

## Determinants of Subjective Well-Being: Perspectives of Malay Muslims

Nor Hafizah Mohamed Harith<sup>1</sup> & Hazizan Md. Noon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Selangor  
[norha561@salam.uitm.edu.my](mailto:norha561@salam.uitm.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup>International Islamic University Malaysia  
[hazizan@iiu.edu.my](mailto:hazizan@iiu.edu.my)

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### Abstract

*In modern and industrialized societies, the level of quality of life or life style is measured objectively by economic parameters such as income inequality rate, literacy rate and life expectancy. Many economists believe that money buys happiness, and so, income is the sole measure of well-being. Economists typically equate economic development with per capita income or product, and they usually measure inequality and poverty in terms of real income or consumptions. However, in the early 1970s, Easterlin found that happiness, from the perspective of SWB, does not seem to rise systematically with income. Indeed, this finding seems to be in contradiction with the basic assumption of many economists. Therefore, it is important to provide an insight into the issue on how significant the meaning of happiness or life satisfaction among people. Thus, the main objective of this study is to determine the meaning of well-being among the Malay Muslim respondents. The study adopted a qualitative approach that involved 16 people who worked in University MARA Technology Shah Alam. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and NVivo 9 was utilized as data management software. Results of the study shows that the themes were centered on 1) the need of spiritual need 2) the economic satisfaction needs & 3) the social needs. The study also revealed significant impacts to policy implications in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** Subjective Well-Being; Quality of Life; Malays Muslim

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### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one the fast growing economy in the world and ranked 62 in the High Human Development Category with 0.6% poverty rate in 2015 (Malaysia Millennium Development Goals Report, 2015) Looking into this scenario, Malaysia citizens or “*rakyat*” of Malaysia have enjoyed the prosperity of the economy growth. Since independence in 1957, through its Malaysian Plan strategies, the quality of life of Malaysians have increased tremendously. For instance, Malaysia’s absolute poverty rate at the national level fell by more than half from 16.5 per cent in 1990 to 8.5 per cent in 1999 and to 0.6 per cent in 2014. Indeed, the number of poor households also fell from 409,300 to 40,000 households between 1999 and 2014 (Malaysian Development Report, 2015).

Even though the economic growth have flourished tremendously, have subjective well-being of the people of Malaysia's quality of life have risen simultaneously? This issue ponders most of the subjective well-being scholars when Easterlin in 1970s have found that subjective well-being seems not to arise simultaneously with the rising income. Therefore, it is important to provide an insight into the issue on how significant the meaning of happiness or life satisfaction among people of the majority population in Malaysia. Hence, it is high time that the social policies in Malaysia also be evaluated with respect to the impacts of the national subjective well-being, not just economic or job-related outcomes. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to determine the meaning of well-being among the Malay Muslim respondents.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Quality of life consists of multi-faceted dimensions and its definition varies according to the discipline of study (Rapley, 2003; Searle, 2008 & Bowling and Windsor, 2001). For instance, according to Bowling and Windsor (2001), quality implies the degree of excellence of a characteristic, but the concept of the quality of life may mean different things to different people. In short, Bowling and Windsor (2001) have arguably defined the term as what one has lost or lacks rather than what one has. On the whole, one may conclude that in general the term quality can be described as a grade of goodness or that it is about the goodness of life.

Despite the controversial and ill-defined concept of the quality of life, it may serve as a good and useful purpose in the investigation of social life (Bestuzhev-Lada, 1980). Bestuzhev-Lada (1980) argues that the conceptual framework of quality of life should be understood as an evaluation of gratification which people derive from the degree to which their material and environmental needs are actually satisfied. The quality of life cannot be simply determined by measuring how many hours people work and how many hours they spend on leisure. Rather it is important to find out how rich and interesting their work is and how satisfied they are with it (Bestuzhev-Lada, 1980). Thus, they have proposed the conceptual approach of quality of life that integrates the concepts of standard of living, quality of life, and life-style. To this end, the importance of satisfaction may serve as a point of reference in the quality of life research.

