Life Satisfaction (2006)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Life satisfaction is an overall assessment of feelings and attitudes about one’s life at a particular point in time ranging from negative to positive. It is one of three major indicators of well-being: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984). Although satisfaction with current life circumstances is often assessed in research studies, Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith (1999) also include the following under life satisfaction: desire to change one’s life; satisfaction with past; satisfaction with future; and significant other’s views of one’s life. Related terms in the literature include happiness (sometimes used interchangeably with life satisfaction), quality of life, and (subjective or psychological) well-being (a broader term than life satisfaction). The research on life satisfaction and cognate concepts is extensive and theoretical debates over the nature and stability of life satisfaction continue. Life satisfaction is frequently included as an outcome or consequence variable in work-family research (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Reliable and valid measures of life satisfaction are available. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), for example, shows good psychometric properties and has been used in a number of organizational work-family studies reviewed below (e.g., Judge, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1994).

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Life satisfaction is often considered a desirable goal, in and of itself, stemming from the Aristotelian ethical model, eudaimonism, (from eudaimonia, the Greek word for happiness) where correct actions lead to individual well-being, with happiness representing the supreme good (Myers, 1992). Moreover, life satisfaction is related to better physical (Veenhoven, 1991) and mental health (Beutell, 2006), longevity, and other outcomes that are considered positive in nature. Men and women are similar in their overall levels of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) although women do report more positive and negative affect. Married people are more satisfied with their lives and those with life-long marriages appear to be the most satisfied (Evans & Kelly, 2004). Life satisfaction tends to be stable over time (e.g., Cummins, 1998) suggesting a dispositional (e.g., Judge & Hulin, 1993), and perhaps, even a genetic
component (e.g., Judge et al. 1994). Fujita and Diener (2005) have examined the life satisfaction set-point (a relatively stable level that an individual will return to after facing varying life circumstances) reporting that there are longitudinal changes in satisfaction levels for about one-quarter of their respondents.

Much of the work-family literature, however, has emphasized a conflict perspective (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, although this is changing, e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) noting the potential for role incompatibility and strain relating to negative outcomes. Life satisfaction is used to assess the impact of conflict levels on overall feelings about one’s life. Importantly, life satisfaction exhibits the strongest relationship with work-family conflict of all non-work variables studied (Allen et al. 2000). Research has shown that, beyond direct relationships between work-family conflict and life satisfaction, how people deal with such conflicts is also important. Successful coping with work-family conflict is also associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (e.g., Beutell & Greenhaus, 1982). According to this view, even if conflict is a likely consequence of engaging in work and family roles, how people deal with such conflict is a determinant of life satisfaction possibly because of self-efficacy perceptions generated by successful coping behavior.

Finally, if the reciprocal (e.g., Judge et al., 1994) perhaps even causal (Judge & Wantanabe, 1993), relationship between life satisfaction and job satisfaction (e.g., Judge et al. 1994) continues to receive empirical support, there are important implications for reducing employee turnover, improving job performance, reducing ‘spillover’ from work to family, and enhancing the work-family culture of organizations.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

**Work-Family Conflict and Life Satisfaction**

Life satisfaction, like job satisfaction, has been one of the most frequently studied outcomes of work-family conflict (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Findings indicate that, the higher the level of work-family conflict, the lower the level of life satisfaction. Meta-analytic studies have reported weighted mean correlations between work-family conflict and life satisfaction of -.31 (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998) and -.28 (Allen et al. 2000). Additionally, Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) reported weighted mean correlations of -.26 for work-to-family conflict and -.20 for family-to-work conflict and life satisfaction. (Examining relationships by type of work-family conflict is strongly supported in the literature.) Interestingly, two early studies failed to find significant relationships between inter-role conflict and life satisfaction (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1982; Cooke and Rousseau, 1984) but virtually all of the more recent studies have confirmed significant negative relationships between these variables although the magnitude of the relationship
does vary. Possible explanations for lack of finding in these early studies may stem from lower expectations for work-family balance in the 1980s (Allen et al., 2000) and the fact that the conflict and satisfaction scales differed from those used in more recent research.

Some of the noteworthy studies supporting significant relationships include studies of accounting professionals (Bedeian et al., 1998; Greenhaus et al., 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1989), studies of professional couples with children living at home (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Higgins & Duxbury, 1992), and studies using national probability samples (Beutell, 2005; Rice et al., 1992). Other studies include Adams et al. (1996), Chiu (1998), and Netemeyer et al. (1996). It is worth restating that work-family conflict exhibits the strongest relationship with life satisfaction of all non-work variables studied to date (Allen et al. 2000).

