



# Latest Australian and Overseas Quality-Of-Life Research

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was represented at the First Conference of the International Society of Quality-of-Life Studies, held in Charlotte, North Carolina in November 1997. The Conference brought together social/behavioural science researchers from a variety of disciplines to discuss factors affecting physical health and subjective wellbeing, and provided an opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the latest research on quality of life from these different perspectives.

The Conference covered a broad spectrum of topics, including quality of life and its relation to: work life; unemployment; financial circumstances; interpersonal relationships and social participation; family life; school life; leisure activities and patterns of time-use; materialism, religious and spiritual factors; and health status and health care delivery systems.

## Australian research

A number of Australian researchers from several states delivered papers at this extremely well-run conference. Ruth Weston, representing the Australian Institute of Family Studies at the conference, presented a paper entitled 'Adolescents' Satisfaction with Relationships with Parents: Hornet's Nest or Haven?'. Ralph Kober, University of Western Australia, examined measures for assessing the quality of life of people with developmental disabilities, while David Webb and Robyn Ouschan, from the same university, focused on dimensions of consumer satisfaction and the engagement of 'consumption' and 'non-consumption' behaviour. Gabrielle Ostrognay and colleagues from the University of Melbourne and University of Queensland examined factors linked with teachers' job satisfaction and perceptions of the quality of their work life.

Michael Pusey, from University of New South Wales, outlined views on economic reforms held by 'middle Australians' (a sample which excluded people with incomes at either extreme). He found that expectations about job prospects and future incomes tended to be gloomy as a result of economic restructuring, and that confidence in public institutions tends to be eroded by falling quality of life.

Three papers were given by Robert Cummins and colleagues from Deakin

University, one of which compared various circumstances and perceptions of circumstances of farmers, ex-farmers and Melbourne metropolitan residents. While there was no difference in overall satisfaction, this research suggested that falling satisfaction in one domain is compensated for by rising satisfaction in another – an issue further explored in another paper by this group. Cummins also outlined the development of the fifth edition of his 'Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale', which focuses on seven domains of life, including relationships with family and friends.

## Family-related research

The importance of family life to overall quality of life was highlighted in many of the papers. Ruth Weston's analysis of data from the Australian Living Standards Study, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, suggested that relationships within the family were among the most satisfactory aspects of life for both young people and their parents. Nevertheless, a small proportion of boys and girls were clearly dissatisfied with their relationships with their parents, and these young people, along with their mothers, indicated lower subjective wellbeing on a range of measures. Effects for fathers appeared to be less pervasive than those for mothers.

A paper given by Scott Huebner, from South Carolina, indicated the importance of quality of family life for the life satisfaction and happiness of school age children. Across the ages of 8–18 years, family relationships were the strongest predictor of wellbeing. Other important factors included satisfaction with school life, personality variables, and high engagement in challenging tasks. Huebner recommended that these matters need to be considered by educators when they attempt to develop effective programs for optimising children's academic, social and interpersonal wellbeing.

Peggy Berger, Alicia Cook and Randy Weigel, from Colorado and Wyoming, discussed gender differences in perceptions of overload from family and work roles and the relationship between perceived overload and other indicators of quality of life. Both the men and the women in their study expressed a strong desire to have more time to do things for and with the family. Compared with other men and women, those who felt

overloaded were more likely to feel financially insecure, and indicated higher stress and lower satisfaction with their job and family roles.

Kathryn Rettig and Ronit Leichtenritt, from Minnesota, examined men's and women's satisfaction with various dimensions of family wellbeing. Their analysis suggested that men and women give different meanings to the same measures of resources received through the family and have different priorities for their family life.

The paper presented by Kent Granzin and Lois Haggard, from Utah, highlighted the importance of social relationships, especially emotional support from family and friends, for sense of wellbeing. Of all the factors examined, emotional support had the most important influence on sense of wellbeing, and appeared to affect sense of wellbeing both directly and indirectly, through its relationship with mental health and evaluations of leisure experiences.

Robert Emmons, from California, asked 'What makes meaningful, valuable, and purposeful?' He referred to research suggesting that childless couples tend to be the happiest of any group studied, yet parents living with children usually indicate that they are very glad that they had children. One reason that has been offered for this paradox is that children provide a powerful source of meaning in life although they may dampen happiness. Thus, Emmons argued, meaning in life is central to quality of life and differs from a happy life. He further noted the importance of goals and personal strivings – especially 'spiritual' strivings – in providing meaning in life and promoting wellbeing.

## Research and family policy

The conference highlighted the significance of quality of life research for family policy and service provision. It also suggested the inadequacy of exclusive reliance on objective indicators, such as material circumstances, for monitoring the individual and family wellbeing, and the importance of assessment of subjective indicators, such as personal priorities and sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

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