On the other hand, Zapf (1980) defines quality of life as the well-being of individuals and households measured by social indicators that show the degree of goal attainment in the selected goal areas or social concerns. Thus, the quality of life is viewed as an ultimate goal of public welfare policies and private pursuits of happiness. This means that the public welfare would include objective life conditions of individuals and the objective system conditions, i.e. distributional patterns and

perceived life quality (Zapf, 1980). Meanwhile, World Health Organization (WHO, 1997:1) has a broader definition of quality of life. It has defined quality of life as happiness, life satisfaction, well-being, self-actualization, freedom from want, objective functioning; a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease. These various notions of quality of life may serve as indicators for determining how good one's life is within the context of the definition of a particular discipline of study.

Rapley (2003) divides the definition of the quality of life into two levels of constructs; the population and the individual levels. The population level of construct contains dimensions that are important to a particular nation and its indicators vary according to different authorities. In contrast, the individual construct contains dimensions for assessing the individual's subjective experiences. For instance the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) introduced major social indicators for measuring well-being according to important aspects of life and the most pressing social issues. The ABS (cited in Rapley, 2003: 32) offers the following definition of well-being/quality of life:

*From birth to death, life enmeshes individuals within a dynamic culture consisting of the natural environment(light, heat, air, land, water, minerals, flora and fauna), the human made environment (material objects, buildings, roads, machinery, appliances, technology), social arrangements(families, social networks, associations, institutions, economies),and human consciousness (knowledge, belief, understanding, skills, traditions). Well-being depends on all the factors that interact within this culture and can be seen as a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life. Measuring well-being therefore involves mapping the whole of life, and considering each life event or social context that has potential to affect the quality of individual lives or the cohesion of society. At the individual level, this can include the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of life. At the broader level, the social, material and natural environments surrounding each individual, through interdependency, become part of the well-being equation.*

However, within the context of Malaysia, the Malaysian Economic Planning Unit (EPU, 2004) defines quality of life as follows:

*Quality of life is defined as encompassing personal advancements, a healthy lifestyle, access and freedom to pursue knowledge and a standard of living which surpasses the fulfillment of the basic needs of individuals and their psychological needs, to achieve a level of social well-being compatible with the nation's aspirations*

The above definition comprises the main dimensions of quality of life that can be divided into three main themes; 1) the economic 2) the social and 3) the environmental factor that enable people to live successfully and happily within the environment. The Malaysian Economic Planning Unit (EPU) has identified eleven domains of quality of life (EPU, 2004). They are income and distribution, working life, transport and communications, health, education, housing, environment, family life, social participation, public safety, culture and leisure. These domains are measured by sub-indicators that represent the total quality of life. In Malaysia, the MQLI is measured based on the basic needs approach which are evaluated quantitatively with forty-two sub-indicators. In June 2012, the MQLI Report 2011 was launched. It provides insights into the changes and improvements in the quality of life of Malaysian. In particular, most of the indices have shown increase. Nevertheless, the main point to highlight is: to what extent the objective indicators reflect the subjective meaning of life satisfaction experienced by the people themselves? This is the main question that the research intends to explore and the one which also defines in general the scope of this study.

The research on life satisfaction was to measure the people's assessment of their life satisfaction as a whole and it has become an important social indicator that measures the quality of life (Kesebir and Diener, 2008 & Oishi and Gilbert, 2016). This is as a result of the limitations of economic indicators to capture various societal domains such as health, education, and human rights. Prior research on well-being has been dominated by economic indicators. Certainly, economic progress and affluence are the primary focus of policy makers today, such emphasis on materialism, however, can be detrimental to well-being. Easterlin pioneered the research on the economics of happiness. His empirical study revealed why even when their incomes and consumptions increase, people are not necessarily happier as a result. This phenomenon has been called the Easterlin Paradox (Krishna Dutt and Radcliff, 2009).

In addition, we also add spiritual life domain which we thought is significant in the context of this study. This we do because firstly, this domain is absent in Allardt's framework and secondly, in the context of this study, the spiritual or religiosity domain is to our mind important in measuring the quality of life of Malaysians, especially the Malay Muslims.