**Job Satisfaction-Life Satisfaction Studies**

Evaluative assessments in the work (job satisfaction) and non-work (life satisfaction) domains have played a crucial role in work-family research. Many studies have reported significant, positive relationships between job satisfaction and life satisfaction (e.g., Rain, Lane, & Steiner, 1991) generally ranging from .31 to .44 (e.g., Rode, 2004). Researchers have argued that job satisfaction and life satisfaction should be related because of time devoted to the work role and because work has been identified as a central life interest (Dubin, 1956) thereby affecting overall feelings about one’s life. Trying to explain the underlying dynamics of the relationship between these variables, however, has proven more elusive than the consistent findings might suggest. The theoretical underpinnings emanated from Diener’s (1984) work and essentially focuses on life experiences (‘bottom-up’ argument that views life satisfaction as the result of satisfaction with life domains such as work, family, leisure) and on dispositions (‘top-down’ that people enjoy life experiences in a psychological sense rather than objectively because they are happy people). (See Diener (1984) and Brief et al. (1993) for thorough discussions of these approaches.) Further, Rode (2004) has argued that the relationship between life satisfaction and job satisfaction is spurious suggesting that they result from common influences. Finally, the suggestion by Brief et al. (1993) that an interaction explanation will prevail (experience and personality) deserves serious consideration.

The work of Judge and his colleagues has been significant in the job satisfaction-life satisfaction relationship particularly, for our purposes, the findings among executives reported by Judge et al. (1994). Importantly, this study included directional measures of work-family conflict (as well as job and life satisfaction, stress, etc.) and represents on of the most comprehensive studies using an executive sample. The significance of this study lies in tying together all of these variables in an overall model rather than using a piecemeal approach. Interestingly, the effect of job satisfaction on life satisfaction was significantly stronger than the effect of life satisfaction on job satisfaction (note that this was the
reverse of the findings reported by Judge and Wantanabe, 1993 for a non-executive sample). Placing the reciprocal and likely causal relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction in models that explicitly consider work and family variables should be emulated in subsequent studies.

**Work-Family Synergy**

There is an increasing recognition that positive outcomes can also accrue from participation in both work and family roles (e.g., Beutell, 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). This concept has been referred to as work-family facilitation (Hill, 2005), positive spillover (Grywacz & Marks, 2000), positive balance, enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), and synergy (Beutell, 2005). In contrast to the conflict perspective that views work and family on a collision course resulting from time, stain, and behavior sources (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), the synergy approach argues that multiple role participation has beneficial effects for the individual and the family enhancing the quality of life. As such, a positive relationship between work-family synergy and life satisfaction would be expected.

There is some empirical evidence to support this relationship. Hill (2005), for example, found that work-to-family and family-to-work facilitation were each positively and significantly related to job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Similarly, Beutell (2005) found that an overall measure of work-family synergy was significantly related to life satisfaction. Both of these studies used national probability samples from the 1997 (Hill) and 2002 (Beutell) public-use files, the National Study of the Changing Workforce. Research on the positive aspects of engaging in work and family roles, including antecedents and consequences, is in its infancy having been overshadowed by the prevailing conflict paradigm. Work-family synergy is not the opposite (or absence) of work-family conflict, and, as such, researchers should continue to investigate conflict and synergy (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Clearly there is much more work to be done in this fast-emerging area of study (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Although life satisfaction is often classified as a non-work variable it has important implications for organizational behavior and human resource management. Apart from the inherent desirability of life satisfaction, the evidence reviewed here suggests important relationships with work and family variables (i.e., work-family conflict, job satisfaction, and work-family synergy). The connection between work-family conflict and life satisfaction suggests that organizational interventions aimed at reducing conflict (e.g., work-family benefits, flexible scheduling, supervisory support) may enhance employees life satisfaction. This increased life satisfaction may, in turn, reduce absenteeism, turnover intentions, and serve to increase work motivation. Note however that such organizational practices may be more effective in western, individualistic cultures (Spector et al., 2004).
Life satisfaction has been shown to relate to in-role performance (cf. Rode, 2005) and to supervisory rated performance even though the performance measures were unrelated to job satisfaction in this case (Wright & Croanzano, 2000). The reciprocal and likely causal connection between job satisfaction and life satisfaction suggests that organizations need to be aware of the factors that affect both types of satisfaction. In effect, a happy worker is a productive worker not only because of job satisfaction (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001) but because they are satisfied with life in general (e.g., Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). Job satisfaction can affect employee withdrawal behaviors and it is likely that life satisfaction will have similar consequences. Further, the relationships between life satisfaction and health (physical and mental) have important implications for understanding and containing health care costs. Finally, organizations might examine ways to increase work-family synergy (in addition to interventions designed to reduce work-family conflict) because of the observed relationships with life satisfaction. (Recall that synergy and conflict seem to represent separate and distinct variables although they are somewhat related.) At this point, similar interventions to those noted above, like work-family benefits and greater employee control over role resources, might be expected to enhance role performance at work and in the family.

References


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic**


