

LIFE SATISFACTION BY DEMOGRAPHY IN LOW INCOME RESIDENTIAL AREAS: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Life satisfaction within various South African contexts remains an important subject for both management and research practitioners. This importance emanates from the view that life satisfaction is an enduring indicator of both social and economic stability in any given country. This study investigated the life satisfaction of the residents of three low income residential areas in South Africa. The study was conducted by means of a quantitative research design using the cross sectional survey approach. The sample was composed of 298 individuals drawn from Sebokeng, 285 individuals drawn from Sharpville and 402 individuals from Siculo townships, which are all located in Southern Gauteng. The results of the study showed low levels of life satisfaction in Sebokeng and Siculo, with respondents from Sharpville showing marginally higher levels of life satisfaction. Regression analyses revealed that age, employment status and educational level predicted life satisfaction while marital status and gender did not predict life satisfaction. The study provides a comparative overview of the current trends in life satisfaction amongst township residents who are an important cohort of society in developing economies such as South Africa. Using this information, government may initiate appropriate measures to bolster the life satisfaction of low income groups.

JEL Classification: I30

Keywords: Life satisfaction, low income group, Sharpville, Sebokeng, Siculo

1. Introduction

The development of South Africa since 1994 has brought a number of socio-economic challenges that continue to bedevil the country. Typical examples of such challenges include rising unemployment, service delivery backlogs, race relations, social welfare and inequality, amongst others (Ebrahim, Botha and Snowball, 2013). Low life satisfaction levels amongst residents of townships have emerged as a consequence of the socio-economic inconsistencies facing South Africa (Bhorat, 2007). Although the actual causes of low life satisfaction levels in South Africa may

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be debatable, it is difficult to unbundle the issue from social and economic factors (IMF, 2009). This state of affairs has brought with it a constellation of countrywide headaches that include intensified poverty, an escalating crime rate, political instability and entrenched service delivery protests (Burger and von Fintel, 2009). Consequently, there has been an increased realisation that South Africa has problems of significant proportions, which require immediate solutions.

In response to the rising socio-economic ills facing the country, the South African government responded by initiating a number of interventions such as regulatory reforms, social welfare grants, working with other countries to build an integrated African economy, private public partnerships, as well as policy initiatives such as the Industrial Action Plan and, more recently, the National Development Plan (Burger, Van der Berg and Von Fintel, 2013). These initiatives were meant to address the social and economic challenges by stimulating economic activities in order to boost the standard of living in the country (Manuel, 2013). Unfortunately, the programmes have largely yielded unimpressive results, as demonstrated by the negative statistics. More cutting edge interventions are therefore needed to combat the challenge of low life satisfaction levels and to stimulate economic prosperity in the rainbow nation.

Life satisfaction within various South African contexts remains a persistent topic for researchers, and this may be attributed to the importance of life satisfaction in the socio-economic development of any country. As mentioned by Botha and Booysen (2012), high levels of life satisfaction indicate the prevalence of prosperity in various domains of life, whereas low satisfaction with life gives a signal of instability within the same domains. Owing to its importance, the body of literature focusing on life satisfaction in the context of South Africa continues to grow (e.g. Bookwalter, Fitch-Fleischmann and Dalenberg, 2011; Ebrahim, Botha and Snowball, 2013; Schatz, Gómez-Olivé, Ralston, Menken and Tollman, 2012). Despite this growth, there remains several research gaps in the subject, particularly on recent studies that concentrate on investigating the life satisfaction of low-income groups in South Africa. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies that compare the life satisfaction of people living within several geographic contexts in South Africa. These research gaps presented a fundamental impetus for this study. This study was aimed at the purpose of investigating the life satisfaction of low income groups in South Africa. Unlike previous studies whose scope was limited to individuals in one geographic area, this study directed attention to three low income residential areas, which are Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo. This created room for empirical comparisons between these geographic locations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction may be perceived as the degree to which people find the lives they lead as being rich, meaningful and full of a generally high quality (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The concept of life satisfaction has been associated with either an individual's state of mind or a life that goes well for the person leading it (Larsen and Prizmic, 2008). This implies that life satisfaction concerns what benefits a person, is good for him/her, makes that person better off, serves his/her interests, or is desirable for him/her. An individual who has high life satisfaction is generally expected to be

