

Urbanites' Life Satisfaction Research in China: A Case Study of Quality of Life in Eight Cities

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Abstract

In this paper results were reported of an accidental sampling survey of more than 1600 respondents from eight typical cities representing different developmental levels in China. The main aim of this survey was to measure respondents' assessment of the life satisfaction, which reflected part of the people's quality of life as a whole in China. Generally speaking, the evaluations were quite favorable. Most of the respondents owned high assessments for their life satisfaction as a whole. Life satisfaction had district variance. People from different cities had dissimilar evaluations. But the difference was not caused by developmental levels. The relevant statistical analysis also indicated some individual characteristics (such as income) had influence on residents' satisfaction with QOL, while some others (such as gender, age, education and marriage) had no significant influence. As far as the specific domains were concerned, health, working status and family life were the most important factors.

Keywords: Life satisfaction, Quality of life, Influencing factors

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new opinion about development has attracted people's attention, which emphasizes that social development should be based on human beings, but not economic development. In the development of human being, the improving of quality of life (QOL) and the liberation of personality are the core content. So the research of indicators of QOL is becoming the issue people focus on. China is in the process of building the so-called well-off society now, and the material conditions have reached certain level, its effect on QOL is decreasing. Life satisfaction is becoming an important indicator of QOL.

At the micro level, life satisfaction can reflect individual's self-cognition for their own living conditions and at the macro level, it is also able to inspect the process of China's social development in building the well-off society in an all-round way. This research was based on a quantitative investigation which contained more than 1600 samples that came from 8 cities in China. The research had described the life satisfaction of urban residents in these cities, and analyzed factors which influenced people's QOL. The indicators could be used to measure QOL, finding out key issues about peoples' life satisfaction and helping government make policies.

2. Research methods and sampling technique

The research mainly adopted questionnaire survey research, and tried to combine qualitative analysis closely with quantitative analysis. At first, we selected eight typical cities from the whole country, which characterized the different developmental levels. Specifically, they were Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou (developed areas); Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Changsha (general developed areas) and Lanzhou, Kunming (developing areas). After sampling investigation and collecting data, all statistic variables in different types were analyzed by utilizing SPSS, which concluded univariate analysis, bivariate correlation analysis, nonparametric test (Chi-Square) and One-Way ANOVA. All these methods did great help for us to induce, compare, outline, sum-up and deduce a large number of data materials and make out valuable conclusions.

The surveys used accidental sampling. At the beginning, each of the selected cities was divided into several

districts according to the administrative areas; and then, these districts were also divided into several streets and were distributed the planned number of the investigation in the light of certain proportion. At last, there were about 210 respondents in every city. Investigation time spanned from April to August in 2004. Both the numbers of Center for Quality of Life Studies in Wuhan University and local college student interviewers took part in this large survey. 1680 questionnaires were sent to a random selection of individuals and 1609 valid questionnaires were returned. The valid rate of recovery was 95.8%.

3. Demographic characteristics of the samples

Respondents identifying their gender included 871 (54.2%) males and 736 (45.8%) females. The age ranged from below 25 years old to over 55 years old. 371 (26.3%) respondents were 25 years old and less; 580 (36.4%) from 25 to 35; 299 (18.7%) from 35 to 45; 220 (13.8%) from 45 to 55; and the others occupied 7.8%. Two hundred and thirty-six (14.7%) had junior high school and less educational level. Those (467 respondents) who had senior high school or equivalent degree occupied 29.1%. Nine hundred and three (56.2%) had a college degree and beyond. As far as the marital status was concerned, one thousand and fifty (66.5%) were married or had been married, which included divorced, widowed, separated and married conditions. Others were single (529, 33.5%).

Insert Table 1 Here

4. The analysis of satisfaction as a whole

4.1 Comparison of Life Satisfaction as a Whole in Different Cities

From the evaluation of life satisfaction as a whole, it was easily to find that 63.5% of the respondents expressed that they thought their present life 'very satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied', and 32% expressed 'a little unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied', compared to only 4% who said they could not exactly judge their present life satisfaction.. The average score of the eight cities was 2.62, and standard deviation is 0.632. All in all, respondents were relatively satisfied with their own lives.

But if compared further, satisfaction levels in different cities were not completely same (Table 2). The highest score was 2.79 belonging to Shanghai, which was higher than the average score; while Beijing's score was the lowest, only 2.45. One-Way ANOVA also indicated that there was significant difference in these cities ($p < 0.01$).

