

Life Satisfaction and its Determinants Among Young Iranian Women

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Abstract

Background: Satisfaction with life indicates an individual's overall evaluation of life, which is influenced by a range of factors including socio-demographic characteristics, psychological issues, and life experiences.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to explore the main determinants of life satisfaction among young Iranian women.

Patients and Methods: 391 young Iranian women (18-35 years) were recruited through cluster convenience sampling to participate in this cross-sectional study. Satisfaction with life (SwL) was used as the dependent variable. Demographic characteristics together with the individual items of the Persian version of the WHO QoL-BREF (World Health Organization quality of life questionnaire-brief version) were used as the independent variables and/or the determinants of SwL.

Results: The analysis showed that young Iranian women's satisfaction with life was average (19.9 ± 6.4), ranging from 5 to 35. The regression analysis identified higher income, better living conditions, higher level of leisure activities, and satisfactory sexual life as the main predictors of higher satisfaction with life. Satisfaction with life diminishes with increased age, being divorced and/or widowed and being of Lor ethnicity (vs. Fars and Turk ethnicities). On the other hand, those with higher education and/or level of religiosity had a higher satisfaction with life.

Conclusions: In transitional countries, particularly those with different social and cultural situations, identifying and enhancing the main determinants of SwL is of importance in order to improve socially cohesive and robust community.

Keywords: Satisfaction With Life, Quality of Life, Demographic Characteristics, Young Women, Iran

1. Background

A happy population is a healthy population. Whether health is measured by death rates or life expectancy, it is highly correlated with people's satisfaction with life (1). Satisfaction with life (SwL) plays a substantial role in the actual physiological and psychological health and wellbeing of individuals (2). For example, Hutchinson's study in Jamaica with 2,580 respondents showed the connection between satisfaction with life and a range of health outcomes and social behaviors (3). Ye et al. demonstrated the link between satisfaction with life and psychological health in China in 2011 among 348 participants (4). According to Piko's study of 1,114 Hungarians in 2006, there is a link between SwL and the psychosocial health of youth, including depressive and psychosomatic symptoms (5).

A great amount of empirical research has been conducted to measure satisfaction with life, and investigate why some individuals are more satisfied with their life than others, and how to promote and maintain individuals' SwL (1, 6, 7). There are different determinants of life satisfaction including socio-demographic characteristics, psychological issues, and life experiences (7). According to the literature, age, faith, income (8), health status or ill-

ness (7), and community socio-economic conditions have been shown to influence SwL (9). Although these influences could be different in different societies and according to the criteria individuals set for themselves, aggregated scores obtained through surveys of life satisfaction offer insight into the global sense of wellbeing of individuals, populations and sub-populations in given countries.

In contrast to SwL, the current study suggests that the widely used concept of quality of life (QoL) offers a window into different dimensions of life that shape SwL. This measure provides an overall indicator of QoL together with four dimensions of physical QoL, psychological QoL, social QoL, and environmental QoL. Each dimension includes multiple individual measures of QoL that offer more fine grained measures of life experiences that contribute to QoL. This instrument is a highly respected measure of QoL that has been widely used and validated for many populations including the use in Iran (8, 10). In the current study, the individual items of quality of life together with socio-demographic factors were examined as the determinants of the broader and more general concept of satisfaction with life. This analysis complements a paper published by the authors that explained the relationship between quality of life and lifestyle behaviours in young Iranian women

(8).

In order to understand the relationship between general life satisfaction and an individual's perceptions of quality in their domains of life, a bottom-up approach is used in the present study. This approach posits that perceptions of quality in various aspects of life, particularly those domains which are very important for specific groups of people in certain contexts, result in the enhancement of general life satisfaction. Hence, the way individuals think about their general life satisfaction is shaped by how they feel about different domains and/or aspects of their life (11), and differences in SwL across different countries and populations can be explained by differences in these circumstances (12).

Satisfaction with life may be different in terms of gender. However, few studies have investigated the particular predictors of life satisfaction for women (13), particularly in the Middle East region, and in countries with different social systems such as Iran. Thus, in the present study, QoL domains together with the individual items of the QoL and socio-demographic characteristics were used to explore whether they are determinants of life satisfaction, socio-demographic factors and all individual items of QoL.

2. Objectives

Therefore, the main objectives of this study were: 1) to evaluate life satisfaction among young Iranian women; and 2) to explore how demographic characteristics and quality of life items are associated with satisfaction with life in this population.

