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**ABSTRACT**

A central issue in thinking about the quality of life is the relationship between objective and subjective indicators. A study was conducted to examine the relative importance of objective status indicators, internal referents of life conditions, residential characteristics, and self-esteem on life satisfaction. Socioeconomic status and gender of the respondent were control variables. This study is a secondary data analysis of a longitudinal survey of life plans of youth from rural, low-income families from Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee. In the original study, 580 mother/child pairs of fifth and sixth grade students participated in the first phase of the longitudinal project. The present study involved 322 Appalachian whites who participated in the three data collection periods (1969, 1975, and 1979) of the longitudinal project. Their responses to survey questions were subjected to a multiple regression analysis. The results indicated the relative importance of subjective indicators versus objective indicators of life conditions on self-reported life satisfaction. Community size and frustrations about occupational ambitions were negatively related to life satisfaction. Money available, proximity to childhood home, and self-esteem were positively related to life satisfaction. Other variables, including educational and occupational attainment, were not related to life satisfaction. (Author/NB)

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**Personal and Situational Factors Affecting Life Satisfaction Among Young Adults from Rural, Low-Income Appalachian Families\***

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## A B S T R A C T

The relative importance of objective status indicators, internal referents of life conditions, residential characteristics, and self-esteem on life satisfaction are evaluated in this study. SES and gender of the respondent are control variables. This study is a secondary data analysis of a longitudinal survey of life plans of youth from rural, low-income families from three Southeastern states. This study employs a purposive sample of 322 youth. Their responses to survey questions were subjected to a multiple regression analysis. The results indicate the relative importance of subjective indicators versus objective indicators of life conditions on self-reported life satisfaction. Community size and frustrations about occupational ambitions were negatively related to life satisfaction. Money available, proximity to childhood home, and self-esteem were positively related to life satisfaction. Other variables, including educational and occupational attainment, were not related to life satisfaction.

**Key Words:** Life satisfaction, young adults, rural families

**PERSONAL AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING LIFE SATISFACTION  
AMONG YOUNG ADULTS FROM RURAL, LOW-INCOME APPALACHIAN FAMILIES**

The "quality of a person's life" has been an important topic of social commentary by popular and scientific writers for a number of years (Dakley, 1972). The meaning of this phrase obviously differs widely, and only on rare occasions has care been taken to determine what it consists of and how it develops (Bunge, 1975). In some cases it may refer to conditions of the human environment such as finances, health, and work (e.g., Liu, 1976), specific attributes of people such as fatalism, ambition, and optimism (e.g., Andrews & Withey, 1976), or comparisons about a person's present circumstances versus those which a person hopes will be true in the future (e.g., Campbell, 1972).

A central issue in thinking about the quality of life is the relationship between objective indicators (e.g., health standards, salary, and occupational attainment) and so-called subjective indicators (e.g., the self-reported satisfaction with job, marriage, housing, family life, or the perceptions of overall well-being) (Allardt, 1978; Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976; Schneider, 1976; Shin, 1980; Stipak, 1979). Critics of objective indicators as determinants of the quality of life (e.g., economic or environmental) point out that a deeper examination of "quality" in life experiences requires knowledge of a person's subjective experiences (Campbell & Converse, 1972; Dalkey, 1972).

This study examines the relationships of several objective indicators (e.g., attainment and characteristics of residence) and several kinds of subjective evaluations of the life conditions (e.g., frustrations about educational requirements and frustrations about limited job opportunities)

on overall life satisfaction among low-income youth from rural families of three states (i.e., Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee) of Southern Appalachia.

The concept of life quality in rural areas, in general, and rural Appalachia in particular is complicated further by nostalgic and romantic views of country life (Melton, 1983). Despite deficiencies in several objective indicators of life conditions in rural areas (e.g., family income, educational and occupational attainments, health care institutions, social services, and cultural amenities), a popular view suggests that the quality of life is better in the pastoral atmosphere of nonmetropolitan areas (Korte, 1983; Photiadis & Simoni, 1983). Despite this belief, however, there have been few efforts to examine or to deal with the quality of life in rural areas either by scholars or politicians (Melton, 1983).

Contrary to the bucolic images of nonmetropolitan environments, there are far-reaching economic weaknesses in rural America (Dillman & Tremblay, 1977; Foss, Bluestone, & Hines, 1979; U.S.D.A., 1978). Among these weaknesses are lower incomes, higher levels of underemployment or of unemployment, greater proportions of citizens who live below the poverty line, and lower salaries for the same jobs in rural than in urban areas (Chadwick & Bahr, 1978; Nilsen, 1979). Nonetheless, while having a lower quality of life in terms of standard of living or of objective indicators, some investigators have reported that rural inhabitants express higher levels of satisfaction with their places of residence, access to family and tradition, and standards of living than urban residents (Johnson & Knop, 1970; Korte, 1983; Rogers, 1979).