Furthermore, the contribution of the spiritual domain in the prediction of the personal well-being index has also been considered by some scholars. For example, spirituality has been included as a new domain in the Personal Well-being Index by Cummins et al. (Wills, 2009).

Even though, the majority of the published research on quality of life, SWB and religiosity has been carried out in the context of Western Judeo-Christian culture, these studies have indicated positive relationship between religiosity and SWB (Cummins, 2003; Ellison, 1991) and the results have shown that the satisfaction with spirituality and religiosity to PWI was significant. Based on these results, one can conclude that, even in the West, spirituality contributes to satisfaction with life. Only a few studies were carried out on Muslim societies (Tilioune et al., 2009 & Abdel-Khalek; 2012). These studies, which were conducted based on quantitative measures, have also shown empirically the positive relationship between the Islamic religiosity and satisfaction with life.

Based on the above, the researcher decided to include the spiritual needs domain into the framework. To incorporate all the elements mentioned above into the framework the researcher has modified the Allardt's model which can be re-presented as follows:

Table 1: *Allardt's Modified Needs Theory & Its Corresponding Objective & Subjective Indicators*

ALLARDT'S TYPES OF NEEDS	WHAT IT MEASURES?	MQLI'S ELEVEN DOMAINS
<b>HAVING</b>	Level of living and environmental conditions	Income, health, education, housings, public safety, working life, transport and communication, environment.
<b>LOVING (SOCIAL NEEDS)</b>	Relationships with others	Family life, Social Participation
<b>BEING NEEDS (NEEDS FOR PERSONAL GROWTH)</b>	Relationship with externalities	Culture and leisure
<b>SPIRITUAL NEEDS</b>	Spirituality and religiousness	Not in MQLI

As indicated earlier, Allardt's framework provides the general frame and basis for this study. To suit the purpose of our investigation, we identify and group the MQLI's eleven domains into the three main types of need proposed by Allardt. In addition, we also add spiritual life domain which we thought is significant in the context of this study. This we do because firstly, this domain is absent in Allardt's framework and secondly, in the context of this study, the spiritual or religiosity domain is to our

mind important in measuring the quality of life of Malaysians, especially the Malay Muslims.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### ***Research World View***

This research is mainly grounded within a social constructivist philosophical position or interpretivism. This interpretivist epistemological perspective assumes that reality is socially constructed. In this worldview, there is no single observable reality only. Rather there exist multiple realities and interpretations of a single event (Merriam, 2009). The aim of the research is not to test a theory or measure anything, rather to understand the meanings people have constructed about their world and experiences. Therefore, unlike the post-positivism approach to research, the goal of this research is to uncover the meaning of people's understandings of their world, specifically regarding subjective life satisfaction. As indicated a single case study with embedded multiple unit analysis is a preferred case study design (Yin, 2009). The main rationale for a single case with embedded multiple units of analysis designs is that it is a representative or a typical case. The main objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or common place situation. It is hoped that the lessons learned from these multiple unit analysis are informative concerning the experiences of the subject (s) of the study (Yin, 2009).

### ***Research Design***

The qualitative research design, in particular a case study research design, was preferred due to a number of reasons. A case study is a form of research inquiry that involves the study of a phenomenon explored through one or more cases within a bounded system i.e. a setting, a context (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2013 & Yin, 2009).

### ***Research Setting***

This study was carried out in University of Mara Technology (UiTM) that is located in Shah Alam city. UiTM was selected as the location of study because it is situated in the capital city of Selangor and it contains the majority of Malay civil servants. The main subjects for this study were individual Malay civil servants who work in UiTM and live in Shah Alam urban residential area.

### ***The Sampling Method***

Purposive sampling method, in which the required essential criteria were preselected, was utilized to choose the appropriate population or sites to be studied. Patton (2002 as cited in Merriam, 2009) explains that the reason for the choice of purposeful sampling is most effective in selecting information-rich cases for an in depth study. In criteria-based selection, a list of the requisite attributes is created and then the researcher proceeds to locate the participants. Thus, in this study, the selection criteria were first determined. The type of purposeful sampling employed was the maximum variation sampling. This type suited the scope of the study, which aims to examine any common patterns that emerge from great variation. This could capture the core experiences that are central within the setting or phenomenon (Patton, 2002 as cited in Merriam, 2009).

