiness. Evidence is already available that this conclusion is counter-intuitive and will not gain easy acceptance (Kammann and Campbell, 1982), but a consideration of alternative models may encourage efforts toward a more truly psychological analysis of well-being.

The New Zealand data confirm the rank-order of the domain satisfactions uncovered in North America and therefore the four-level grouping noted in the Introduction: significant others, personal concerns, community concerns, national concerns. It is now possible to examine the items more closely in search of an underlying psychological process. For this purpose a comparison of highest and lowest domains suggests four possibilities, among which the first three are partly overlapping. High satisfaction domains seem (a) to have a more personal (inner) locus of control and choice, (b) to be more individually tailored rather than uniform, (c) to permit a more varied or "playful" expression of the self in respect to other people

and activities, (d) to be more costly to criticize in terms of others' reactions or own self-concept. If one or more of these hypotheses are validated against mean satisfactions, they can be further tested in the realm of individual differences.

Somewhat different models have been advanced by other investigators of happiness, and may be sketched briefly here as follows. Upon observing only a small difference in the average happiness of permanently disabled recent accident victims and recent lottery winners, Brickman, Coates and Janoff-Bulman (1978) concluded that people adapt to their circumstances, including extreme life events. Such adaptation does not, however, account for wide individual differences in happiness (for example, among the same accident victims and lottery winners) unless it is also posited that individuals vary in adaptability as Dixon (1981) has suggested.

An alternative theme is traceable at least as far back as Epicurus who contended that degree of satisfaction equals one's attainment divided by one's expectations. Since the time of William James this has been more commonly known as the achievement-aspiration ratio, and has received some empirical support by Campbell, *et al.*, (1976), Dixon (1981) and Jan Collins (unpublished study at the University of Otago). Variations on this theme can be seen in the concepts of the "punishing superego" in psychoanalytic theory, the real-self/ideal-self correspondence in self-concept theory, or the mediating role of "musts" and "shoulds" in rational-emotive theory.

Still other models could be listed, including some currently active themes in the literature (e.g. learned helplessness), but the approaches outlined are sufficient to illustrate psychological avenues that do not rely

on objective circumstances in developing a model of life satisfaction and enjoyment.

Reference Note

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Appendix

Distributions of Satisfaction Ratings

- 1=Terrible
 2=Unhappy
 3=Mostly Dissatisfied
 4=Mixed (About Equally Satisfied and Dissatisfied)
 5=Mostly Satisfied
 6=Pleased
 7=Delighted

(Items are presented in order of decreasing U.S. means.
 Months refer to U.S. surveys in 1972, otherwise the year is given.
 All New Zealand data were collected in March 1980).

X =	Percent Response (Rounded)							Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
1.	Your wife/husband (May)								
US	1	1	1	0	8	31	58	6.39	.98
NZ	0	2	3	4	18	35	38	6.13	1.18
2.	Your marriage (May; 1976)								
US	2	1	0	2	11	34	50	6.22	1.16
NZ	0	2	3	3	19	31	42	6.00	1.15
3.	The things you and your family do together (May; Nov-b)								
US	1	1	3	8	27	41	20	5.63	1.05
NZ	1	2	4	5	36	48	5	5.34	1.05
4.	Your friends (Nov-b)								
US	0	0	1	5	37	45	12	5.62	.80
NZ	0	1	1	5	28	50	15	5.70	.89
5.	How sincere and honest you are (1973)								
US	0	0	1	8	32	41	18	5.62	.96
NZ	0	1	1	8	48	38	4	5.33	.80
6.	Your community as a place to live (May; Nov-b)								
US	2	2	4	10	31	37	14	5.34	1.24
NZ	1	0	7	16	36	31	9	5.15	1.12
7.	The amount of fun and enjoyment you have (1973)								
US	2	2	4	12	29	34	17	5.34	1.30
NZ	0	1	10	20	37	28	3	4.86	1.04
8.	Your job (May; Nov-b; 1974)								
US	1	3	4	12	28	38	14	5.33	1.24
NZ	1	2	2	16	33	34	12	5.28	1.15
9.	The amount of respect you get from others (1973)								
US	1	1	3	12	38	35	10	5.30	1.07
NZ	1	0	2	12	36	42	8	5.43	.98
10.	Your house [or apartment] [or flat] (May; Nov-a; Nov-b)								
US	2	3	6	11	31	34	13	5.30	1.34
NZ	1	3	4	6	19	50	17	5.57	1.23
11.	The extent to which you can adjust to changes in your life (1973)								
US	0	1	4	14	40	31	10	5.26	1.02
NZ	0	2	4	13	46	33	3	5.17	.95
12.	How safe you feel in your neighborhood (May)								
US	3	2	4	8	34	38	11	5.26	1.29
NZ	0	2	3	8	41	39	7	5.40	.99