Quality of life as perceived by a person is an individual psychological experience. Specifically, a person's experience of life quality is determined by his or her own evaluation of various aspects of his or her life circum-

stances. Thus, self-reported life satisfaction may be more relevant to understanding how people evaluate their own lives than many of the objective measures of well-being.

Some of the most important objective measures of life quality are components of social mobility and the status attainment process. In terms of mainstream American values, a person's income level, occupational prestige, and his or her educational attainment are viewed as major contributors to a positive life experience because these characteristics are important status projections. The assumption that improving attainment goals will improve life satisfaction has rarely been questioned (Coleman, 1975). Furthermore, it has been assumed that the people of particular rural regions such as Appalachians share many values and traditions with mainstream America (Brown & Schwarzweller, 1970). Many intervention programs in rural Appalachia have been designed to facilitate educational achievement, occupational attainment, and to improve attainment of family financial resources (Southern Regional Technical Committee, 1974). One effect of these mainstream assumptions is the belief that upward social mobility and status attainment are worthy goals for all subcultures in America and that educational and occupational achievement are reliable means for accomplishing these ends (Jencks et al., 1979). Thus, it was reasonable to assess the influence of educational attainment, occupational attainment, and financial resources on life satisfaction. However, the paucity of jobs, poor schools, and low salaries in the region seem to contradict the relatively high levels of reported life satisfaction. It seems likely, therefore, that the attainment variables do not influence life satisfaction the way that they are reported to do among urban populations. Hence, it was hypothesized that educational attainment, occupational attainment, and

available financial resources would not be significantly related to life satisfaction for rural Appalachian, young adults.

Other researchers, however, have explored the possibility that rural Americans' perceptions of life quality are effected by a different set of factors than those of mainstream, urban dwellers (Melton, 1983; Rogers, 1979). A constellation of factors unique to rural inhabitants might include such things as community size and closeness to one's childhood home. Community size, for example, taps a variety of social, political, and economic issues that impact the perception of one's quality of life (Rogers, 1979). The tight-knit kinship patterns in which Appalachian youth are socialized may influence their life satisfaction. The need for continuity of contact with family for advice, for social and emotional and material support, and for legitimization for their ascribed status inherent in family identification may be more evident for rural residents' world view than such a need for continuity is for their urban counterparts. Such relationships may exist because geographic closeness to childhood kin and friends roughly coincides with the emotional, material, and social network that is afforded by access to one's "home place" (Ball, 1970; Photiadis, 1977). It was, therefore, hypothesized that proximity to childhood home would be positively related to life satisfaction while community size would be inversely related to life satisfaction (i.e., the larger the community of residence the lower the level of life satisfaction) for the young adults in this sample.

Still other influences on a person's life are based on internal referents which are unique to each individual's evaluation of his or her life. For example, the self-esteem of low-income Appalachians from rural environments has been shown to be relatively high, suggesting a positive adaptation and

acceptance of their existing individual and family circumstances (Reed & Kuipers, 1976). Additional internal referents are the individual's aspirations (i.e., hopes or ambitions) and expectations (i.e., what he or she actually believes) about her or his attainment possibilities in such areas as educational and occupational levels. Some internal referents are based upon the individual's own aspirations and expectations which are, in turn, internalized standards from family and significant others (Otto, 1986). The comparison of an individual's aspirations to her or his expectations may reveal more about how a person evaluates their life than information about the external referents of his or her life. The difference between what one hopes for and what one actually expects is likely to indicate the level of frustration. Hence, the comparison of internal referents is related to how satisfied one is with her or his life. (Campbell et al., 1976; Mason & Faulkenberry, 1978).

Among young adults from rural, low-income Appalachia aspirations for jobs are higher than the expectations for jobs that they believe will actually be available to them (Eller, 1982; Korte, 1983). This gap (i.e., between aspirations and expectations) would seem to offer a rough index of the perception of opportunities available or the demands required for enactment. There is, thus, an internal referent concerning the job opportunity gap which is based upon aspirations for jobs in comparison to expectations about jobs.

In a similar manner, the internal referents of educational achievement expectations and aspirations can be compared to each other. Perceived opportunities for high levels of education are complicated by some ambivalent perceptions about the usefulness and necessity of education in Appalachia (Photiadis, 1980; Reck & Reck, 1980; Urey & Henggeler, 1983). Low-income Appalachian youth feel compelled to go further in school than they wish in order



to gain better jobs and salary (i.e., their expectations for educational attainment are higher than their aspirations for educational attainment). There is, therefore, an internal referent concerning educational demands required in order to accomplish other desired ends (i.e., educational attainment is instrumental for accomplishing occupational or financial ends--it is not valued for itself or because it is inherently satisfying). The internal referents (i.e., the job opportunity gap and educational demands) were hypothesized to be related to life satisfaction in a negative manner while self-esteem was hypothesized to be positively related to life satisfaction in the present sample.