Insert Table 2 Here

In order to verify the relation between the economic development level and life satisfaction, the eight cities were divided into three groups. They were developed areas (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou), general developed areas (Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Changsha) and developing areas (Lanzhou, Kunming). Then, making another One- Way ANOVA analysis, the result was just as follows (table 3).

Insert Table 3 Here

From the above table, we could find significance level was greater than 0.05. It showed that as for life satisfaction as a whole, there was no significant difference in various economic developmental levels' areas. Beijing and Shanghai are both municipalities in China. One is the capital, and another is economic center. The two cities' developmental levels are both on the top in China. But their residents' life satisfaction had great difference. Lanzhou belongs to the western city of China, whose economic level is obviously lower than that of eastern and middle areas. But residents in Lanzhou indicated an active evaluation at their present lives, whose score was second only to Shanghai, and higher than that of the other six cities. Kunming is also a western city, while its respondents' life satisfaction was only the last but one. In three cities of the middle areas, respondents' life satisfaction in Wuhan was greatly lower than Zhengzhou's and Changsha's.

4.2 Correlation Analysis between Individual Characteristics and Life Satisfaction as a Whole

By means of correlation analysis, the results indicated gender, age and educational level of the respondents had no correlation with their overall life satisfaction. That is to say, overall satisfaction of the persons with different gender, age and educational level almost had no difference. While personal monthly income and satisfaction as a whole had a rather weak relation. Namely, the higher the income was, the higher life satisfaction was. Quality of objective material condition was still one of the most important factors determining people's life satisfaction to a certain extent.

Insert Table 4 Here

4.2.1 Gender

The analysis results indicated, the respondents of different gender had not shown the obvious difference in the

appraisal of the satisfaction to the quality of life. With the improvement of female's status in China in recent years, the idea of equality of the sexes has already rooted in the heart of the people. Although the inequality of sexes still exists in some places at present time, people's thought have significantly changed than before. No matter who are males and females, they are all deeply eager for equality and pursue higher quality of life. This conclusion is also unanimous with the conclusion of *2004 Chinese Residents' Quality of Life Report*, which pointed urbanites' with different gender had no remarkable difference in the appraisal of overall life satisfaction (Zeng and Yuan, 2004). Meanwhile, another quality of life research from Singapore showed gender almost had no correlation with life satisfaction too (Kau and Hooi, 1995, pp.71-79).

4.2.2 Age

Yi and Feng (1997, p.82) pointed out age and life satisfaction had positive correlation in the subjective quality of life research in Wuhan, Beijing and Xi'an. Namely, the older the age was, the higher the life satisfaction was. Their explanation was, after being middle-aged and old, people mostly entered the summit stage of the resource, they always felt more satisfied when compared with other people's condition and their past circumstance, and at the same time, middle-aged and old persons lowered their life expectation and weakened their pursuit motivation, therefore improved subjective quality of life while choosing the realizable reference standard (Yi and Feng, 1997, p.82). But as far as our research was concerned, the correlation between age and satisfaction was rather weak, nearly could be ignored. The reasons of results' difference were in many aspects. The most important one, except survey content, samples selection, research methods, data computation and so on, perhaps lied in social change and the process of modernization which dramatically impacted people's psychology. Survey by Feng and Yi had lasted many years. Social structure in China had already enormously changed over the past ten years, the persons of different ages faced different opportunity and challenge. So compared with ten years before, their lives' heterogeneity was much stronger, and the factors influencing life satisfaction tended to diversify. Things only appearing in some specific age stage in the past probably were faced by everyone now.

4.2.3 Educational Level

Although the research result that educational level and life satisfaction had no obviously correlation was not same as some other scholars' research, it had its own reasons. Because this research paid attention to the subjective quality of life, while others did objective aspects or survey time was remote now. All these reasons rendered past conclusion could not reflect the present condition, especially the influence caused by social change to people's idea. People are more and more eager for high quality of life than before after ten years' development. The persons who receive higher education always have high life expectation and a variety of demands. But it is difficult to realize these expectations. All these caused them to lower their satisfaction degree. On the contrary, those with low educational level probably have not so many demands for life, and are apt to satisfy, so their life satisfaction is relatively high.