3. Patients and Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

This cross-sectional study, part of a larger program of doctoral research, was conducted among young Iranian women aged between 18 and 35 in Shiraz, Iran. According to Erikson's stages of human development, a young adult is a person aged from 18 to 35, which aligns with Iran's national statistics classification of young women (14, 15). As Shiraz has ten major districts with different individual and neighbourhood characteristics, the city was divided into ten clusters, and multi-stage cluster sampling was used for data collection across these major districts in 2013. In stage one, five of these clusters were randomly selected as sampling locations. In stage two, significant community locations were randomly chosen from within the five districts (e.g. public and private universities, public and private workplaces, religious locations, health care centres, and

public places). These different locations were used as sampling sites to promote heterogeneity and representativeness of the research sample. The approximate total population of women aged 18 - 35 in Shiraz is 500,000 (Iran census population 2006), thus estimated sample size required was 383 based on $P=50\%$ and $C.I=95\%$ and $d=5\%$ (d = width of the Interval).

A paper-based anonymous questionnaire was used for data collection, and the questionnaires were filled in by participants. To encourage completion of the surveys, five native-speaking research assistants were available to answer questions and provide assistance. The research team (principal researcher plus research assistants) attended the selected community locations for data collection. At individual sites, research team members would approach young women and request their participation in the study. After expressing interest, eligibility was determined, the purpose of the study was explained and the information sheet and informed consent were provided. Participants completed the questionnaire at the data collection location, and the research assistants provided assistance if required. A token of appreciation of a box of chocolates was provided to participants upon completion of the questionnaire.

3.2. Measurements

3.2.1. Satisfaction With Life Scale (SwL)

The SwL scale is a five item self-report measure using a seven point Likert scale (ranging from 1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree) with a summated score range from 5 (the lowest satisfaction score) to 35 (the highest satisfaction score) (16). Based on the analysis provided by a recent study by Carufel and Wright in 2012, each individual's total score was categorized as one of six levels of satisfaction with life (extremely dissatisfied (5 - 9), dissatisfied (10 - 14), slightly below average (15 - 19), average (20 - 24), satisfied (25 - 29), extremely satisfied (30-35)) (17). The reliability and validity of this scale has been confirmed in Iran (16).

3.2.2. Determinants of Satisfaction With Life

The determinants of SwL comprise two sections. The first consists of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Demographic characteristics include age, ethnicity, religion and level of religiosity, marital status, parental status and number of children. Socio-economic characteristics include education, education of partner, occupation and income. The second section is the brief version of the WHO quality of life scale (WHO QoL-BREF). This scale consists of 26 items that measure the four domains of physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environment, using 5-point Likert response formats. The

reliability and validity of this scale has been confirmed in Iran (10).

3.3. Statistical Analysis

For data analysis the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 was used. Descriptive statistics were calculated and presented as mean with standard deviation. Mean scores between groups were compared using ANOVA and T-test. Correlations were calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficients. Multiple linear regressions were also used to predict demographic and socio-economic characteristics affecting SwL, while the p value less than 0.05 was considered significant.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by human research ethics committees of the researchers' Australian university and a local partner university in Iran (HREC Ref No: PBH/38/12/HREC).

4. Results

391 out of 420 individuals, with the mean age of 27 ± 4.8 years, completed the survey, making a response rate of 93%. The majority of participants were Muslim ($n = 378$, 96%), and 158 (40.4%) had an average level of religiosity. Most of the participants were of Fars ethnicity ($n = 305$, 78%), and over three quarters had a tertiary qualification/university degree ($n = 299$, 76.4%). The summary of socio-demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

The mean level of satisfaction with life among young Iranian women was 19.9, ranging from 5 to 35, indicating an average level of SwL among this population. According to the findings, items 5 (if I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing) and 2 (the conditions of my life are excellent) had the lowest mean scores respectively (2.9 and 3.9 out of 7 respectively). A descriptive summary of each item is provided in Table 2.

According to Pearson correlations, all 24 items of QoL were all correlated with SwL. However, the strength of association differed (Table 3). In terms of demographic characteristics, there was a negative linear correlation between age and SwL, while education of partner and level of religiosity were positively associated with SwL (Table 3). According to the regression analysis (Table 4) examining the individual items contained within each of the four QoL dimensions, the main determinants of SwL included access to enough money to meet basic needs, satisfactory sexual life, satisfactory living conditions, and access to leisure activities (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$).