### ***Techniques of Data Collection***

Two techniques of data collection were employed in this research. An in-depth interview was the first and the main method of data collection, while the second one was a written feedback. Both techniques were chosen to enable the researcher to triangulate their evidence in order to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data (Stake, 2010).

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of this research have revealed some important insights into the meaning of life satisfaction among the participants. There were eleven initial themes emerged namely: 1) need for increment, 2) involvement in community service, 3) having financial freedom, 4) improved education, 5) migrating to lower living places, 6) doing extra job, 7) having a peaceful retirement, 8) being promoted, 9) spiritual enhancement, 10) remaining in the workforce or job security and 11) repaying parents' sacrifices. These categories were found in each of the sixteen participants' narratives although the way they spoke of them were varied. These sub-themes can be grouped into three main themes, which support the central concept namely life improvement. These themes are: 1) the need for spiritual development, 2) the need for economic satisfaction and 3) the social need. These themes can be regarded as the important aspects that constituted the meaning of subjective life satisfaction among the respondents as shown in Figure 1 below.

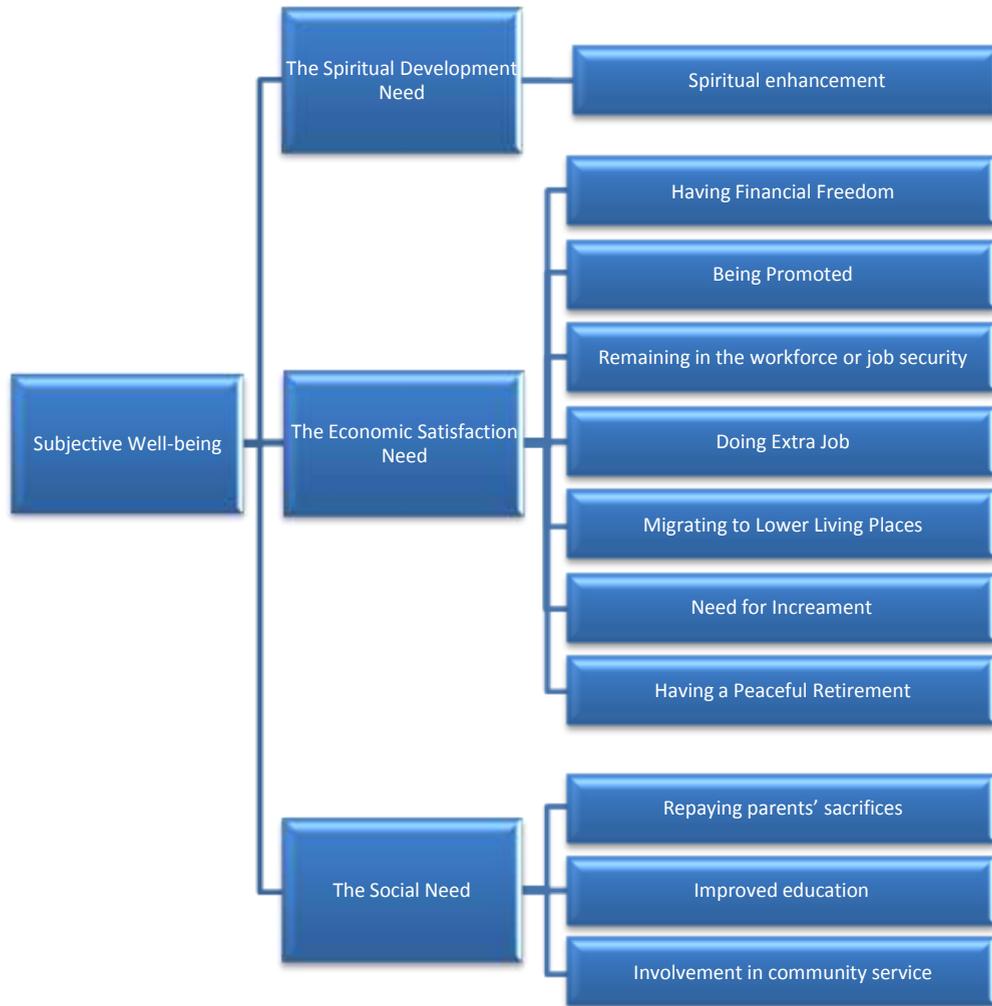


Figure 1

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The meaning of life satisfaction among the respondents can be inferred from and was mainly centered around three main needs namely spiritual, economic and social needs. This means the respondents viewed life as being meaningful when it embraces both its material and non-material aspects of life with the first two being the main priorities for the participants.

With regards to the spiritual need, the study found that the majority of the participants expressed their dream to improve their religious knowledge and devotion (*ibadat*) as this has been regarded as an important source of their happiness. From here it can be detected that there is strong connection between spirituality and life satisfaction among the participants. This is especially so for the Muslims as the nature of the Islamic faith has provided such teachings for dealing with life in this world and life in the hereafter.

Thus, it can be concluded that there is an existence of a strong connection between spiritual needs and SWB among the participants of the study. It also may be the case for the Muslim population that is associated with the nature of the Islamic faith because it provides teachings for dealing with life comprehensively. Islam is a religion of tolerance and ease, which ensures happiness for people here and in the hereafter. According to Omar, the Holy Quran draws Muslim's attention to the fact that the worldly life is temporary and will someday end. While happiness in the hereafter is eternal. With encouragement not to abandon or neglect the worldly life (al-Hadid: 20). Thus, striking a balance between earthly duties through total submission to Allah SWT has made participants not to be deluded by life's materialism and delights (Al-Attas, 1993).