faring well, doing well, fortunate, or in an enviable condition (Nettle, 2005). Some researchers distinguish between the terms 'happiness', 'subjective well-being' and "life satisfaction", but it is generally considered proper to use these terms interchangeably (Posel and Casale, 2011). In terms of its measurement, traditional economic indicators such as gross domestic product have long been employed as indicators of life satisfaction. However, there is growing consensus that such measures are inappropriate for assessing individual levels of well-being and progress, since important non-monetary measures are not taken into account (Natoli and Zuhair, 2011). Based on these assertions, combinations of socio-economic indicators, which combine both monetary and non-monetary measures, have been adopted as indicators of life satisfaction in development economics research (Tsai, 2011).

2.2. Antecedents to life satisfaction

There are various factors that serve as antecedents to life satisfaction. Antecedents to life satisfaction include attachment or love (Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Koohsar and Bonab, 2011), character (Porubanova-Norquist, 2012), emotional intelligence (Extremera and Fernáandez-Berrocal, 2005); physical activity (Bastug and Duman, 2010), self-esteem (Abolghasemi and Varaniyab, 2010) and resilience (McKnight *et al.*, 2002). Some studies (Hinks and Gruen, 2007; Møller and Radloff, 2010) found that employed people have a higher life satisfaction than unemployed people. In terms of age, a number of scholars (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2009; Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy, 2007) found that elderly people experience higher life satisfaction than younger people. With reference to education, a ground-breaking study conducted by life satisfaction research gurus Feldman (2010), reported that those with higher education tend to have higher life satisfaction. It has also been observed that married people are more satisfied with life than those who are divorced, separated, single or widowed (Graham, 2014).

There has been extensive debate on the influence of gender on life satisfaction. This controversy is exemplified by the contradictory results of some previous studies. For instance, a study conducted by Kapteyn, Smith and van Soest, (2009) reported that women have higher life satisfaction than men. However, in a study by Stevenson and Wolfers (2009), it emerged that men had higher life satisfaction than women. Still another study conducted by Mahadea and Rawat (2008) concluded that gender does not influence life satisfaction amongst South Africans. It is an important supposition then that there exists no universal unanimity as to the influence of gender on life satisfaction.

Health is considered to be amongst the most significant drivers of life satisfaction, with individuals in a good state of health generally experiencing higher levels of life satisfaction than those with poor health (Graham, 2014). With regard to religion, it has been noted that in South Africa, there is a positive interplay between religion and life satisfaction, with those individuals who attach value to religion reporting higher life satisfaction levels than those who are not religious (Rule, 2007). In addition, life satisfaction is influenced by an individual's geographic area of residence. For instance, the findings of a study conducted by Graham and Felton (2006) reveal that rural dwellers have higher levels of life satisfaction than urban dwellers. It is also reported that people who earn higher per-capita income experience higher levels of life satisfaction than low income earners (Posel and Casale, 2011; Powdthavee, 2003). It appears then that various factors play a critical role in shaping the life satisfaction of people in different spheres and stages of life.

2.3. Outcomes of life satisfaction

The outcomes of high life satisfaction seem to be more constructive than detrimental. Among the youths, a study by Lippman *et al.* (2012) found that life satisfaction is negatively related to outcomes such as substance use, depression, involvement in violence, and delinquency and it is positively related to good grades at school. A research by Archontaki *et al.* (2012) found that measures of life satisfaction such as optimism and positive affect predict long-term health status and mortality. Akinin and Norton (2009) provide evidence that interventions that are successful in improving life satisfaction can have beneficial effects on various aspects of health, with examples including meditation and relaxation training which have both been found to increase positive effects and to reduce blood pressure. Diener (2008) concluded that people with higher levels of life satisfaction live up to 10 years longer than those with poor life satisfaction. Koivumaa-Honkanen *et al.* (2004) further report that people with high life satisfaction experience less injury, work disability, as well as reduced male disease mortality and injury mortality. These insights add credence to the positive effect of life satisfaction on health and mortality.

