

POLISH WOMEN AND QUALITY OF LIFE: A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH REPORT

J. MAYONE STYCOS, BARBARA WEJNERT, ZBIGNIEW TYSZKA

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J. Mayone Stycos, Department of Rural Sociology Cornell University, USA

Barbara Wejnert, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Cornell University, USA

Zbigniew Tyszka, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Instytut Socjologii (Institute of Sociology Adam Mickiewicz University), ul. Szamarzewskiego 89, 60-568 Poznań, Polska-Poland.

All of the Soviet Union's erstwhile satellites... have moved definitely away from communism. But the touchstone of progress has long since become not moving away from communism, but moving toward democracy. The goal of a Western-type liberal democracy had looked relatively simple as communism was being overturned, but in the following months the Eastern Europeans were to learn how difficult and apparently thankless their chosen task was to be. (Brown 1992:16).

INTRODUCTION

The current democratic transformation taking place in the former Communist states, and the transition toward a capitalistic market economy, have brought substantial changes in the lives of residents of prior countries of the USSR (Stephenson 1998; Rebound & Chu 1997). Among these changes are the establishment of political freedom, free elections, elimination of censorship, an opening of opportunities for private entrepreneurs, and, in the more economically advanced countries, availability of both food and quality consumer products. Moreover, the ongoing political and economic unification with Western Europe has exposed former Soviet block societies to the life style of Western democracies and presumably to a higher standard of living (Brown 1992; Dąbrowski & Antczak 1996; Wejnert 1996b, 1999; Wejnert

& Spencer 1999). But democratization and transition toward a market economy have also been associated with changes in employment levels, family relationships, redistribution of financial resources, the restructuring of individual life-styles, and the emergence of a new class system. Though democracy was perceived as a system that would guarantee an equally high standard of living for all citizens, the connectedness of democratic freedom with economic liberty has led to social inequality and social discomfort, a problem that has been broadly discussed by scholars studying democratic transitions (e.g., Held 1990, Sandel 1996, Dahl 1971).

Pervasive changes in economic and political systems experienced over the last decade by Polish society and the free market practices generated disparity in socioeconomic conditions among various segments of the general population (Wejnert & Spencer 1999). This disparity could lead to a sense of unfairness and social inequality in all except the very top economic groups; thus lowering perceived quality of life. While the communist system constrained the expression of individual incentives, and hence, aspirations were generally low, with the democratic and free market transformation, incentives and aspirations were kindled. For some groups, progress has been much slower than people have hoped, which could lead to a persistent state of deprivation relative to a new goal of success.

Vulnerability and sensitivity to such changes are likely to vary by gender, by socioeconomic status, by age, and by urban/rural residence (Funk & Mueller 1993; International Labor Office 1985; Wejnert 1996a). Women are particularly disadvantaged, especially those who live in rural communities (Wejnert 1996, Wejnert & Spencer 1996). Although many of the contemporary trends have been commonly assumed to have enriched women's lives and increased their opportunities, the costs to them may have been substantial (Funk 1996, Wejnert 1996b). Rising unemployment has been a particular threat to women's sense of security. Further, the growth of social and economic inequality may have caused women's status to decline vis-à-vis that of men and other reference groups commonly targeted for self evaluation (Issraelyan 1996, Lissyutkina 1993, Wejnert & Spencer 1996).

In short, objective measures of "progress" are easier to identify and collect than are subjective measures. Although political freedoms and economic well-being have improved for many Polish women over the past decade, it is less certain that there has been a commensurate increase in psychological well-being.

RESEARCH ON QUALITY OF LIFE IN POLAND

Reports on Quality of Life (QOL) for the general Polish population go back as far as the 1960s, when Handley Cantril (1965) found that the model evaluation score on general well-being on an 11 point scale was five. Such studies are useful for cross-national comparisons and assessing overall change over time, but have two major limitations: first, they fail to report findings for sub-groups (e.g., scores by

gender, region, social class, age or rural-urban residence); second, they fail to assess satisfaction with different sub-categories of life such as family, economy, environment, etc.

Our study was intended to help fill in these gaps, by designing a survey that would include various sub-categories of the population, and contain questions on satisfaction with a variety of life domains. In essence the research questions were: have improvements in health, wealth, life and liberty led to greater achievement in the pursuit of happiness, and to what extent have different groups in the population shared gains or losses in satisfaction with various aspects of life? A conceptual model generating hypotheses concerning the determinants of QOL, followed by a large-scale survey to test the hypotheses, would enhance answering such questions.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Based on the pioneering work of Andrews and others, we have selected fifteen life “domains” (Andrews and Inglehart 1979; Andrews and McKennel 1980; Andrews and Robinson 1991).¹ Micro-type domains that have proven to be especially important in other countries include satisfaction with work, marriage, standard of

