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[See table of contents](#)

### Article abstract

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# The Relative Importance of Work as a Factor in Life Satisfaction

**Terrence H. WHITE**

*This study assesses the impacts of job satisfaction on life satisfaction through the analyses of data obtained from a sample of respondents who held full-time employment.*

An outgrowth of the ferment and challenge to established social norms and institutions associated with the youth and student protest movements in the late Sixties is a greater sensitivity for the "quality of life". Many of the existing ideologies of societal growth and technological change are no longer accepted without question. It often is argued, for instance, that big is not always better, and that the costs of industrial growth and development might more than outweigh any projected benefits. "Ecology" has become a much-used term as interest groups spring up to express their concerns about a myriad of pollutions. Governments have come to realize the political importance of such issues and in the last several years, major national studies have been undertaken to ascertain citizen satisfaction levels on a host of dimensions thought to be components important in the assessment of quality in life (cf., Blishen and Atkinson, 1978; Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976; and, Andrews and Withey, 1976).

Quality of life surveys attempt to tap the satisfaction levels of respondents on a series of life activity dimensions such as family, friends, work, recreation, housing, and so on. Of particular importance is a global measure of a person's overall feelings about life, and a commonly used measure is a 7-point Likert scale categorizing responses to the question, "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976:33). The methodological shortcomings of such an approach, while convenient and economical for researchers, are obvious and include the well established debates about cross-sectional versus longitudinal studies, and questions of validity and reliability. Notwithstanding the considerable research design problems associated with current studies of quality of life, such research data afford a unique opportunity to make preliminary assessments of the relative importance of the contributions of various roles and activities to one's overall satisfaction with life. Our focus in this paper is on work and more particularly, the job, as predictors of quality of life.

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## JOB SATISFACTION AND LIFE SATISFACTION

### Previous Research

People's lives are characterized by their participation in a series of roles and activities, each of which is subject to changing levels of prominence. North American adults, for instance, typically coexist in families, have friends, work consume, engage in free-time activities, make token participations in the democratic process, and so on. An important question for social researchers and planners is which of these activities and roles are more important in influencing people's satisfactions with the quality of their lives.

Because so many people work and spend so much of their lives engaged in work activities, it has been traditional to view work as one of the prime determiners of people's attitudes in other facets of their lives (Tilgher, 1931). The relationship between life and job satisfaction has been the subject of previous research where a direct and usually significant association has been reported (Friend and Haggard, 1948; Herzberg, Mausner, Peterson, and Campbell, 1957; Brayfield and Wells, 1957; Iris and Barrett, 1972; Quinn, Staines, and McCullough, 1974).

In a recent study, for example, Kavanagh and Halpern (1977) report results which show a positive relationship for their sample between the job satisfaction of respondents and their general satisfaction with life. A similar pattern was observed for both their male and female sub-samples. They hypothesized, as well, that persons in higher level jobs are more likely to have greater opportunities to fulfill their higher level needs (cf., Porter and Lawler, 1965) and as a result, expected the relationship between job and life satisfaction to increase in magnitude for respondents in higher level jobs. This hypothesis was not supported as an inverse pattern resulted with the relationship between job and life satisfactions weaker in higher level jobs than in lower levels.

While studies have consistently found positive associations between job and life satisfactions, they provide little information on the *relative importance* of various life dimensions in explaining overall satisfaction with life. As we have already indicated, it has been conventional to regard attitudes about one's work as major determinants of attitudes in other areas of life. Typifying this view is the following excerpt from a U.S. President's 1971 Labour Day speech: "In our quest for a better environment, we must always remember that the most important part of the quality of life is the quality of work" (Sheppard and Herrick, 1972:xiii).

Wilensky (1960, 1961) has called this position that assumes if persons are satisfied in their work then they will tend to be satisfied in their non-work activities, the "spillover hypothesis". There have been research efforts to test the spillover hypothesis in the job and life satisfaction relationship (e.g., Kornhauser, 1965; Iris and Barrett, 1972), and more specifically in the work-leisure relationship (e.g., Habermas, 1958, Wilensky, 1960; Hanhart, 1964; Wippler, 1968; White, 1975). Overall, the pattern of support for the spillover effect of work has not been conclusive.