In the workplace, the benefits of life satisfaction amongst employees are immense. Rehman *et al.* (2010) highlight that employees with higher life satisfaction correspondingly have greater resilience to stress, exhibit higher levels of energy, focus, stamina, performance and productivity. Saraceno *et al.* (2005) add that satisfied employees are more interested, motivated and engaged with work. Jones *et al.* (2007) found deeper levels of job satisfaction and fulfilment amongst employees who had higher life satisfaction. Chou and Robert (2008) further observed that more positive working relationships as demonstrated by feelings of camaraderie were more pronounced within circles of employees who were satisfied with life. Yin-Fah *et al.* (2010) found that life satisfaction positively correlated with employee morale, which facilitates better retention of staff. Warsi *et al.* (2009) found that life satisfaction predicted lower absence rates, reduced intention to quit and employee turnover, which results in significant cost savings for the organisation. It has also been noted by DeFour and Brown (2006) that employees who feel well and happy tend to make fewer workplace injury claims. Tangen (2005) further states that having satisfied employees, stimulates a harmonious and constructive industrial relations climate within the organisation. Therefore, having employees who are satisfied with their lives results in a greater return on the organisation's staffing investment.

3. Research Method

3.1. Delimitation

In terms of its geo-spatial context, this research study was conducted in Southern Gauteng, with its foci being directed to individuals who are based in three townships, specifically Sebokeng, Sicelo and Sharpville, which are all located within the Sedibeng District Municipality. The municipality has an estimated population of nearly eight million inhabitants, its most widely spoken language is Sesotho and its administrative capital is the town of Vereeniging (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

3.2. Design

The cross-sectional survey approach (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter, 2006) was used in the empirical portion of the study. The cross sectional survey

approach was deemed to be appropriate for the study, because it easily facilitates the collection of data from large groups of respondents, is inclusive in the number of variables that can be studied, requires minimum investment to develop and administer, and is relatively easy for making generalisations (Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griifin, 2009).

3.3. Sample

For the purpose of this study the population was taken to be made up of the collective residents of the three selected low income residential townships in South Africa. These results show that the estimated populations of Sebokeng, Sicelo and Sharpville are 218515 people (or 61000 households), 15200 (or 4000 households) and 37 599 people (or 11000 households), respectively (Statistics South Africa, 2014). This totals to an estimated collective population of 271 314 (or 76 000 households) in the three townships. In this study the non-probability sampling approach using the convenience sampling techniques was adopted in order to select the sampling elements from the target population. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Quinlan, 2011). Use of the convenience sampling technique was appropriate since there was no sample frame or list from which the names and exact locations of the respondents could be obtained. The resultant sample sizes after collection of the questionnaires were N=402 respondents for Sicelo, N=298 respondents for Sharpville and N=285 respondents for Sebokeng. The demographic characteristics of respondents drawn from the three townships are stated in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Categories	Sebokeng		Sharpville		Sicelo	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Marital status	Married	84	28.2	101	35.4	138	34.3
	Not married	214	71.8	184	64.6	264	65.7
Totals		298	100	285	100	402	100
Age group	18-35	121	40.4	100	35.2	220	54.7
	36-50	134	45.0	146	51.4	118	29.3
	51+	43	14.6	69	13.4	64	16
Totals		298	100	285	100	402	100
Gender	Male	165	55.4	146	51.2	228	56.6
	Female	133	44.6	139	48.8	174	43.4
Totals		298	100	285	100	402	100
Employment status	Employed	183	61.3	150	52.5	199	49.6
	Unemployed	115	38.7	135	47.5	203	50.4
Totals		298	100	285	100	402	100
Educational Level	No formal education	26	8.7	26	9.1	38	9.5
	High School	133	44.6	128	44.9	178	44.3
	Post-high school	139	46.6	131	46.0	186	46.3
Totals		298	100	285	100	402	100