X =	Percent Response (Rounded)							Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
13.	Your own health and physical condition (May; Nov-b; 1976)								
US	2	4	6	8	30	35	15	5.25	1.37
NZ	1	6	8	14	30	29	11	4.96	1.38
14.	The way you spend your spare time, your non-working activities (May; Nov-b)								
US	1	2	6	11	36	33	11	5.23	1.17
NZ	0	1	4	13	38	38	5	5.19	.95
15.	The way you handle problems that come up in your life (May)								
US	0	1	2	14	46	31	6	5.22	.90
NZ	0	0	4	13	64	19	0	4.98	.69
16.	Yourself (May; 1973)								
US	1	2	2	17	39	30	9	5.21	1.10
NZ	0	0	3	29	46	21	1	4.88	.80
17.	Your standard of living—the things you have like housing, furniture, car, recreation and the like (May; Nov-b; 1974; 1976)								
US	1	2	6	12	36	34	9	5.17	1.16
NZ	1	0	6	9	29	42	13	5.43	1.12
18.	The usefulness, for you personally, of your education (May)								
US	1	2	7	12	36	34	8	5.14	1.17
NZ	1	2	8	18	30	31	10	5.07	1.24
19.	What you are accomplishing in life (May; Nov-a)								
US	1	2	6	18	38	29	6	5.02	1.12
NZ	0	3	6	21	35	32	3	4.96	1.08
20.	The weather in [this part of the state] [this area] (May)								
US	4	2	6	16	34	28	10	4.98	1.38
NZ	1	3	13	35	31	14	3	4.46	1.13
21.	Life in [the United States] [New Zealand] today (May)								
US	1	3	5	23	39	22	7	4.90	1.16
NZ	0	8	11	36	27	17	2	4.44	1.18
22.	The goods and services you can get when you buy in this area—things like food, appliances, clothes (May).								
US	2	2	8	18	40	26	4	4.86	1.18
NZ	2	3	13	19	37	24	3	4.73	1.15
23.	The entertainment you get from [TV, radio, movies, local events and places] [from newspapers, magazines, TV and radio] (May)								
US	3	4	10	27	36	16	4	4.53	1.27
NZ	3	3	8	34	39	9	3	4.39	1.14
24.	The income you and your family have (Mar; Nov-b; 1974)								
US	5	6	11	16	35	24	3	4.48	1.44
NZ	2	7	10	24	26	33	4	4.86	1.23
25.	Your opportunity to change things around you don't like (Nov-b)								
US	1	4	14	29	36	13	3	4.46	1.15
NZ	1	5	14	36	30	14	0	4.53	1.08
26.	How sincere and honest other people are (1973)								
US	4	5	10	30	32	16	3	4.41	1.31
NZ	1	0	14	34	42	9	0	4.43	.91

X =	Percent Response (Rounded)							Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
27.	Your chance of getting a good job if you went looking for one (Nov-b)								
US	7	6	13	20	28	21	5	4.39	1.56
NZ	8	6	13	20	30	22	1	4.28	1.51
28.	The conditions of the natural environment—the air, land and water in your area (May)								
US	7	10	12	21	27	18	5	4.25	1.59
NZ	2	5	3	15	37	27	6	4.85	1.31
29.	The way your local government is operating (May)								
US	5	6	13	30	32	13	1	4.21	1.31
NZ	6	6	8	35	38	7	0	4.14	1.22
30.	The way our national government is operating (May)								
US	6	7	15	38	25	8	1	3.97	1.28
NZ	8	11	16	38	21	6	0	3.71	1.30
31.	The standards and values of today's society (Nov-b)								
US	3	7	19	42	22	6	1	3.95	1.13
NZ	4	15	21	49	9	2	0	3.50	1.04
32.	The way our political leaders think and act (May; Nov-b)								
US	6	9	17	46	18	3	1	3.75	1.17
NZ	10	11	23	41	12	3	0	3.43	1.12
33.	What the government is doing about the economy—jobs, prices, profits (May; Nov-b)								
US	6	11	22	38	17	5	1	3.66	1.24
NZ	12	12	28	32	15	1	1	3.36	1.29
34.	The taxes you pay—I mean [the local, state and national taxes together] [both income tax and rates on property] (May)								
US	16	17	23	22	16	5	1	3.24	1.49
NZ	19	15	27	26	12	1	0	3.00	1.32