Contrary positions have been expressed that suggest work may not be as influential a factor in people's lives as is commonly believed. Over twenty years ago, Dubin (1956) advanced the notion, radical for that time, that work was not a "central life interest" of industrial workers. And in assessing his research on the work-leisure relationship, Wippler (1968:150) has concluded:

Contrary to the expectation advanced in much theoretical discussion, the variables from the working situation prove to exercise but slight independent effects upon the leisure behavior when compared with other predictors. Only 10 of the 22 variables introduced as aspects of the work situation provide an independent contribution towards explanation of variance, while even the degree of variance they explain is comparatively low.

Obviously many sociologists overestimate the independent influence of the kind of work upon the nature of leisure activities.

Concurrent with contemporary concerns about the supposed demise or slippage of the conventional work ethic, is the view that increasing specialization of work has resulted in a compartmentalization of people's lives. That is, work is viewed as an instrumental activity, a means to an end, where the money earned provides the means to do what is of real interest off the job (cf., Goldthorpe, 1968; Sheppard and Herrich, 1972).

Recent detailed studies of factors influencing individual assessments of the quality of life provide an opportunity to seek additional clarifications of the relative importance of work as a predictor of life satisfaction. Using U.S. national survey data, Andrews and Withey (1976) looked at the relationship between a large number of life dimensions and a measure of individuals' assessments of the quality of their lives. Reflecting on the results of their multivariate analyses to determine the relative importance of various predictors on quality of life, they observe the following:

A surprise comes at the bottom of the list, where we find feelings about job seeming to play a relatively small role. Given the large amount of time most employed people spend at their jobs, and the widespread belief that work roles are important to the people who fulfill them, one might have expected job concerns to show more relationship to Life 3 [their global Quality of Life measure, a 7-point Likert scale response to 'How do you feel about your life as a whole?'], even after holding constant the effects of other predictors (:125).

Respondents' assessments of their work and job were determined using an index on which they rated aspects of their jobs including co-workers, physical surroundings, supervision, the work itself, etc. on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "delighted" to "terrible". Of the twenty-five predictors employed in multivariate analyses with quality of life as the dependent variable, the job index was one of the four least important. Even how people felt about the weather or their relatives were more important predictors. Satisfaction levels with one's family, non-work activities, money, self-assessment, and housing had the highest relative importance in association with satisfaction with life for respondents.

The very low relative importance of the job revealed in their results perhaps might be explained by the circumstances that their analyses employed the total sample and not just those who were employed in jobs. But detailed followup analyses to corroborate their findings led them to conclude:

Thus, these multivariate results, as well as the bivariate results..., suggest that in present-day America feelings about one's job tend to have a rather mild impact on people's general sense of well-being. Even among employed men, various other concerns seem to have more impact on feelings about life-as-a-whole, and job concerns show only modest relationships (Andrews and Witbey, 1976:129).

And in a re-analysis of the original data, London, Crandall, and Seals (1977:330) also found satisfaction with family and friends to be more important predictors of overall life satisfaction than was satisfaction with work.

Another American study using a national sample, however, arrived at a contrary conclusion. Their results suggest that satisfaction with work is a central predictor of total life satisfaction. "These cross-sectional data do serve to demonstrate", they say, "that job satisfaction is intimately related to other domains of life and must be considered a crucial ingredient of the overall quality of life" (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976:317). Unfortunately they do not present detailed results of their multivariate analyses and as a result, the reader is unable to judge the appropriateness of their conclusions. Nevertheless, there is an evident need for additional studies in this area to clarify the relative importance of work in people's lives.

### **Research Model**

Our position in this paper agrees with Hedley (1978:6) who, in summarizing the results of his research on the work-nonwork dichotomy, presents a more realistic alternative to the two polar positions on the importance of work when he suggests the following:

For the majority of shop floor workers in this study, clearly work does not hold the position of preeminence that it was once thought to occupy. At the same time, this does not mean that these workers are disaffected or alienated from their jobs and lives. Rather it suggests that the predominant approach is to view work as simply one of the domains to be considered in the overall pursuit of 'the good life'.

Recent studies have shown that North Americans rank interesting work as a highly important desired characteristic in jobs, but their actual satisfaction scores on this, and challenge and growth opportunities in their jobs, are much lower (Quinn, Staines, and McCullough, 1974; Burstein, Tienhaara, Hewson, and Warrander, 1975). This noticeable discrepancy between desired and actual levels on interesting and challenging work is probably accounted for, in part, by the increasing division of labour and resulting specialization typifying many job situations. One frequent result, whether it is factory or office jobs, is repetitious, monotonous, and uninteresting work for many. These factors, coupled with the rising achievement expectations associated with higher educational levels, may make work less than a fulfilling and inwardly satisfying experience.