In Sebokeng, nearly 72% (n=214) of the respondents were unmarried, whereas in Sharpville 65% (n=184) were not married and in Sicelo 66% (n=264) were unmarried. With reference to age groups, in Sebokeng the highest number of respondents (45%; n=134) were in the 36 to 50 years age group. An analogous trend was observed in Sharpville where 51% (n=146) of the respondents were in the 36 to 50 years age group. A different pattern was observed in Sicelo, where the majority of respondents (55%; n=220) were in the 18 to 35 age group. In addition, there were more male respondents than females in all three locations (55%; n=165 for Sebokeng, 51%; n=146 for Sharpville, 57%; n=228 for Sicelo). In terms of employment status, a majority of the respondents in Sebokeng (61%; n=183) and Sharpville (53%; n= 150) were employed. However, there were almost equal numbers of employed and unemployed respondents (50%; n=402) in Sicelo. With regard to educational level, in Sebokeng, most of the respondents (47%; n=139) were in possession of a post-high school qualification. In Sharpville nearly 46% (n=131) of the respondents were in possession of a post-high school qualification while in Sicelo, post-high school qualification holders were the highest number amongst respondents (46%; n=186).

3.4. Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data were collected using the five item validated Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, 1985). The scale is composed of the following five items:

- i. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- ii. The conditions of my life are excellent.
- iii. I am satisfied with my life.
- iv. So far I have got the important things I want in life.
- v. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Response options on the Satisfaction with Life Scale were configured in a 4-point, forced-choice format Likert Scale, where the neutral/middle option of “neither agree nor disagree” was unavailable to respondents. Reliability for the Satisfaction with Life Scale as measured using the Cronbach’s Alpha Estimate of Reliability was 0.873, which surpasses the minimum threshold of 0.7 recommended by scholars that include Bonnet (2010), Cronbach, Shavelson and Richard (2004) and Eisinga, Te-Grotenhuis and Pelzer (2013), amongst others.

After developing the questionnaire, 500 copies were distributed in each of the three townships in November 2014 to the conveniently selected sample of respondents. The researcher administered the questionnaires in person with the assistance of a trained research assistants who are students at a traditional university located in Southern Gauteng Province, South Africa. To explain the aim of the study, a cover letter was attached to the questionnaire. Also, respondents were requested to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study.

3.5. Statistical Analysis

The collected questionnaires were screened before the data was captured on a Microsoft Excel computer package. The Excel document was then imported into the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 23.0) where it was coded in preparation for data analysis. Thereafter, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the captured data.

4. Research Results

This section was reserved for the analysis of the life satisfaction levels of people in Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo. This procedure was in line with the aim of the study, which is to investigate the life satisfaction of residents in low income residential areas in South Africa. In this section, responses of participants to the five individual items of the Life Satisfaction Scale are analysed, with the results considered to be showcasing the levels of life satisfaction in each township.

4.1. Levels of life Satisfaction in Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo

Table 2 reports on the summarised results for life satisfaction in Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo. In the Table, only two categories (dissatisfied vs satisfied) are recognised for the five items in the Satisfaction with Life Questionnaire. To create these two categories, all responses coded as 1 and 2 (strongly disagree and disagree) on the Likert scale were categorised under 'dissatisfied' whereas all responses coded as 3 and 4 (agree and strongly agree) on the Likert scale were categorised under 'satisfied'.