With regard to the need for economic satisfaction, issues related to income have revolved around the fact that it is very difficult to sustain and survive in the high cost living environment. This is in line with the findings of life satisfaction among the Chinese urban residents, which found that the residents living in a society with dramatic change, competition and increasing inequalities would experience such difficulties (Wang and VanderWeele, 2011).

The above findings can also be discussed in the light of Maslow's theory of need (1970) which says that before one could satisfy the higher level of life needs, one must gratify the lower level of needs. In other words, if the basic needs were not fulfilled, an individual would work hard to fulfill them. Oishi, Diener, Lucas & Suh (1999) have adopted the Maslow's theory in their study and found that financial satisfaction is more strongly associated with life satisfaction in poorer nations. This suggests that satisfying lower level needs like income and housing is necessary as these are naturally very basic for life in poorer nations. As far as the findings of this study are concerned, the slight difference of experience and perception on the economic and financial necessity among participants of different salary grades or scales does demonstrate similarity to this theory.

Lastly, with regards to the social need which is the last important aspect that gives meaning to participants' satisfaction, finding similar to that of number two (economic

need) can be found whereby majority of the participants were more concerned with their social relationship and connection with their immediate family members. As reported, majority felt that taking care of children and aging parents' was their main priority. This finding is also consistent with the findings of some other studies (World Happiness Report 2016; Inoguchi & Fiji, 2009; Tambyah, et al., 2009 & Wang & VanderWeele, 2011).

On this note, it can be concluded that life satisfaction to the participants is more than satisfying the material needs per se, but it includes also and more importantly the non-material ones particularly the spiritual and social needs. As reported earlier, the findings of this research have revealed that both male and female participants did share similar views on the factors of life satisfaction.

In conclusion, the aspects of life satisfaction among the Malay Muslims. Despite of the struggling in meeting the needs of modern life, the Malay Muslims emphasis the need of spiritual need, the economic satisfaction needs and the social needs are the most significant aspects in lives. The meaning of life satisfaction for the participants is centered on both the material and non-material needs with the former being more worthy and central to the middle and lower administrative staff. Despite the deficiency in their income, the non-material needs remain significant in the life of the Malay Muslims. This study provides a strong case that non-material needs do influence people's life satisfaction especially within the context of the Muslim population in Malaysia.

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