Under these circumstances, we would not anticipate work to be a major institution in the lives of those so affected. Instead, family, friends, and nonwork activities should be more important predictors of life satisfaction. However, where the characteristics and nature of a job are more favourable, the relative importance of work may be expected to be greater.

For most people a job provides their major source of economic viability. Money earned on the job provides subsistence and opportunities to engage in a variety of nonwork activities. Therefore, we also would anticipate that regardless of the nature of the work environment, work will have a higher relative importance as a predictor of life satisfaction for those who are highly satisfied with their pay as compared with those who have low satisfactions with pay.

### **Research Procedure**

To test these qualifications of the relative importance of various predictors in the job and life satisfaction relationship, we shall employ data from the 1977 Edmonton Area Study based on a sampling of households and information from detailed interviews (Kennedy, Northcott, and Kinzel, 1977). In order that a more accurate assessment of the impacts of job satisfaction on life satisfaction might be obtained, only respondents who held full-time employment are utilized in our analyses. This results in a subsample of 172 persons — 119 males and 53 females.

Life satisfaction, our dependent variable, is measured by responses ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied" to the question "All in all how satisfied with life are you these days?" (cf., Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976:33; Andrew and Witbey, 1976). Rather than attempt to manipulate an unwieldy number of predictors of satisfaction with various life domains, we limit our analyses to those predictors found in previous analyses to be most important. The parsimony thus achieved should enable us to better gauge the relative importance of work under differing circumstances. The variables used are individual responses to how satisfied they are with their *family life*, their *friendships*, their *non-working activities* — hobbies and so on, and their *job*.

## RESULTS

### Job and Life Satisfaction

To determine the relative importance of our four independent variables with life satisfaction, multiple regression analyses are used. The variable job satisfaction is entered first followed by the remaining three predictors. Results of these multivariate analyses for the total sample and the female-male subsamples with life satisfaction as the dependent variable are presented in Table 1.

For the total sample, over forty-three per cent of the variance in life satisfaction for persons with full-time employment is accounted for by our four predictors. Andrews and Withey's (1976:125) findings on the relative unimportance of feelings about one's job are confirmed in our results where job satisfaction has the lowest standardized regression coefficient of our four predictors. The most important variables are satisfactions with family life and non-working activities.

Comparison of the male-female results reveals different patterns for each. Satisfaction with non-working activities is the most important predictor for males, while satisfaction with family life is the most important for females. Job satisfaction is the least important for males, but its relative importance for females is higher. The variety of motivations for women working make such female-male comparisons sometimes difficult to interpret (White, 1975). Nevertheless, our results on the relative importance of factors in explaining life satisfaction represent an interesting extension of simple correlational studies that have shown job and life satisfaction to be positively related for both females and males (Kavanagh and Halpern, 1977).

**TABLE 1**  
**Multiple Regression Results with Life Satisfaction as Dependent**  
**Variable for Total Sample and Male-Female Subsamples**

	<i>Total Sample</i>	<i>Male Subsample</i>	<i>Female Subsample</i>
N	159	108	51
R	.66	.64	.71
R <sup>2</sup>	43.2%	41.4%	50.3%
<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficients</i>		
Job Satisfaction	.15	.13	.19
Family Life Satisfaction	.31	.23	.44
Friendship Satisfaction	.19	.21	.19
Non-working Activities Satisfaction	.30	.36	.16

### Job Characteristics

Earlier we suggested that when the conditions of work on the job were regarded as more satisfactory, then perhaps the relative importance of job satisfaction as a predictor of life satisfaction might be enhanced. To test this intuition, respondents' assessments of the satisfaction they have with the opportunities to use their skills, their sense of accomplishment, and recognition derived from their jobs are used as control variables. For each of these variables, the sample is roughly dichotomized into a high and low category, and then multiple regression analyses run for each group. Table 2 summarizes the results of these analyses and affords a comparison between those highly satisfied on each job dimension with those who have lower satisfaction levels.

For example, if we compare those who are less satisfied with the sense of accomplishment derived from their jobs with those more satisfied we had anticipated that the relative importance of job satisfaction as a predictor of life satisfaction would be greater for those more satisfied with the sense of accomplishment in their jobs. But instead, our results show job satisfaction to be the least important predictor regardless of how satisfied people are with the sense of accomplishment in their jobs. A similar pattern is observed when one controls for the respondents' level of satisfaction with opportunities to use their skills in their work.