Table 2: Summary Report for Life Satisfaction in Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo

Item	Name of Township	N	Dissatisfied n + (%)	Satisfied n + (%)
B1	Sebokeng	298	139 (46.6)	159 (53.4)
	Sharpville	285	131(46)	154(54)
	Sicelo	402	145(36.1)	257(64.8)
B2	Sebokeng	298	198(66.7)	100(33.6)
	Sharpville	285	122(42.8)	163(57.2)
	Sicelo	402	251(62.5)	151(37.5)
B3	Sebokeng	298	191(64)	107(36)
	Sharpville	285	116(40.7)	169(59.3)
	Sicelo	402	226(56.2)	176(43.8)
B4	Sebokeng	298	201(67.5)	97(32.5)
	Sharpville	285	137(48.8)	148(51.1)
	Sicelo	402	224(55.7)	178(44.3)
B5	Sebokeng	298	160(53.7)	138(46.3)
	Sharpville	285	84(29.4)	201(70.5)
	Sicelo	402	257(63.9)	145(36.1)
Totals	Sebokeng	298	59.6%	40.3%
	Sharpville	285	41.0%	59.0%
	Sicelo	402	55.0%	45.0%

Scale: 1&2 = Dissatisfied; 3 & 4: Satisfied

With regard to the first question, (In most way my life is close to ideal), the majority of respondents from all three townships were satisfied. This is supported by the fact that 53% of the respondents from Sebokeng, 54% from Sharpville and 65% from Sicelo attested that their lives were close to ideal. However with regard to

question two (The conditions of my life are excellent), only respondents from Sharpville (57%) indicated that they were satisfied with life, while the majority of respondents from Sebokeng (67%) and Sicelo (63%) indicated that the conditions of their lives were not excellent. With reference to question three (I am satisfied with my life) Sharpville was the only township with most respondents (59%) indicating that they were satisfied with life. From Sebokeng, only 36% and from Sicelo, 43% of the respondents, representing a minority, indicated that they were satisfied with life. Consistent with this established pattern, in terms of the fourth question (So far I have got the important things I want in life), only Sharpville had the largest number of respondents (51%) who were satisfied. In contrast, 33% of the respondents from Sebokeng and 44% of respondents from Sicelo indicated that they had not yet got the things they needed in life, which signals dissatisfaction with life in this area. Finally, with respect to question five (If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing), the response from Sharpville was resounding, with 71% of the respondents affirming the statement. Conversely, a majority of the respondents from Sebokeng (54%) as well as from Sicelo (64%) indicated that given the chance, they were willing to change some aspects of their lives.

An analysis of the overall results (all questionnaire responses on the Life Satisfaction Scale combined) for all five items show that in Sebokeng, almost 60% of the responses indicated dissatisfaction while 40% indicated satisfaction with life. In Sharpville, 41% responses indicated dissatisfaction with life as opposed to 59% that indicated satisfaction with life. In Sicelo, 55% of the responses were inclined towards dissatisfaction as opposed to 45% that were inclined towards satisfaction. By implication, the highest satisfaction with life was found amongst residents of Sharpville (59% satisfaction), followed by Sicelo (45% satisfaction) with Sebokeng occupying the bottom position (40% satisfaction).

5. Regression Analysis for Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo

Regression analysis was conducted to verify the influence of demographic factors on life satisfaction in each of the three township locations. Using the enter method of regression, the five demographic variables (marital status, age, gender, employment status and educational level), which were the independent variables, were regressed against the dependent variable, i.e. life satisfaction. This procedure was done separately for each of the three townships, namely Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo. Since all demographic factors were categorical variables, they were entered into the regression models dichotomously (coded 0-1), implying that only two categories were recognised in the regression analyses. When the results obtained in the regression analyses for Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo are presented together in one table, it is possible to get an overview of the overall permutations in the association between demographic factors and life satisfaction. This is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Summaries for Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo

Variables	Location	Regression Results (β)	Significance (P)
Marital status → Life satisfaction	Sebokeng	0.058	0.170
	Sharpville	0.061	0.337
	Sicelo	0.064	0.192
Age → Life satisfaction	Sebokeng	0.369	0.019
	Sharpville	0.135	0.143
	Sicelo	0.105	0.094
Gender → Life satisfaction	Sebokeng	0.039	0.307
	Sharpville	0.044	0.725
	Sicelo	0.024	0.362
Employment → Life satisfaction	Sebokeng	0.528	0.002
	Sharpville	0.641	0.005
	Sicelo	0.522	0.007
Educational Level → Life satisfaction	Sebokeng	0.270	0.000
	Sharpville	0.371	0.000
	Sicelo	0.261	0.000

* Significant at .05 level i.e. the Null Hypothesis is rejected if the P value is less than the significance level

As revealed in Table 3, in all three townships, all demographic factors with the exception of marital status and gender strongly predicted life satisfaction. Employment emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction and gender emerged as the weakest predictor of life satisfaction life.

6. Discussion

There were several observations made on the levels of life satisfaction that emerged from the analysis of the collected data in this study. The first observation is the variation in the perceptions of life satisfaction between residents of Sharpeville on the one hand, and those in Sebokeng and Sicelo on the other. While there was an optimistic life satisfaction outlook by the residents of Sharpeville, there was a very negative viewpoint emerging from Sebokeng and Sicelo. The greater number of respondents from Sebokeng and Sicelo indicated that their lives were not close to ideal (imperfect), the conditions of their lives were poor, they still had a lot to achieve and given the chance they would prefer to change some things in their lives. These perspectives are microcosmic of gross dissatisfaction with life and are at variance with the views of those from Sharpville, who exhibited satisfactory levels of satisfaction with life. This result is interesting in that it demonstrates that individuals residing under similar circumstances can experience different life satisfaction levels. Given that residents of informal settlements within the three townships were recruited to be part of the sample in this study, with some of them reporting that they were experiencing high life satisfaction levels, questions may be placed on the exact influence of geographic location or type of settlement on life satisfaction. In other words, in certain cases, the place of residence influences people differently, depending on the influence of other factors.

The second observation, as revealed through the results obtained from Sebokeng and Siculo, is that life satisfaction in a township can be low, with residents embracing negative feelings about the state of affairs. This can be attributed to several reasons. Many of the homes in South African townships are illegally built on land that is owned by someone else, leading to the non-availability of basic amenities such as electricity, roads, sanitary facilities and clean water, among others (Swart, 2013). Since some of the houses are built illegally, formal construction standards are disregarded, making these structures vulnerable during times of natural occurrences such as heavy rainfall and/or flooding (Jeffery, 2010). Shack fires are also a common occurrence, while safety issues are a major concern in most South African townships, with frequent, if not regular, bombardments of acts of criminality that claim many lives each year (Managa, 2012). For instance, a study by Masitsa (2011) found that both teachers and learners are not safe in their schools, either during or after school hours, which tends to compromise the quality of education in townships. Moreover, social and political unrest is also commonplace in townships. For instance, almost all violent service delivery protests that characterise modern-day South Africa are normally concentrated in the townships (Swart, 2013). The anti-foreigner campaigns that started in Soweto in January 2015 and later spread to other parts of South Africa, were largely attributed to poor life satisfaction levels amongst residents (Associated Press, 2015). The dense population coupled with unfavourable conditions provides fertile ground for such activities and could have a further detrimental effect on the life satisfaction of residents of such townships. Therefore, the unconducive and undesirable conditions in townships have a counteractive effect on the life satisfaction of residents.