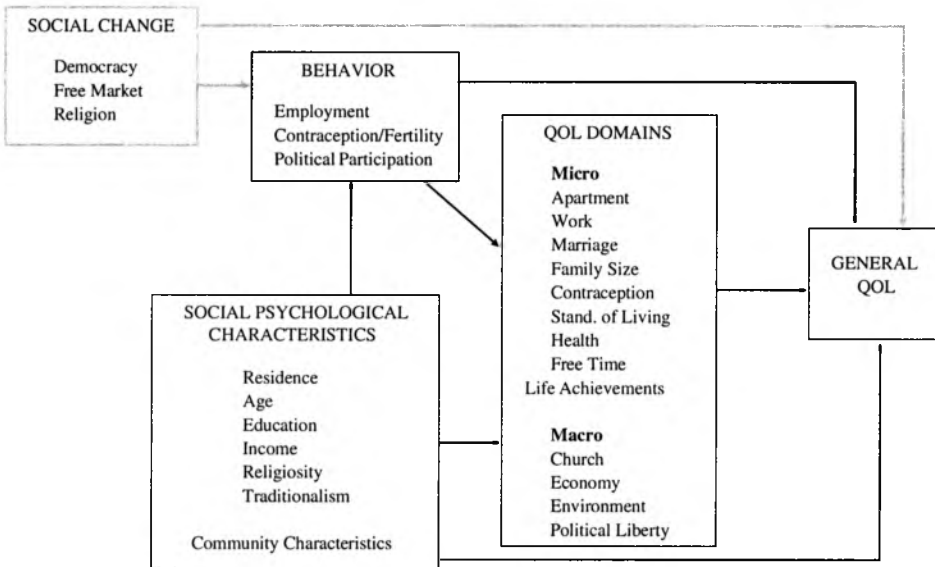


Figure 1. Model of Determinants of QOL

¹ For each of these domains the respondent was asked for her current degree of satisfaction, and for satisfaction prior to the political changes a decade ago. A scale of seven points from extreme satisfaction to dissatisfaction was used.

living, health and environment. We also included satisfaction with family size and contraception because of their special significance to women. Macro domains include satisfaction with government, church and the general economy. Respondents were also asked for their degree of general satisfaction with life as a whole.

Figure 1 shows the overall model that drives the study design, the questionnaire content, and the mode of analysis. We have divided the hypothesized determinants of QOL into two sets of variables: behavioral histories of employment, fertility, and political participation on the one hand, and social psychological characteristics on the other. These latter include familiar demographic and social variables – age, education, residence, income – that have been known to explain at least some of the variance in QOL, along with at least three less common measures – religiosity, traditionalism, and community characteristics.

RESEARCH SITE

We selected region of Konin near Poznań as our research site. Konin is a region (województwo) that over the past three decades has undergone historical changes that were typical of other Polish regions. Around the end of the 1960's, due to the communist policy of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the government constructed an industrial city in the agricultural hinterland of Konin, an effort similar to those made in Brazil and India, but with more effective job creation. In addition to massive infrastructure development in the town of Konin, the government located several new industries in the region – aluminum production, electricity generation, and coal mining/processing. Thus, urbanization, industrialization and a surge of male and female employment in the service and industrial sectors came to the area almost overnight. At the same time, similar economic, demographic, and social restructuring took place in other Polish rural regions, where substantial industrial centers were built in the midst of agricultural areas (e.g., a petrochemical industry in the Plock region, and the largest Polish metallurgy factory, Nowa Huta, near Cracow). Moreover, by its social, economic and demographic characteristics, Konin is representative of many other regions in Poland. It is a medium-sized region with a population of 476,000, where, despite the inputs of industry and infrastructure, 56% of the region's population still resides in villages, compared to 39% for all of Poland. (Wojewódzki Urząd Statystyczny w Koninie 1993: 25, Główny Urząd Statystyczny 1993:LXVI); (see also Figure 2). Konin has the same proportion of working-age people as the nation (56% compared to 57%), a similar proportion of the labor force is female (43% in Konin compared with 46% in Poland), and a similar rising unemployment rate (see Figure 3). Marriage rates and ages at marriage are virtually identical for Konin and Poland (Wojewódzki Urząd Statystyczny w Koninie 1993, Główny Urząd Statystyczny 1993).

The attractiveness of Konin as a research site was further enhanced by data from research conducted in this region at the end of the 1960s by our Polish co-investigator, Prof. Z. Tyszka (Tyszka 1970).

THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND SAMPLE

We devised a questionnaire of approximately 45 minutes duration (Appendix A) that was administered by interviewers to 50 women in urban and rural areas near Poznań and Konin. Fieldwork was carried out in 1995 by the survey organization ANKIETER, under the direction of dr Krzysztof Podemski. About four fifths of the women were married, three quarters had completed high school, and two thirds were employed outside the home.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Although a large-scale survey would be required to answer the questions we have raised, at this stage we report the preliminary results of the pretest. One set of questions asked about

“Your satisfaction with life. I will show you a card asking you to choose the number which best matches your opinion, where 1 means the most satisfaction and 7 the least satisfaction.”

Fifteen dimensions of life were queried, along with an overall appraisal of life in general. Table 1, which divides the domains into four levels of satisfaction, shows that the lowest degree of satisfaction refers to the environment, the government, and the economy. The highest satisfaction concerns one's family and social life (how others treat you). In between these extremes but on the high side are political liberties, health, work, personal achievements, political freedom, housing and the neighborhood, while income, free time, how the free time is spent, and the Church are relatively low in satisfaction. About half of the 15 items are classified in the higher and half in the lower categories.

Table 1

Mean Score for 14 Quality of Life Domains

Satisfaction level	Mean Scores (Range)	Domain
Low	4.8-4.9	Environment, Governance, Economy
Moderately Low	3.7-4.1	Church, Income, Free Time, How free time is spent
Moderately High	2.9-3.3	Health, Neighborhood, Apartment, Political Liberties, Work Self-Achievement
High	1.9-2.1	Family Life, How treated by others

“Life in general” received a mean score of 2.6, on the high side, but lower than family and social life. Thus, despite the general low level of satisfaction with many particular aspects of life, a satisfactory family and social life may be crucial in the general high evaluation of “life in general.”

Our second objective was to assess what impact the political and economic changes since 1989 have had on women’s satisfaction with life. To determine this, respondents were asked to compare their current situation to their situation prior to 1989. Were they “better, worse or about the same?” Responses demonstrated little enthusiasm for the current situation. According to just over half of the sample, the situation of women had worsened, while only one-third thought it had improved. Asked about employment opportunities for women, 82% said they had declined, and no one thought they had increased. One half felt “the environment”² had worsened and only 12% thought it had improved. While just over half felt their current income was better than before, two thirds felt *less* secure financially, and half said they could buy less now than before. Regarding politics, only one fifth feel the country is better governed now, and one third regard it as worse governed. Moreover, while three quarters said there is a greater freedom to express oneself now, only about one third said their ability to criticize the local government had improved, (while 56% said it had weakened). Only one fifth said their influence on decisions of local government had increased, while a quarter say it had decreased. Thus, the data point to considerable disillusion with the changes – in politics, economics and the environment. However, when asked “generally speaking how is your life now?” half say life is better than before the changes and only 10% say life is worse. Moreover, asked about their level of happiness six years ago, 80% said they were happy or very happy then – similar to the 82% that rated themselves as currently happy. These data not only suggest a general high level of satisfaction with life, but suggest no deterioration (or improvements) in *general* happiness over the decade. Indeed, there is considerable optimism about the future. “In response to the question In five years do you think you will be “very happy”...etc.” 86% said happy, only 2% said unhappy and the balance gave “Don’t know” responses.

CONCLUSION

How does our study compare with QOL research conducted by others, and can any hypotheses be derived for future research?

First, other studies of the Polish population suggest long-range stability in levels of general happiness. Veenhaven and Ehrhardt (1995) and Veenhaven (1996) reports a mean of 7.0, on a ten point scale, in Polish happiness both prior to the transition (1989) and in 1996. However, there were significant short-term changes, since the

² The question was “How would you rate your environment, I mean air quality, the quality of drinking water, etc.?”

same measures taken in 1992 and 1993 dropped to 6.1 and 6.2, before rebounding to 7 in the latter part of the 1990s. These shifts may indicate that only powerful macro-changes in the society can effect (like Polish "shock therapy") substantial change in a relatively stable level of general happiness.

Although Veenhaven (1996) does not report differences by sex, his mean level for the general Polish population (7.0) exceeds our men for women of 6.6 (adjusted to a 10 point scale). American studies have also found lower levels of life satisfaction among women (Andrews & Withney 1976), who were also more likely than men to recall negative aspects of their lives (Campbell 1981). Our findings that marriage and family are the strongest determinants of life satisfaction has also been confirmed by American studies (Andrews and Withney 1976; Andrews and Robins 1991; Campbell 1981). But why should women report lower levels of life satisfaction? One possibility is increasing dissatisfaction with male contributions to household tasks. Haavio-Mannila (1992:105) concluded that "women were happier... the more the spouse participated in domestic work". Only half of our respondents reported that their husbands often help with household chores, data consistent with earlier World Bank studies carried out in five European countries including Poland (World Bank 1994).

Clearly two major areas for future research are indicated: First, what kinds of macro-changes affect which domains of life satisfaction? Second, what accounts for consistently lower female evaluations of quality of life?

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