In addition to status attainment, frustrations about educational demands and job opportunities, residential characteristics, and self-esteem, there are a number of other factors which are potential predictors of life satisfaction. These factors may have either direct effects on life satisfaction or indirect effects through interaction with other variables. For example, researchers studying aspirations and expectations have found positive relationships between family socioeconomic status (SES) and educational aspirations and between SES and educational expectations (Alexander & Eckland, 1975; Kerckhoff, 1974; Mariani & Greenberger, 1978a, 1978b; Otto & Haller, 1979). Family SES and rurality influences on aspirations and expectations logically, therefore, might be expected to be related to life satisfaction by influencing the internal referents (i.e., aspirations compared to expectations). Relationships of this kind reflect that parental expectations and socialization practices directed at their children may vary with the SES of the family (Gecas, 1979; Hoffman, 1980; Kohn, 1977; Peterson & Rollins, 1986; Smith, 1986). These parental expectations, in turn, may be internalized and

reflected in the aspirations and expectations of young adults. The internal referents, in turn, may serve as the basis for the young adult's evaluation of his or her own life satisfaction. Thus, the SES of the family of origin is an important influence to investigate along with the kinds of variables previously mentioned.

Research literature about parental expectations for female and male youth also supports the notion that differential expectations of parents are based on the gender of the child (Biller, 1981; McDonald, 1977). Parents interact differently with male and female children (Baumrind, 1980; Lamb, 1977; Peterson, Rollins, Thomas, & Heaps, 1982; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Additionally, there is evidence that by young adulthood low-income, rural women, such as are present throughout much of Appalachia, not only have different attainment levels but have higher educational and occupational aspirations though they have lower expectations than young men (Dunne, Elliott, & Carlsen, 1981; Thomas & Falk, 1978; Wilson, Peters, & Peterson, in progress). Such research demonstrates the importance of testing for differences in life satisfaction based on the gender of young adults. Thus, in addition to investigating the SES of the family of origin, it is recommended that gender be tested for its relationship to life satisfaction. Hence, two control variables were added to the model. It was hypothesized that neither the SES of the family-of-origin nor the gender of the respondent would be significantly related to life satisfaction among respondents from this sample of rural, low-income sample.

This study examines the effects of several objective social indicators (i.e., attainment and characteristics of residence) and several kinds of subjective evaluations of life conditions (i.e., self-esteem, frustrations about educational requirements and about limited job opportunities) on overall life satisfaction and two control variables (i.e., gender and the SES of the

family-of-origin). An examination of life satisfaction is described in this study which utilizes several variables and interrelationships suggested by the research literatures on status attainment (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Otto, 1986) and the perceived quality of life (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976) (see Figure 1).

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### PROCEDURES

This study involved a secondary data analysis of a purposive sample originally drawn from six states of the Southeastern United States (i.e., from Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) (Southern Regional Technical Committee, 1974). The baseline phase of the Agricultural Experiment Station Southern Regional Research Project, S-63 was begun in 1969. In the original panel, 580 mother/child pairs of fifth and sixth grade students (mean age - 11.2 years) participated in the first phase of the longitudinal project.

The present study involved only the Appalachian whites from rural areas who participated in the three data collection periods (i.e., 1969, 1975, and 1979) of the longitudinal project (i.e., the present study includes a sample drawn from Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee). The sample size for this study was the 322 participants, 140 males and 182 females, who responded to all three assessments of the longitudinal study. Data from these 322 Appalachian whites were collected during each of the three panels and accounts for 322 of the original 580 (55%) Appalachian whites from the 1969 baseline panel.

Since the focus of the original assessment in 1969 was concerned with low-income families, families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were excluded from the present sample. The criteria for inclusion or exclusion was the parents' occupational status and educational attainment. When children from families of higher income parents were eliminated from the sample, the educational attainment levels of the remaining Appalachian white parents were 8.5 years for fathers and 9.1 years for mothers (Peters, 1983). In addition, the average occupational prestige scores (Duncan, 1961) of the parents from the base line sample were 58.9 for fathers and 55.9 for mothers; all of these parents reported occupations found in the lower five levels of the United States Census classifications, being craftsmen, operatives in factories, laborers, clerical workers, miners, truckers, service workers, or agricultural workers.

Only the data acquired from respondents who participated in the 1979 data collection period were used for this study. Young adults responded to the survey that was mailed to them. Respondents were located on the basis of their earlier reported address or through addresses of their next of kin. At the time of the third panel, the young adults had an average age of 21.1 years (i.e., of those who had been respondents in both 1969 and 1975). The questionnaire included items measuring educational and occupational attainments as well as reports of current salary, proximity to where respondents had grown up, the size of the community in which they lived, self-esteem, and other sociodemographic information about marriage, family, work, educational plans, and occupational goals.