Findings of the Tukey Post-Hoc test indicate that there was a significant difference between SwL for some of the demographic characteristics such as ethnicity and marital

status. A better SwL was reported among Tork (mean = 21, SD = 7.6) and Fars (mean = 20, SD = 6.1) ethnicities in comparison with Lor ethnicity (mean = 17, SD = 6.3). The analysis of variance revealed a significant difference, P value = 0.024. In addition, a better SwL was reported in single (mean = 20, SD = 6.3) and married women (mean = 19, SD = 6.4) in comparison to divorced women (mean = 13, SD = 5.1). The analysis of variance revealed a significant difference, P value = 0.034.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was firstly to examine and describe satisfaction with life among young Iranian women, and secondly, to explore the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics, and individual items of QoL as determinants of SwL among this population. Overall, the study found that young Iranian women's satisfaction with life was average. The main socio-demographic characteristics influencing SwL include age, level of religiosity, education of partner, ethnicity, and marital status. In relation to the correlation between SwL and individual items of QoL, being affluent, living in a better neighborhood, higher participation in leisure activities, and satisfactory sexual life were found to be the main determinants of SwL. This can be explained by the important role that social and environment items of QoL have in the life satisfaction of young Iranian women.

A significant relationship was found between some of the demographic characteristics and SwL. A negative correlation was detected between age and SwL. This is consistent with Ohaeri et al.'s 2009 study of subjective wellbeing (18). Other studies have found that there is not a linear trend regarding the development of satisfaction with life over the life cycle. For example, an increasing body of studies suggests a U-shaped relationship between age and SwL over the life cycle. Based on the suggested U-shaped or curvilinear pattern, life satisfaction decreases to midlife, and then subsequently increases towards retirement (19-21). The main reason for this could be positive psychological states at younger and older ages. Seemingly, stress and worry remain high until the age of 50 years and decline thereafter. This is more consistent in high-income, English speaking countries. However, in other regions such as the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, life satisfaction decreases with age (22). A factor contributing to this difference could be the better support senior citizens get in high-income countries. This could be direct pensions received by the person or better health and community support services available. Although the current study suggests an inverse relationship between age and

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of SwL Items and Total SwL in A Sample of Iranian Women Aged 18 - 35, Shiraz, Iran, 2013

| N = 391 | Mean | Median | Mode | SD | Min | Max |
|---|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------|
| In most ways my life is close to my ideal | 4.2 | 5 | 5 | 1.4 | 1 | 7 |
| The conditions of my life are excellent | 3.9 | 4 | 4 | 1.4 | 1 | 7 |
| I am satisfied with life | 4.5 | 5 | 5 | 1.5 | 1 | 7 |
| So far i have gotten the important things i want in life | 4.2 | 5 | 5 | 1.5 | 1 | 7 |
| If I could live my life over, i would change almost nothing | 2.9 | 3 | 2 | 1.7 | 1 | 7 |
| Total | 19.9 | 20 | 20 | 6.4 | 3 | 35 |

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations Between Physical and Psycho-Social Items and SwL by A Sample of Iranian Women Aged 18 - 35, Shiraz, Iran, 2013^a

| Physical and Psycho-Social Items | R ^b | P Value |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Age | - 0.11 | 0.024 |
| Education of partner | 0.17 | 0.017 |
| Level of religiosity | 0.12 | 0.017 |
| Individual health | 0.379 | 0.000 |
| Physical pain | 0.50 | 0.000 |
| Medical treatment | - 0.13 | 0.012 |
| Satisfaction with sleep | - 0.15 | 0.003 |
| Work capacity | 0.20 | 0.000 |
| Getting around | 0.20 | 0.000 |
| Enough energy for everyday life | 0.20 | 0.000 |
| Concentration | 0.40 | 0.000 |
| Ability to perform | 0.33 | 0.000 |
| Health status | 0.33 | 0.000 |
| Negative feelings | 0.658 | 0.000 |
| Enjoying life | - 0.50 | 0.000 |
| Meaningful life | 0.68 | 0.000 |
| Satisfaction with body appearance | 0.60 | 0.000 |
| Personal relationship | 0.46 | 0.000 |
| Sexual life | 0.432 | 0.000 |
| Receiving support from friends | 0.36 | 0.000 |
| Physical environment | 0.29 | 0.000 |
| Public transportation system | 0.680 | 0.000 |
| Living place condition | 0.40 | 0.000 |
| Health care services | 0.40 | 0.000 |
| Leisure activities | 0.47 | 0.000 |
| Feeling safe | 0.37 | 0.000 |
| Enough money to meet the basic needs | 0.52 | 0.000 |
| Availability of needed information | 0.58 | 0.000 |

Abbreviation: SwL, satisfaction with life.