TABLE 2

**Multiple Regression Results with Life Satisfaction as Dependent Variable, Controlling for Satisfaction with Various Job Characteristics**

	<i>Satisfaction with Sense of Accomplishment</i>		<i>Control Variables Satisfaction with Opportunities To Use Skills</i>		<i>Satisfaction with Recognition From Job</i>	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
	N	61	98	64	95	84
R	.58	.69	.71	.61	.68	.64
R <sup>2</sup>	33.4%	48.2%	50.3%	37.0%	45.8%	40.7%
<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficient</i>					
Job Satisfaction	.09	.09	.18	.05	.05	.30
Family Life Satisfaction	.39	.28	.34	.27	.31	.30
Friendship Satisfaction	.16	.23	.19	.23	.19	.14
Non-Working Activities Satisfaction	.16	.41	.32	.30	.36	.31

Controlling for the satisfaction people have with the recognition they get from their jobs, however, we do find some support for our earlier position. For persons low in satisfaction with the recognition received from their jobs, job satisfaction is the least important predictor of life satisfaction. But job satisfaction is a much more important predictor for those with higher levels of satisfaction with the recognition received as a result of the work on their jobs.

### Pay

We also suggested that for most people a job provides their primary source of economic viability and as a result, it was anticipated that regardless of the nature of the job, job satisfaction will have a higher relative importance as a predictor of overall life satisfaction when people are highly satisfied with their pay than when that is not the case. This is confirmed by our results in Table 3 where job satisfaction is the least important predictor for those with lower satisfactions with their pay. For those more satisfied with their pay, job satisfaction is seen to be a more important predictor second only to satisfaction with family life.

### Some Additional Reflections

Thus far our findings tend to call into question the widely held views "... that job satisfaction is intimately related to other domains of life and must be considered a crucial ingredient of the overall quality of life" (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976:317). Even when we control for the satisfactions people have with various aspects of their jobs, no clear and strong pattern of association between job and life satisfaction emerges. This is particularly surprising in that differences in satisfaction with opportunities to use one's skills and a sense of accomplishment in one's job make no apparent difference with the relative importance of job satisfaction lowest among our predictors, regardless. Only when we control for satisfaction with the recognition respondents report getting from their jobs and satisfaction with their pay does the relative importance of job satisfaction climb as expected.

**TABLE 3**  
**Multiple Regression Results with Life Satisfaction as Dependent Variable, Controlling for Satisfaction with Pay**

	<i>Control Variables</i>	
	<i>Satisfaction with Pay</i>	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
N	82	77
R	.58	.75
R <sup>2</sup>	33.7%	55.9%
<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficient</i>	
Job Satisfaction	-.02	.28
Family Life Satisfaction	.10	.46
Friendship Satisfaction	.34	.04
Non-Working Activities Satisfaction	.32	.26

While we have expressed our surprise at these inconclusive patterns, we are reminded of Kavanagh and Halpern's (1977) hypothesis that because persons in higher level jobs have greater opportunities to fulfill their higher level needs, they expected the relationship between job and life satisfaction to increase in magnitude for respondents in higher level jobs. They found, instead, an inverse relationship. We are not able to test directly for our sample the effect of job level on the job and life satisfaction relationship, but we are able to indirectly examine this by reference to the occupation of our respondents. We have divided our sample into two groups — one comprised of clerical, sales, and manual occupations, and the other consisting of occupations with higher prestige levels (cf., Blishen and McRoberts, 1976) such as managers, engineers, teachers, and so on.

Controlling for this division roughly based on occupational prestige, we find a pattern of results more in line with our expectations. As shown in Table 4, for persons in clerical, sales, and manual occupations job satisfaction is the least important predictor — family life, friendships, and non-work activities are all more important. But for the higher prestige occupations, job satisfaction is the most important of our predictors of life satisfaction. Satisfaction with nonworking activities is next important, while satisfaction with family and friends are relatively unimportant predictors. It should be noted, however, that our four predictors accounted for only a total of fifteen per cent of the variance in life satisfaction.

If we examine the patterns observed under our various control circumstances, controlling for intrinsic characteristics (Seeman, 1967) of the job (i.e., sense of accomplishment, and opportunities to use one's skills) has little or no impact on the relative importance of job satisfaction as a predictor of life satisfaction. But on the other hand, controlling for extrinsic characteristics of a job, such as recognition, pay, and occupational prestige, does result in job satisfaction as a more important predictor of life satisfaction.