The variable of interest in this study was the life satisfaction of young, white adults from rural Appalachia in 1979. Life satisfaction was assessed by summing satisfaction items for several domains represented in the

1979 panel (i.e., self-reported satisfaction with each of the following areas of life: job, amount of money made, high school, marriage, proximity to childhood home, size of community living in, living arrangements, and housing satisfactions). These domains were used because they were available in the extant data set and because they replicate most of the domains commonly used in other major studies of life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey 1976; Campbell, Converse & Rogers, 1976; Flanagan, 1978). To be included in the present sample, each subject was required to respond to seven or more of the nine satisfaction domains. Such a criterion was used because some of the respondents were not married or had not finished high school. Thus, two of the nine domains were not relevant to their evaluations of life satisfaction.

### Measures

The dependent variable in this study was the life satisfaction of young white adults from rural Appalachia in 1979. Life satisfaction was assessed by summing satisfaction items from several domains (i.e., satisfactions with job, amount of money made, high school, self in terms of how well a person took advantage of high school, marriage, closeness to one's childhood home, size of community now living in, living arrangements, and housing). The summed life satisfaction scores were calculated by adding Lickert responses for all the satisfaction domains and dividing by the number of domains for which there were responses (i.e., averaging across domains). Satisfaction responses ranged from "very dissatisfied" (1) to "very satisfied" (4).

The independent variables concerned with objective measures were measured by a variety of scales and items. Occupational attainment was assessed by the responses to an item which was coded with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) Occupation Prestige Scale (Reiss, 1961) which places occupations on a continuum of prestige levels. Educational attainment was assessed on a scale

of responses which ranged from "left before finishing the eighth grade" (1), to "went beyond college (graduate or professional school)" (10). Financial resources were assessed by responses to a set of items -- ranging from "none" to "\$1,500 or more per month" -- to the question, "which best describes the amount of money you are making (before taxes and other deductions)."

The second group of independent variables were the job opportunity gap and educational demands. The former compared the NORC score of jobs aspired to minus NORC scores of jobs expected. The latter refers the comparison of expectations for how far a person thinks they have to get minus their hopes about how much they would like to have. These two variables represent internal referents about jobs and schooling.

The third set of predictor variables included community size and proximity to childhood home. Respondents answers to questions about their residential characteristics were coded for rurality and nearness to natal community.

The control variables were SES and gender. SES was assessed by scoring the fathers' occupational prestige scores for Duncan's Socioeconomic Index (1961). Gender was self-reported by each respondent.

### Analysis

Multiple regression was used to explain the variance, to ascertain direct, as well as interaction effects of a set of independent variables on a dependent variable. This analytical procedure was used to examine linear relationships. Multiple regression was chosen because it examines the strength of relationships in multivariate analysis where several independent variables and a single dependent variable are analyzed (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Neter, Wasserman & Kutner, 1983; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1983). The Statistical

Package for the Social Sciences-X (SPSS-X) was used to conduct these analyses (Hull & Nie, 1979; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975; SPSS, Inc., 1983).

In addition to multiple regression analyses, several other statistical analyses were employed in this study. Pearson correlations were conducted to ascertain the strength of relationships involving all of the independent variables with the dependent variable. Reliability analyses were conducted for the two variables derived from a scale of items (i.e., self-esteem and life satisfaction). Descriptive statistics included means, frequencies, and standard deviations. T-score analyses were used for demographic comparisons of the ten year longitudinal sample to those subjects who dropped out of the study. This was accomplished to insure that the 1979 sample had not been different than the original sample because of attrition.

Multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses of the model developed for this study. To test each hypothesis, standardized (betas) and unstandardized regression coefficients were examined for statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ). Multiple Rs and  $R^2$  (multiple correlation squared) were examined for the overall predictive capacity of the regression models.

Hierarchical regression procedures were used to test for possible interactions of gender and the relationships between the independent variables and the criterion variable (i.e., the dependent variable). That is, each regression model was a two step analysis. Step one of the regression entered the eight primary predictor variables (i.e., educational attainment, occupational attainment, educational demands, job opportunity gap, self-esteem, amount of money made, community size, and proximity to childhood home)

and the control variable (i.e., the fathers' occupational prestige level in the family of origin) in relation to life satisfaction, the criterion variable.

Step two of the hierarchical regression was a test of the gender of the youth differences in the relationships between each of the primary predictor variables and life satisfaction. In addition to direct effects, therefore,, gender-of-youth interaction terms for each of the predictor variables was included. Any of these interaction terms which were significant were to be included in the equation (i.e., if  $p < .05$ ).