4.2.4 Marital Status

Wuhan survey by Yi and Feng found marriage satisfaction was the important factor influencing family quality of life (Yi and Feng, 1997, p.82). This is mainly because they regarded the family as the research unit. In fact, 'marriage' is not the most important factor influencing the individual's quality of life, but determining the family quality of life. Xing pointed 'subjective well-being of no marriage groups was higher than that of married ones in the city', and thought this related to the marriage quality of life among Chinese urbanites (Xing and Jin, 2003, pp.1056-1059). According to our research, married, single and other groups (divorced, separated and widowed) showed no distinction at life satisfaction. To some extent, this conclusion supported Xing's. Namely, most of the married groups had low quality of marriage (In China, only 3% of spouses have high quality of their marriage), so their life satisfaction was also not notably higher than other groups either.

4.2.5 Income

There are many diverse opinions concerning the relation among income, life satisfaction and subjective well-being (or happiness). Easterlin's (1973, cited in Rapley, 2003, p.17) demonstration was that, while the association of happiness with income within countries was not strong, income differences between nations predicted national differences in happiness. Veenhoven (2001, p.19) stated that 'the richer the country, the happier its inhabitants', but qualified Easterlin's analysis by noting that 'correlations between personal happiness and personal income are strong in poor countries and weak in rich nations'. Our findings testified this opinion---there was certain positive association between income and subjective well-being. The abroad researches have their universal significance to some extent. In a developing country such as China, one of the biggest developing countries all over the world, it is still an important way to improve people's quality of life by means of raising their income.

Through introducing these demographic characteristics variables, we found that only income had a certain influence to individuals' quality of life, especially life satisfaction and other factors nearly had no correlation, which even could be ignored. It was no doubt that some researchers pointed out, if age, gender, income, educational level and all other demographic variables are put together, they can only explain approximate 10% of the happiness and satisfaction (Michalos, 1985, pp. 195-223).

4.3 Comparison of Specific Domains of Quality of Life

At the individual level, respondents were required to select several factors they thought the most important to influence their quality of life. The result was as follows:

Insert Table 5 Here

Seen from the above table, 30.7% of the respondents positioned health on the first place. That indicated a large amount of people thought health exerted the largest influence on quality of life. And 24.5% considered working status was extremely vital to them. 21.0% judged family life was the greatest factor. In addition, 8.4% of the respondents considered self-development. While few people selected social communication, leisure and entertainment, public service and policy.

5. Subjective life satisfaction in specific domains

5.1 Health

In the quality of life research and practice, health is increasingly acknowledged as a valid and appropriate indicator. During the last several years, an amount of the research activities have addressed subjective health and quality of life. And many authors launched health-related quality of life measure, including objective and subjective assessments of health, which were particularly useful for evaluating subjective life satisfaction. Such data can inform health policy, planning, and practice.

Insert Table 6 Here

Over half of the respondents were relatively satisfied with their own physical and mental health. But in the light of comparison, we could find satisfaction of physical health was higher than that of mental health. That more than 20% of the respondents deemed they were 'very unsatisfied' or 'somewhat unsatisfied' with their mental health indicates in the modern society, people undertake enormous spiritual pressure under fierce life competition and their mental health is dropping too. Respondents' personal physique and life pressure were the most vital factors influencing quality of life among the health factors. In addition, daily life regular, physical exercise and psychological anxiety all do their jobs.

5.2 Working status

Working status is found to have significant effects on urbanite's life satisfaction. In our survey, the satisfaction measures of working status included working environment (official facilities, space arrangement and natural environment), working intensity, working security, income, working welfare, relation with superiors, relation with colleagues, promoting opportunities, incentive mechanism, self-expression chances and working autonomy. Respondents' reflections are as follows:

Insert Table 7 Here

Respondents in our survey generally took active evaluations to their working environment, working intensity, working security and relation with superiors and colleagues. But there were obvious divisions concerning working welfare, income, promoting opportunities and incentive mechanism. Nearly half of the respondents were satisfied with these aspects, while others were unsatisfied. There were close relations with types of the units. Different types of units will bring various organization structures, corporate culture and welfare. Because the respondents were from different trades and units, the difference of data was normal. As for working incentive mechanism, the reason why many respondents selected 'unsure' as the answer to satisfaction was that part of them may be professionals. They worked freely and independently.

5.3 Family and Social Communication

Family and social communication play important roles in people's subjective quality of life. People spend most of their time together with their family or friends besides working time. Harmonic family relationship and good social communication are one of the essential aspects for high quality of life. According to the data, most of the respondents thought the relationships with family, relatives and friends were in good condition. Specifically, more than 90% of them thought the relationships with family and friends were 'very good' and 'fairly good'. Because of the characteristics of modern living models, people seldom have opportunity to communicate with

their neighbourhood. So some respondents could not judge the relationship with their neighbourhood. The following table shows the specific conditions.