The third observation is that despite the aforementioned views, this empirical research challenges certain traditionally accepted views and stereotypes about township lives. Conventionally, the widely espoused view among many was that township life was substandard, which led to the natural anticipation that there was less satisfaction with life in townships. This view has since changed as noted in this study and cannot be espoused holistically. For example, there have been massive infrastructural developments in townships, with townhouses and other modern cluster houses, as well as state of the art shopping malls that have been built in townships (Chipkin, 2012). Examples of such developments include Maponya Mall in Soweto, clusters of townhouse developments spread across West Rand in Johannesburg, and Makro and President Hyper shopping facilities in Sharpville. The effect of such developments is to alter the social landscape of South Africa in that many black middle class people have moved into such townships in order to take advantage of the availability of such facilities. In addition, for many black South Africans, township life provides encounters of close companionship that is so important to everyday life (Mbembe, 2008). This is because people in townships live in close spaces and have an opportunity to share many of the facilities that are available, which provides for the creation of close family and community bonds (Jones, 2013). As an example, a common phenomenon is the meetings that are held during weekends where residents have the opportunity to socialise and enjoy grilled meat (braai) together (Jones, 2013). Such activities could have a positive effect on the life satisfaction of residents in townships. It also becomes difficult to endorse the traditional view that life experiences for people in townships are characterised by economic depravity and social dysfunction.

Another interesting observation is that on the one hand, residents of Sebokeng and Sicelo mentioned that their lives were close to ideal, while on the other hand they refuted that the conditions of their lives were excellent. This scenario is ironic in the sense that it is expected that people who claim to have an ideal life would naturally regard the conditions of their lives to be excellent as well. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, a closer look at the meanings of the terms ideal and excellent reveals very subtle but important differences whose effect cannot be underestimated. The Oxford English Dictionary (2000:391) defines the term ideal as perfect, visionary or desirable but unlikely to become a reality. The same dictionary defines the term excellent as 'extremely good, superior and outstanding' (p 269). This implies that an ideal state is an imaginary one (only exists in the mind) that does not actually exist (it is what is desired for the future). With reference to Sebokeng and Sicelo, what residents perceive in their minds appears to be the ideal (they have a clear mental picture of what they desire), but they acknowledge that the actual situation on the ground is far from that. A second possible explanation for the variance in the responses given could be that the other question focused on the 'conditions' of life, in contrast with the first question which focused on the general idealness of life. Conditions usually refer to the factors or circumstances influencing the manner in which people live or work (Saxby, 2012). This possibly implies that as respondents gave answers to the question on conditions of their lives, their primary focus could have been on various external factors such as the economy, resources and living conditions, among others, which are presently in a bad state. Hence their responses on this matter were negative.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is clear that sources of satisfaction with life vary for different persons depending on the diversity of their needs and wants. The study revealed that residents of Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo, which are all classified as townships, experience different levels of life satisfaction as determined by their different needs and wants. Therefore, township life satisfaction experiences in contemporary South Africa are not homogeneous.

In considering the results of the regression analyses, both conventional and unconventional patterns were observed in this study. For instance, the results of the association between marital status and life satisfaction contradicted the established trends. Available literature (e.g. Diener *et al.*, 2000; Easterlin, 2001; Layard, 2006; Stutzer and Frey, 2006) validates that the status of being married is generally associated with higher life satisfaction levels and happiness than other similar forms of relationships. This is attributed to the ability of marriage to provide additional sources of self-esteem for instance, by providing an escape from stress in other parts of one's life, in particular one's job (Willitts *et al.*, 2004), the opportunity of gaining from a supportive and intimate relationship from the significant other (Stanca, 2009) and providing important protective barriers against the stressful consequences of external threats (Musick and Bumpass, 2012). With regard to age, the results of the present study validate previous results that show that age does predict life satisfaction. A u-shaped age effect is confirmed by several studies (Easterlin, 2006; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Oswald, 1997; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008). This depicts that life satisfaction is at its lowest during middle age (between 30 and 50 years) and highest during early life and later life. Evidence gathered from a number of studies (Frijters and Beaton, 2008; Gwozdz and Sousa-Poza, 2010; Stone *et al.*, 2010) suggests that people become more satisfied when they retire. This confirms that age has an influence on life satisfaction.