Examination of the correlation matrix and tolerances was used for ruling out autocorrelation in the error terms (Neter & Wasserman, 1974). Additionally, analysis of the scatterplots and histograms was conducted to check for appropriateness of statistics having parametric and linear assumptions (i.e., nonlinearity of regression function, nonconstancy of error variance,, nonindependence of error terms, presence of outliers, and heteroscedasticity) (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Hays, 1981; Neter & Wasserman, 1974; Neter, et al., 1983; Tabachnick & Fidel, 1983).

## RESULTS

The capacity of occupational attainment, educational attainment, financial resources, the job opportunity gap, educational demands, community size, proximity to one's childhood home, and self-esteem as predictors of life satisfaction were examined in this study. Multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses. Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables used in the research model (see Figure 1) are presented in Table 1.

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## Data Analyses

### Independent Variables

Occupational attainment. The first hypothesis indicated that occupational attainment was not expected to be a predictor of life satisfaction. Support was provided for this hypothesis by the non-significant standardized regression coefficient (i.e., beta) of .02 (see Table 2).

Educational attainment. The second hypothesis proposed that educational attainment would not be related to life satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported by the presence of a non-significant standardized regression coefficient of -.06 (see Table 2).

Financial resources. The third hypothesis indicated that financial resources were not expected to be related to life satisfaction. The proposed hypothesis was not supported, however, because the results indicated that a significant relationship existed for this association. Specifically, a positive beta coefficient of .11 attained statistical significance at the  $p < .05$  level (see Table 2).

Job opportunity gap. Hypothesis four proposed that the perceived job opportunity gap would be negatively related to life satisfaction. Support was provided for this hypothesis because the results yielded a negative beta of -.16 that attained statistical significance (see Table 2) at the  $p < .01$  level.

Educational demands. The fifth hypothesis proposed that the gap between educational aspirations and educational expectations (i.e., perceived educational demands) would be inversely related to life satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported by the results which demonstrated a beta coefficient of .09 that did not attain statistical significance (see Table 2).

Community size. The sixth hypothesis proposed that community size would be inversely related to life satisfaction. Results from this study indicated that the smaller the community size the greater the level of life satisfaction. This inverse relationship was demonstrated by a beta coefficient of  $-.18$  that was statistically significant (see table 2) at the  $p < .01$  level.

Proximity to childhood home. The seventh hypothesis indicated that the closeness of a person's current residence to his or her childhood home should be positively related to life satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported by a positive beta coefficient of  $.14$  that attained statistical significance (see table 2) at the  $p < .05$  level.

Self-esteem. The eighth hypothesis proposed that the self-esteem of youth would be positively related to their feelings of life satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported with a positive beta coefficient of  $.32$  that attained statistical significance (see table 2) at the  $p < .0001$  level.

#### Control Variables

Family (of origin) Duncan score. Results for this variable revealed a non-significant relationship between the father's occupational prestige (i.e., the SES indicator) and life satisfaction. The non-significant beta for this relationship was  $.10$  (see Table 2) at  $p = .051$ .

Gender. Results for gender as a dummy variable (i.e., where males were scored as ones and females as twos) revealed a non-significant positive beta coefficient of  $.11$  for the relationship between gender and life satisfaction (see Table 2) at  $p = .053$ .

A hierarchical regression was conducted to examine the influence of interaction terms for each of the independent variables with gender on life satisfaction. This procedure was used to test gender differences with respect to the influence of each of the independent variables on life satisfaction.

None of the interaction terms produced significant influence on life satisfaction. Thus, none of these gender interaction terms were included in the regression model used to test the hypotheses.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Earlier research expectations which suggested that higher levels of attainment would lead to higher levels of life satisfaction (e.g., Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976) generally were not supported in this study of low-income, rural youth from Appalachia. Stronger relationships were found for subjective evaluations about life conditions and reports of life satisfaction rather than for status attainment variables. Despite the increasing acceptance of urban normative influences (e.g., achievement and material goods) in the Appalachian region (Billings, 1974; Photiadis, 1977; Schwarzweller & Brown, 1969), there appears to be less emphasis on the centrality of these issues for life satisfaction than there is within middle-class, urban samples (Hennon & Photiadis, 1979; Photiadis, 1977; Peters, Wilson, & Peterson, 1986). The availability of other means of improving one's standing, other than occupational prestige or educational attainment, may decrease the importance of educational or occupational status attainment for life satisfaction among low-income, rural Appalachians. Alternative means of improving one's status might include status based on church standing, recognition for aesthetic achievements or talents, family name, or ascription.