^aSwL score ranges between 1 and 7.^bCorrelations are between physical and psycho-social items and SwL which was calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficients.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analyses: Relation of Physical and Psycho-Social Itmes to SwL

| Predictors | β | B | SE | P Value | Adjusted R ² |
|---|---------|------|------|---------|-------------------------|
| Enough money to meet my needs | 0.38 | 2.50 | 0.41 | 0.000 | 0.46 |
| Satisfaction with sexual life | 0.26 | 1.80 | 0.40 | 0.012 | |
| Satisfaction with living place conditions | 0.18 | 1.40 | 0.54 | 0.001 | |
| Opportunity for leisure activities | 0.15 | 1.08 | 0.47 | 0.034 | |

Abbreviation: β , standardized regression coefficients as Beta; R2, R-squared; B, unstandardized regression coefficients; SE, Standard Error.

SwL, it is not possible to compare this result with the research suggesting the curvilinear relationship, as the population age range of the present study was 18 - 35. Our finding of an inverse relationship is interesting, and requires further investigation, perhaps through longitudinal population cohort studies, particularly in countries such as Iran and among women with special socio-cultural conditions.

Level of religiosity was reported as one of the main demographic characteristics affecting satisfaction with life. This result was confirmed by other studies (23, 24). For example, Starks and Hughey (2003) conducted a study of life satisfaction among 147 African American women from six states in the USA. This study reported a correlation between level of religiosity and satisfaction with life (24). Borooah (2006) also found that self-reported happiness depends on faith in a deity (25). These findings indicate that having a higher level of religiosity and participation in religious occasions anxiety and stress in life (8).

SwL was significantly different for different ethnicities in the current study. For example, Lor ethnicity had a lower level of SwL than Fars and Tork ethnicities in the population of this study. The relevance of ethnicity has been confirmed by other studies. For instance, ethnicity has been shown to significantly influence living standards, achievements, and life as a whole. According to several studies, ethnicity, particularly of minority groups, tends to correlate with social inequity (26). Verkuyten (2008) showed that the life satisfaction of minority groups (Turkish-Dutch) was lower than that of the ethnic Dutch (11). According to a US study by Barger et al. (2009), satisfaction with life was lower among Hispanics and blacks compared with whites (27). The low level of life satisfaction in minority ethnic groups among young Iranian women (Tork, and Lor versus Fars) in the present study as well as those differences found in the literature may be related to the geographic context including disparities in the distribution of resources and facilities by location and among different ethnicities and groups.

Our study found that young Iranian women who are married and those who have a satisfactory sexual life reported a higher general SwL. According to Stutzer and Frey

(2006), marriage has a very significant influence on the wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and happiness of individuals including both men and women. With marriage, people are generally involved in a reciprocal situation with strong commitment. Marriage theory identifies the protective aspect of marriage, including love, recognition, enhanced self-esteem and security (28). These benefits have been explored in diverse disciplines including sociology and psychology (28, 29). One of the key aspects of marriage influencing satisfaction with life and happiness is related to satisfactory sexual relations, and this was one of the main items of QoL in the current study found to be influencing young Iranian women's SwL. It should be noted that satisfactory sexual life is not just about marriage, as some studies show that those individuals who cohabit with a partner reported to be happier than those who live alone. However, this varies according to social and cultural context of societies (28).

Although sexual life is reported as one of the main predictors of life satisfaction of young Iranian women, only a small percentage of this population reported being satisfied with their sexual life (13%). There could be different reasons for this issue, including social and cultural restrictions as well as education. For example, according to a qualitative study by Ahmadi in 2003, there are sexual boundaries in Iranian-Islamic norms that include a traditional belief in women's obligation to be passive and to serve men's sexual desire (30). Another qualitative study conducted by Whelan et al. in 2008 indicates that women's sexual obedience after marriage is symbolic and idealized in Muslim societies as an indicator of self-respect and modesty. These social and cultural restrictions could be strong influences on women's sexual education and consequent beliefs and sexual behavior (31). Hence, recognition of these cultural and social boundaries could assist policy makers in measures to enhance SwL among this population.