With reference to gender, the results of the current study contradict the universal perspective that women experience higher life satisfaction levels than men throughout the life span. A number of studies (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008) found that women are happier and more satisfied with life than men. Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher (2013) also confirm the universal finding that women are more satisfied in life than men. In terms of employment status, the results of the present study are consistent with previous research results (e.g. Carroll, 2005; Knabe and Ratzel, 2011; Opocher and Steedman, 2009). As regards educational level, the results of this study are in sync with established research conducted in international contexts (Amaiike, 2006; Cuñado and Pérez-de-Gracia, 2012; Daukantaite and Zukauskienė, 2006; Frey, 2008; Özer and Sackes, 2011; Peiró, 2006; Salinas-Jiménez *et al.*, 2011) where it emerged that education was positively and significantly related to life satisfaction.

That employment status emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction across all three townships is not surprising, given that unemployment is usually accompanied by extreme destitution, which is often aggravated by the inability of governments to support such people with social grants and other forms of unemployment benefits (Contogiannis, 2007). Joblessness leads to loss of income, decreased self-esteem, a reduced feeling that life is under control, loss of friends/social connections and loss of personal status and identity (Clark *et al.*, 2010). It is logical then that respondents attached greater significance to employment than other demographic factors in this study.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the levels of life satisfaction amongst low income groups in South Africa. In order to achieve this aim, the Satisfaction with Life Scale was used in eliciting information from selected residents of Sebokeng, Sharpville and Sicelo townships, followed by the use of descriptive statistics and regression analysis in the analysis of the collected data. There was a slightly expectant and positive perception towards life satisfaction in Sharpville, whereas in Sebokeng and Sicelo there was a very negative atmosphere on the same matter. This generates the conclusion that people residing in different townships in South Africa may experience different life satisfaction levels. These variations make it imperative to consider each geographic cluster separately when reflecting on life satisfaction experiences. In addition, the results obtained in Sharpville that indicate somewhat satisfactory life satisfaction levels challenge the view that township life in South Africa is generally deplorable. This attracts the conclusion that residing in a South African township, or one that is usually considered to be a low income area, does not necessarily lead to a miserable life. There are many people in such areas who continue to experience high levels of life satisfaction as shown by the results obtained in Sharpville. With regard to regression analysis, age, employment status and educational level predicted life satisfaction across all three townships while marital status and gender were not statistically significant. Residents of low income areas attach more significance to employment status than the other demographic factors considered in this study.

The study contributes to both theory and practice in the field of development economics. In terms of theoretical relevance, as highlighted by Oswald and Powdthavee (2008), life satisfaction is an enduring indicator of both socio and economic stability in any given country. Schatz *et al.* (2012) further maintain that life satisfaction is an important economic indicator, since higher life satisfaction correlates with standard of living and economic prosperity. This sheer significance signals that research on life satisfaction is merited on a perpetual basis, so that new evidence and knowledge can be generated, which can be used to update what is already known about the concept. Findings from this study may be used as a reference point by government authorities in developing policies and strategies for the sustenance of people in South Africa. By focusing on low income groups, this study acts as an empirical voice for this cohort, providing valid information which governance authorities can manipulate for the benefit of underprivileged groups.

With respect to practical relevance, given that life satisfaction is an important indicator of socio-economic well-being (Oswald and Powdthavee, 2008) it is important for those in positions of socio-economic governance to have a more informed understanding of the levels of life satisfaction amongst the people they govern, as this facilitates improved decision-making. Decision making that is based on assumptions may not be effective in addressing societal and economic problems. This being the case, this study provides social and economic development planners in government with prototypical insights on the existing levels of life satisfaction in South African townships. Other non-governmental organisations such as churches and aid institutions can also refer to the study for information on the life satisfaction of people in townships. The information in this study provides the ammunition that is requisite in formulating policies and other initiatives requisite in meeting the socio-economic needs of township communities. Should such initiatives be implemented, a ripple effect becomes inevitable which is higher satisfaction of life in South Africa and a better reputation for the country at large, which preserves the legacy of a “The Rainbow Nation”.

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