In addition, the economic problems of rural Appalachia effectively bar many people from rising to occupational positions consistent with their capabilities (Chadwick & Bahr, 1978; Nilsen, 1979). Hence, occupational attainment may not be a useful predictor of satisfaction in rural Appalachia

to the same extent as in urban areas. Additional research, however, is necessary to determine whether prestige rankings of jobs are the most useful predictors of life satisfaction in this region. Perhaps occupational status in rural Appalachia can be measured more effectively by scales based on job characteristics other than prestige. It is possible, for example, that the strong urban bias of such scales as the Duncan Occupational Prestige Scale render it less useful for rural samples. Perhaps scales should be devised which make allowances for the relative differences between urban and rural job experiences of underemployment, seasonal employment, involuntary parttime employment, and lower salaries for the same jobs. Assessment tools of this kind would clarify the importance of work for life satisfaction in economically depressed areas of rural America in ways that occupational attainment based on prestige does not.

One explanation for the lack of a direct relationship between educational attainment and life satisfaction among low-income rural inhabitants of Appalachia is that education may be valued to a great extent for its instrumental rather than for its intrinsic worth. That is, education is pursued primarily because people believe that it provides access to material goals (Photiadis & Simoni, 1983; Reck & Reck, 1976; Rehberg & Westby, 1967; Schwarzweller & Brown, 1969). Higher levels of education, it is often believed, will make possible more job opportunities and a better standard of living. According to this perspective, one must attain higher levels of education than previous generations to have the means to pursue the opportunities for bringing about a better life (Reck & Reck, 1976; Rehberg & Westby,

1967). Nevertheless, educational attainment is apparently not valued as an end in itself. Therefore, higher levels of education may not lead to higher levels of life satisfaction.

The fact that higher levels of attained education do not lead to higher levels of life satisfaction might be especially applicable to an Appalachian sample. In Appalachia job opportunities, for example, are limited regardless of the educational level attained. In addition, the relationship between higher levels of educational attainment and better jobs or higher levels of educational attainment and higher salaries would seem to be less clear than they are in mainstream, urban America.

While other objective indicators were not predictive of life satisfaction the level of financial resources was. The amount of financial resources was not expected to be related to life satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported because financial resources were found to be positively related to life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with life satisfaction research conducted with urban and middle-income samples (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976; Flanagan, 1970).

An explanation for the failure to confirm this hypothesis may be a function of how it was originally conceptualized in this study. Although presented as an indicator of urban, middle-class status values, in fact, financial resources may be an even more basic indicator of life conditions than was initially thought to be the case. Apparently, financial resources may be more universal predictors of life satisfaction than other kinds of external indicators.

Campbell et al. (1976), for example, found income to be one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction. It is also important to note that in the Campbell et al. (1976) study such findings were most pronounced among

low-income people. Other studies have also found financial resources to be predictive of life satisfaction (Katona, 1972; Medley, 1980; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1979). It is likely that a minimal threshold of financial security is necessary to open the avenues leading to life satisfaction. Future research efforts should attempt to clarify the meaning of financial resources as being either a status symbol or as a necessary but not sufficient basis for life satisfaction.

The present research confirmed earlier research findings that there were correlations between life satisfaction and community size (Dillman & Tremblay, 1977; Rogers, 1979) and between life satisfaction and proximity to childhood home (Photiadis, 1977). This study demonstrated a relative unimportance of status attainment influences such as education and occupation on life satisfaction. Significant correlations between life satisfaction and community size and proximity to childhood home were found. Such results suggest that young adults from rural areas are more likely to "be at home" in settings which are most like the rural childhood settings from which they came.

Individuals who are more comfortable with their settings report higher levels of life satisfaction. Residents of rural areas are socialized within and seem to be psychologically prepared for rural communities--whether their natal or similar sized communities. The relative comfort and high level of life satisfaction expressed by residents of small communities reflects the belief that the social atmosphere of rural areas show advantages over metropolitan areas. This may be the case because there are more frequent and positive contacts between neighbors, more civility, more helping gestures, and less crime in rural than in urban contexts (Korte, 1983). However, a more

plausible explanation would seem to be that the environments of small communities are more comfortable for these rural residents simply because they are psychologically prepared for that environment.

Access to one's childhood home may be the basis for continuing contact and potential use of a variety of social, material, and emotional supports in Appalachia (Korte, 1983; Photiadis & Schwarzweller, 1970). The familistic nature of rural Appalachian social (e.g., kinship) networks and the deep and abiding sense of loyalty to one's "home place" may provide adults who remain close to their childhood homes with the psychological support which increases their positive evaluations of their lives.

Other than the situational variables in this study (i.e., other than occupational attainment, educational attainment, salary, community size, or proximity to childhood home), there were individual mental evaluations about self that were examined for their relationship to life satisfaction. As such, the job opportunity gap, educational demands, and self-esteem were personal factors that influenced young adults' life satisfaction. These three personal factors appear to be the kinds of internal referents that individuals use to make judgments about their overall life satisfaction.