Socio-economic factors such as income, living in a wealthy neighbourhood and having access to more leisure activities were found to be the main determinants of SwL among young Iranian women. According to Spiers and

Walker (2008), access to and/or having chances of participation in leisure activities is one of the main predictors of happiness and subjective wellbeing, even more important than job satisfaction (26). A study that explored life satisfaction among Iranian women in urban areas suggested that any changes in individual socio-economic factors such as educational level, employment status, and opportunity to participate in leisure activities, directly affect women's general satisfaction and therefore affect Iranian society as a whole (32). In addition, studies report that income is positively correlated with SwL (4, 33), and the relationship between SwL and income is approximately log-linear and does not diminish as income rises (34). According to these studies, people with higher levels of income reported higher levels of SwL. Furthermore, people in richer countries with higher GDPs experienced greater levels of wellbeing than people in low-income countries (34, 35). Therefore, economic growth and enhancement in SwL is clearly correlated. This is in agreement with the assumption as well as the findings of the present study. This indicates the significant role of socio-economic status as well as wealthy neighborhood as determinants of SwL for young Iranian women. This could be the result of more pathways being available to young Iranian women with higher socio-economic status resulting in better access to facilities and/or resources.

There are several limitations to this study that need to be considered when interpreting the results. Although this study was conducted in one of the biggest cities of Iran (Shiraz) in different areas, the sample may not be representative of other cities in Iran and should be extrapolated to other cities with caution. Further research is required in Iran as well as other societies with similar socio-economic situations, particularly focusing on variables such as unemployment rates, inflation rates, and gender-based inequality, and their contribution to SwL.

This study highlights the positive relationship between satisfaction with life, and individual items or indicators of QoL. In addition, socio-demographic factors, particularly the socio-economic characteristics of individuals, age, level of religiosity, and ethnicity are found to influence their satisfaction of life. Therefore, the life satisfaction of young Iranian women in the current study is clearly related not only to their demographic characteristics, but also to the social and physical characteristics of their environment and the place they live. This summary finding is significant as it highlights that in transitional countries, particularly those with different social and cultural situations, enhancing the SwL ultimate results in more socially cohesive and robust community.

Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: Asiyeh Salehi has contributed in study concept and design, acquisition of data, statistical analysis and interpretation of data, and drafting of the manuscript. Asiyeh Salei, Neil Harris, Elisabeth Coyne, and Bernadette Sebar have contributed in critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content. Neil Harris, Elisabeth Coyne, and Bernadette Sebar have contributed in administrative, technical, and material support, and study supervision. All authors have participated in the work and have seen and approved this original article prior to submission.

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Table 1. Socio-Demographic and Socio-Economic Variables of Young Iranian Women Aged Between 18 - 35 (N = 391), Shiraz, Iran, 2013^a

| Variables | No. (%) |
|---|------------|
| Ethnicity | |
| Fars | 305 (78) |
| Tork | 39 (10) |
| Lor | 40 (10) |
| Other | 7 (2) |
| Total | 391 (100) |
| Level of religiosity | |
| Very religious (Following religious practices very often/often) | 18 (3.3) |
| Moderately religious (following religious practices occasionally) | 158 (41.2) |
| Not very religious (following religious practices rarely) | 136 (35.5) |
| Not religious at all (never following religious practices) | 71 (18.5) |
| Total | 383 (100) |
| Education | |
| Postgraduate | 60 (15.3) |
| Degree (e.g. bachelor and undergraduate degrees) | 239 (61.2) |
| Diploma/certificate | 73 (18.7) |
| Secondary school | 14 (3.5) |
| Primary school | 4 (1.0) |
| Total | 390 (100) |
| Occupation | |
| Managerial | 37 (9.7) |
| Professional | 51 (13.4) |
| Clerical | 85 (22.4) |
| Labors | 6 (1.5) |
| Home Duty | 68 (17.9) |
| Unemployed | 36 (9.4) |
| Student | 96 (25.3) |
| Total | 379 (100) |
| Type of occupation | |
| Government | 61 (31.6) |
| Private | 132 (68.3) |
| Total | 193 (100) |
| Marital status | |
| Single | 192 (50.2) |
| Married | 178 (46.5) |
| Divorced | 7 (1.8) |
| Widow | 5 (1.3) |
| Total | 382 (100) |
| Education of partner | |
| Postgraduate | 20 (10.9) |

| | |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Degree | 88 (48) |
| Diploma/certificate | 56 (30.6) |
| Secondary school | 9 (4.9) |
| Primary school | 10 (5.4) |
| Total | 183 (100) |
| Arental status | |
| No children | 87 (40.6) |
| Children | 127 (59.3) |
| Total | 214 (100) |
| Number of children | |
| 0 | 87 (40.6) |
| 1 | 69 (32.2) |
| 2 | 41 (19.1) |
| 3 | 17 (7.9) |
| Total | 214 (100) |

^aThe percentage was calculated without considering missing data.