**TABLE 4**  
Multiple Regression Results with Life Satisfaction as Dependent Variable, Controlling for Occupational Prestige

	<i>Control Variables</i>	
	<i>Occupational Prestige</i>	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
N	91	67
R	.79	.39
R <sup>2</sup>	61.7%	15.0%
<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficient</i>	
Job Satisfaction	.09	.28
Family Life Satisfaction	.38	.08
Friendship Satisfaction	.31	-.05
Non-Working Activities Satisfaction	.27	.25

Perhaps in our consumer society the job is coming to be regarded as merely another commodity. Under circumstances Veblen has described as "conspicuous consumption", a job which provides advantages that either are or may be translated into visible status embellishments such as recognition, prestige, and money is more likely to be of increased importance in people's lives and their overall satisfaction with life. When a job fails to provide these outward benefits or visible social capital, then it is less of a central factor in people's lives. Our results can only hint at such a hypothe-

sis and additional research is certainly required with attention to intrinsic and extrinsic features of jobs likely to be a useful area for further clarification.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The current interest in quality of life and the data generated by research attempting to determine the correlates of life satisfaction provide an opportunity to assess the relative importance of various life domains. Our concern has been the contribution that feelings about one's job make to broader feelings of satisfaction about life. It has been clear that for our sample job satisfaction is a relatively unimportant explanatory factor. Satisfaction with family life, nonwork activities, and friendships all tend to be more important predictors of life satisfaction. There are differences, however, according to the sex of the respondent with the relative importance of job satisfaction noticeably higher for women than men. This pattern is contrary to conventional stereotypes and justifies additional detailed followup. In doing so, it may be useful to include controls for the marital (single, divorced, etc.) and family status (number of children, etc.) of respondents.

We had anticipated that one's job would be a more important predictor of overall life satisfaction when intrinsic features of work were assessed favourably. Controlling for several intrinsic features such as opportunities to use skills and a sense of accomplishment from what one is doing, failed to support this expectation. Instead, positive assessments of extrinsic characteristics including pay and recognition were more directly associated with the higher relative importance of job satisfaction as a predictor. The intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy would appear to be a more complex issue than is sometimes theorized (cf., Herzberg et al, 1959; Herzberg, 1966).

As noted earlier, the methodological shortcomings of research on life satisfaction are substantial. The subjective nature of many of the variables and brief encounters with respondents at a single point in time are major hurdles to clear interpretations of the important relationships. Experience gained from data assessment in this paper would seem to indicate that time series design and multiple measures of key variables are the likeliest future routes to major clarifications of the important issues addressed in life satisfaction research.

With the current interest and scattered activity in industrial societies of improving the quality of work through job design, participation, and other measures, it is important to remember Walker's (1975:1) caution that "The worker's attitudes play a critical role in the acceptance of any changes that

are intended to improve the quality of his working life." Indeed, more is needed to be known about workers' attitudes on work but of equal importance are attitudes of how work as an activity relates to their total lives. Without this understanding, change efforts in the workplace may be at best misdirected and at worst inconsequential.

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## L'importance relative du travail en tant que facteur de satisfaction dans la vie

Le travail, activité fondamentale de l'homme, est présumé avoir également une influence marquée sur l'expression personnelle de la joie de vivre. Les recherches récentes sur la qualité de la vie ont permis d'évaluer l'importance du travail en tant que source de satisfaction dans la vie, mais elles ont aussi conduit à des constatations contraires. Une étude importante a montré par exemple que la satisfaction au travail tient une place de choix dans l'épanouissement de l'homme au cours de son existence, tandis qu'une autre a conclu que l'importance relative du travail occupe un rang très bas.

Le présent article met en parallèle les rapports entre la satisfaction au travail et la satisfaction dans la vie par l'analyse de données recueillies d'un échantillon de répondants qui occupaient un emploi à temps plein. Les résultats indiquent que la satisfaction au travail est un facteur explicatif relativement peu important. La vie familiale, les activités de loisir et les relations d'amitié ont tendance à être des sources de satisfaction dans la vie plus marquées que la satisfaction au travail, même si on décèle des différences selon le sexe du répondant. En effet, l'effet de la satisfaction au travail est sensiblement plus élevé chez les femmes que chez les hommes.

Aussi, compte tenu des diverses conditions de travail, il apparaît que la satisfaction au travail est susceptible d'être davantage ressentie en tant que source de satisfaction dans la vie si les individus sont plus satisfaits des caractéristiques extrinsèques de leur emploi que de ses facteurs intrinsèques.