Educational demands is a construct derived from one's comparison of his or her hopes to his or her expectations. The results of this study failed to confirm the research hypotheses that the greater the disparity between aspirations and expectations for education the lower the level of life satisfaction. As the gap between educational aspirations and educational expectations increases young adults were hypothesized to feel frustrated if their wishes for not having to go farther in school than they had hoped would be necessary were thwarted by expectations that they will really have to go further in school in order to get the kinds of jobs and salary that they desire.

However, education appears to be secondary to jobs -- or perhaps only instrumental for getting jobs as has been suggested by much of the status attainment literature (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972; Sewell & Hauser, 1975).

In a similar manner, the job opportunity gap is a construct based upon one's comparison of his or her aspirations to his or her expectations for the kinds of jobs that he or she will hold. The results of this study confirmed the hypothesis that the greater the gap between job aspirations and job expectations the lower the level of life satisfaction. The job opportunity gap indexes the frustration that young adults feel about their chances for accomplishing what they hope to in the occupational sphere of their lives (i.e., really believing that there are better job opportunities available to them). While aspirations may be raised by providing new information, models, and alternatives via mass media, education, and experiences, expectations are more resistant to change. The expectations of low-income, young adults from rural Appalachia are not raised, in turn, because of the limited resources at their disposal, such as their low-income, family backgrounds, the limited number and kinds of employment opportunities in rural Appalachia, and higher literacy and skills demands for jobs.

Self-esteem is another internal referent. People who can accept themselves in a positive manner and who assume that other people value them in a similar way, have high levels of self-esteem. It appears, therefore, that people who evaluate themselves favorably also are likely to evaluate the conditions of their life in a positive manner. It is an important basis for the individual's evaluation of experiences that contribute to life satisfaction. Thus, people with higher levels of self-esteem are likely to



have higher levels of life satisfaction. The often noted pride and independence of Appalachians, noted in the popular literature may well be a result of high levels of self-esteem. The high levels of self-esteem, in the present sample, were related to the high level of life satisfaction.

#### Internal Referents versus External Referents

The internal referents discussed in the preceding section suggest conclusions which may generalize across classes of variables. The comparison of external referents, such as societal standards, observations, and third party evaluations (e.g., occupational and educational attainments) to internal referents about the conditions of life, such as the individual's own aspirations and expectations about occupation and education, suggests several things. This study is consistent with other research indicating that there is not a strong or consistent relationship between objective indicators (i.e., external referents) and life satisfaction (e.g., Gutek et al., 1983). Furthermore, the similar domains that were not related to life satisfaction in the form of external or "objective" measures (i.e., educational and occupational attainments in this study) can be related to life satisfaction when measured as internal referents (i.e., internal assessments of aspirations versus expectations for occupation in this study). The usefulness of subjective assessment over objective assessment as correlates of life satisfaction is an important contradistinction.

The experience of satisfaction, therefore, would seem to derive more clearly from internal referents which are not necessarily linked to external or objective indicators of similar phenomena. Such an experience may result as the individual employs unique personal indices of comparison, such as past experience, hopes, ambitions, or other constructs. Evaluations of one's life

chances, one's sense of personal worth, and one's comfort and adaptation to the situation with which she or he exists are more salient correlates of life satisfaction than are objective indicators of the quality of life.

The quality of life is best understood by taking note of objective and subjective indicators. The so-called "objective indicators" generally include easily quantifiable measures such as economic, environmental quality standards, and institutional services. Objective indicators have the quality of being public and an external frame of reference known to most observers in approximately the same way. "Subjective indicators" are based on each individual's perception of the adequacy of certain conditions. An example of a "subjective indicator" would be individuals' report of the suitability of their housing (i.e., reports of their impressions based on their subjective judgment). Objective indicators may reveal the necessary minimum or threshold levels on objective indices which are necessary for the subjective experience to be positively evaluated. The later case seems to hold for financial resources.

Life satisfaction, therefore, is based on experiences of which individuals perceive their lives to consist. Practitioners should not confuse high reported levels of satisfaction as necessary proof of an objectively defined quality of life. Reports of high levels of life satisfaction could as readily indicate adaptive and optimistic accommodations despite life conditions that are low in terms of "objective" quality. And, the young adults in this sample might hold lower levels of life satisfaction in identical circumstances during later adulthood as their optimism about what they can do, might do, and have done begins to wane.

People live in a symbolic and subjective world. The objective world within which the subjective is encapsulated is interpreted and understood by each person in terms of his or her experiences, aspirations, expectations, self-esteem, and other "internal referents." One reason for the seeming acceptance by Appalachians of their "deficient" objective world may be their perception that things are getting materially better. The expectation that one's aspirations can be reached in the future may well allow individuals to accept their less than ideal objective world and, thus, to report overall life satisfaction in the present.