Insert Table 8 Here

6. Conclusion

The main aim of this survey was to measure respondents' assessment of the life satisfaction, which reflected part of the people's quality of life as a whole in China. There were eight typical cities that were selected and represented different developmental levels. Generally speaking, most of the respondents owned high evaluations for their overall life satisfaction, and satisfaction had district variance. That was to say, people from different cities had dissimilar evaluations. But the difference was not caused by developmental level. The relevant statistical analysis also indicated some individual characteristics (such as income) had influence on residents' satisfaction with QOL, while some others (such as gender, age, education and marriage) had no significant influence.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Samples

Demographic Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Male	871	54.2
	Female	736	45.8
Age	25 years old and less	371	23.3
	25—35	580	36.4
	35—45	299	18.7
	45—55	220	13.8
	55 years old and beyond	125	7.8
Educational level	Junior high school and less	236	14.7
	Senior high school or equivalent	467	29.1
	College degree and beyond	903	56.2
Marital status	Single	529	33.5
	Divorced	31	2.0
	Widowed	18	1.1
	Married	992	62.8
	Separated	9	0.6

Table 2. Comparison of Life Satisfaction as a Whole in Different Cities

	Beijing	Shanghai	Guangzhou	Zhengzhou	Wuhan	Changsha	Lanzhou	Kunming
Mean	2.45	2.79	2.55	2.67	2.54	2.68	2.70	2.51
Std. Deviation	0.66	0.55	0.62	0.58	0.64	0.64	0.56	0.75

(Very satisfied=4, Somewhat satisfied=3, A little unsatisfied=2, Very unsatisfied=1)

Table 3. Analysis of Variance between Life Satisfaction and Different Developmental Levels' Areas

	Sum of Squares	D.F.	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.177	2	0.089	0.222	0.801
Within Groups	615.806	1540	0.400		
Total	615.983	1542			

Table 4. Correlation Analysis between Individual Characteristics and Life Satisfaction as a Whole

Individual Characteristics	Correlation Coefficient	Sig.	N
Gender	Eta ² =0.001	0.638	1541
Age	Gamma=0.083	0.018*	1531
Educational Level	Gamma=0.097	0.021*	1540
Material Status	Eta ² =0.009	0.000***	1515
Income	Gamma=0.233	0.000***	1464

*: p<0.05; **: p<0.01; ***: p<0.001

Table 5. Factors Exerting the Largest Influence on Quality of Life

Factors	N	%
Health	491	30.7
Working status	392	24.5
Family life	336	21.0
Self-development	135	8.4
Material possession and consumption	132	8.2
Social communication	64	4.0
Public service and policy	31	1.9
Leisure and entertainment	20	1.2
Total	1601	100.0

Table 6. Satisfaction with Personal Health Status (%)

	Physical health	Mental health
Very satisfied	27.7	22.0
Somewhat satisfied	53.7	55.9
Somewhat unsatisfied	15.0	18.9
Very unsatisfied	2.5	2.1
Unsure	1.1	1.1

Table 7. Satisfaction with Working Status (%)

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat unsatisfied	Very unsatisfied	Unsure
Working environment	11.1	62.5	21.0	2.7	2.7
Working intensity	7.2	60.7	23.2	4.8	4.1
Working security	18.9	64.1	11.7	2.3	2.9
Income	3.3	41.8	42.4	9.4	3.0
Working welfare	4.4	37.9	37.0	11.7	9.0
Promoting opportunities	4.6	30.7	29.8	7.4	27.5
Incentive mechanism	5.2	31.5	34.7	9.6	19.0
Relation with superiors	12.8	63.7	8.7	2.2	12.6
Relation with colleagues	21.0	66.7	4.9	0.4	7.0
Self-expression chances	9.4	45.2	27.5	5.5	12.4
Working autonomy	13.6	48.9	22.2	6.4	8.8

Table 8. Social Communication and Relationship with the Family (%)

	Very good	Fairly good	Generally good	Somewhat bad	Very bad	Unsure
Relationship with the family	72.5	21.7	4.7	0.6	0.4	0.2
Relationship with the neighborhood	40.3	35.9	20.7	1.1	1.1	0.9
Relationship with the relatives	47.4	36.4	14.2	14.1	0.3	0.2
Relationship with the friends	53.9	36.6	8.5	0.4	0.3	0.2