Regardless of the level of life satisfaction that is reported, the basic amenities of life remain appropriate targets for improvement where low objective quality of life exists. The expression of high levels of satisfaction, even when underemployment, inferior services, underdeveloped or unorganized institutional supports are present, is not sufficient justification to ignore serious rural/urban inequities or structural economic problems. Rather, public policy makers and practitioners may be faced with the much more subtle and difficult tasks of bringing peoples' aspirations and expectations into congruence by raising people's aspirations to higher levels and/or addressing unrealistic expectations of people who demand instant and quantum leaps in progress. Beyond minimal thresholds, however, subjective indicators may be more useful measures of the quality of life (Gutek et al., 1983) than are objective indicators.

An important goal for which to strive is to create and implement public policy that is appropriate to the life ways of those to whom it applies. Programs directed at changing various aspects of peoples' lives must set aspirations and expectations which actually can be met. Comparisons between present and possible situations must be realistic, arise from the local

setting, and provide a sense of meaningful and actual control over the process of change by community leaders. It is important that such programs for rural Americans not be solely developed by urban professionals whose assumptions and world views may not coincide with the people for whom they are designing programs. The goals that lead to life satisfaction for one group are unlikely to be shared by the other.

## SUMMARY

This research demonstrates the importance of subjective indicators in relationship to self-perceived life satisfaction. Further, the life satisfaction of young adults who come from low-income, rural areas of Appalachia is shown, generally, to be unrelated to the status attainment variables which predicted life satisfaction in studies of Americans who hold middle-class, urban values. However, the rural setting (i.e., community size and proximity to childhood home) is correlated with life satisfaction for low-income, rural youth. Life satisfaction is associated with a variety of personal and situational factors which are somewhat different in low-income, rural Appalachia than they have been in mainstream, urban America. The Appalachian context (i.e., world view, values, and assumptions) is an important perspective for professional staffs to use and to understand when working with Appalachian families. Efforts directed at changes and assistance must be sensitive to the local culture. Values such as achievement and material accumulation typical of mainstream America may have different meaning for life satisfaction among Appalachians' whose values continue to be adaptive and appropriate within their own context.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics for the Life Satisfaction Model for Low-Income Appalachian Young Adults

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Number of Cases
Occupational Attainment	52.24	11.45	240
Educational Attainment	5.24	1.39	321
Financial Resources	3.58	1.25	274
Job Opportunity Gap	6.44	8.89	224
Educational Demands	-0.32	1.54	313
Community Size	1.24	0.70	319
Proximity to Childhood Home	3.65	0.62	322
Self-esteem	12.87	1.71	304
Family (of origin) Duncan	56.18	9.96	322
Gender	1.56	0.50	322
Life Satisfaction	3.24	0.44	288

**Table 2 Multiple Regression Results for Predictor Variables with Life Satisfaction Among Low-Income, Rural Appalachian Young Adults**

Variables	b	B	p	tol
Occupational Attainment	.00	.02	.694	.79
Educational Attainment	-.02	-.06	.259	.81
Financial Resources	.04	.11*	.045	.90
Job Opportunity Gap	-.01	-.16**	.003	.89
Educational Demands	.03	.09	.070	.93
Community Size	-.11	-.18**	.001	.77
Proximity to Childhood Home	.10	.14*	.015	.76
Self-esteem	.08	.32****	.000	.93
Family (of origin) Duncan	.00	.10	.051	.92
Gender	.09	.11	.053	.83

Multiple Correlation (R) 0.4803  
 Multiple Correlation Squared (R<sup>2</sup>) 0.2307  
 F - value 9.3243  
 Significant F 0.0000

b = unstandardized beta  
 B = Beta or the standardized regression coefficient  
 tol = tolerance

\* = p < .05  
 \*\* = p < .01  
 \*\*\* = p < .001  
 \*\*\*\* = p < .0001

**ATTAINMENT VARIABLES**

Occupational Attainment

(0)

Educational Attainment

(0)

Financial Resources

(0)

**INTERNAL REFERENTS**

Job Opportunity Gap

(-)

Educational Demands

(-)

**RESIDENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Community Size

(-)

Proximity to Childhood Home

(+)

**SELF-EVALUATION**

Self-esteem

(+)

**CONTROL VARIABLES**

Fathers' Occupational Prestige Level

Gender of Young Adult

Life Satisfaction

**Figure 1**

**Dimensions of Status Attainment, Frustrations about Opportunities and Demands, Residential Characteristics, and Self-esteem as Predictors of Life Satisfaction: A Theoretical Model**



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