

**Work Ethic and Life Satisfaction Among Social Workers in Massachusetts:  
The Moderating Effect of Gender**

Sunday B. Fakunmoju, PhD  
Westfield State University  
577 Western Avenue  
Westfield, MA 01086, United States of America  
E-mail: SFakunmoju@westfield.ma.edu; BFakus@yahoo.com  
Tel.: 410-804-0860; 413-572-8336; Fax: 413-579-3122

Senior Research Associate  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Johannesburg,  
P. O. Box 524  
Auckland Park 2006  
South Africa

### **Abstract**

Despite the belief that agreement with ideals of work ethic has positive effects on life satisfaction, empirical linkage of the association is sparse. Using a disproportionate stratified sample of 194 social workers in Massachusetts, results suggest that being female, being married, being employed full time, and being satisfied with one's job were associated with life satisfaction. Gender moderated the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction: For women, high levels of work ethic were associated with high levels of life satisfaction; for men, there was a much smaller correlation. Implications for practice, human service organizations, and research were discussed.

Keywords: work ethic; life satisfaction; job satisfaction

Since Blood (1969) concluded that “the more a worker agrees with the ideals of the Protestant Ethic, the more he will be satisfied in his work and with life in general” (p. 457), research examining the associations among work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction remains sparse. Although theoretical and empirical knowledge on these topics have increased, the focus has been primarily on the association between job satisfaction and life satisfaction, as well as on the effects of work ethic on job satisfaction (Furnham & Korsitas, 1990; Hudspeth, 2003; Iverson & Maguire, 2000; Proyer, Annen, Eggimann, Schneider, & Ruch, 2011; Rode, 2004; Salahudina, Alwia, Baharuddina, Halimata, 2016; Sekaran, 1989). Effects of work ethic on life satisfaction continue to remain elusive to empirical verification. For example, while some studies have found work ethic to be unassociated with life satisfaction (Cohen, 1999; Luna-Arocas & Tang, 2004; Tang, Kim, & Tang, 2002), Zhang and Shi (2017) found work ethic to be associated with life satisfaction and with quality of life by Axelsson, Andersson, Håkansson, and Ejlertsson (2005). Kwizera (2011) found job and life satisfaction to be associated with work ethic and Fullagar and Barling (1989) also found work ethic to be related to life satisfaction, although only for Blacks.

Knowledge about the associations among work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction, especially in social service professions, remains inadequate for several reasons. First, studies that examined work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction have often relied on data from a single organization. Findings from such studies may be confounded by employees’ experience in the organization. Second, some studies have relied on students as respondents (Modrack, 2008) and others had few female respondents, thereby limiting the ability to generalize findings. Third, some studies have treated work ethic as a dependent variable (Modrack, 2008), thereby limiting the ability to understand its predictive validity. Fourth,

knowledge about work ethic is primarily influenced by data derived from professionals, managers, and executives in business and management fields. Knowledge about work ethic in the social service professions has been empirically neglected. For example, a search of databases yielded few sources of empirical knowledge on work ethic but more sources on job satisfaction and life satisfaction among social workers (e.g., Acquavita, Pittman, Gibbons, & Castellanos-Brown, 2009; Dhooper & Byars, 1989; Elpers & Westhuis, 2008; Graham et al., 2013; Smith & Shields, 2013; Pasupuleti, Allen, Lambert, & Cluse-Tolar, 2009). Fewer articles have focused on facets of work ethic than on the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction. As knowledge about job and life satisfaction among social workers continues to grow, potential effects of work ethic should be considered as theoretically assumed (Blood, 1969; Furnham, 1990). Therefore, the present study examined the association between work ethic and life satisfaction for the purpose of generating insight on their relevance to research, practice, and human service organizations. Specifically, the study examined the role of gender in understanding the association between work ethic and life satisfaction.

### **Rationale for Examining the Association between Work Ethic and Life Satisfaction through Gender Lens**

Much of the research that found work ethic to be associated (Fullagar & Barling, 1989, Kwizera, 2011) or unassociated (Cohen, 1999; Luna-Arocas & Tang, 2004; Tang, Kim, & Tang, 2002) with life satisfaction did not examine the effects of gender in the association. This gap in research has engendered questions about how gender might influence perceived association or lack of association between work ethic and life satisfaction. The need for answers to these questions was informed by the realization that men and women can have different socialization and life experience (Son & Yarnal, 2011) and can be differentially exposed to work conditions

that shape their values and beliefs about work and life. When employees are exposed to toxic work conditions and events that are capable of disrupting their work values and beliefs, the resultant effect may affect how they feel about work and life. By gaining knowledge of gender-based associations between work ethic and life satisfaction, supervisors and managers may gain insight on how to translate policies into actions that could strengthen employees' work values and beliefs.

Without a doubt, high work ethic (e.g., centrality of work or belief in the importance of work) has effects on organizational performance and outcomes, although experience of expressive work events (e.g., promotion, advancement) plays a significant role in the extent that beliefs in the importance of work are translated to job performance (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2010). Nevertheless, it would be unreasonable to assume that men and women have equal work and life experience and more unreasonable to assume that these differences cannot have differential effects on values and beliefs held about work and life. For example, Simpson (2004) found that men who were engaged in female-dominated occupations “benefit from their minority status through assumptions of enhanced leadership..., by being given differential treatment... and being associated with a more careerist attitude to work...” (p. 2), whereas American College of Healthcare Executives (2006) found that women compared to men had different experiences with remuneration, career attainment, gender equity, selection and promotion with their organizations, the realization that may have distinctive effects on their “perceptions and attitudes toward their organizations” (p. 4). It is therefore critical for human service organizations to understand the gender-based associations of work ethic on life satisfaction, as the knowledge gained may assist managers and supervisors to prioritize or reprioritize work policies to improve work values and performance of employees. Such knowledge also may assist managers and supervisors to

determine how to utilize organizational resources to meet employees' work values and organizational goals and to identify ways in which work-related conditions and events could be manipulated to enhance work ethic and life satisfaction of employees. Additional rationale for examining the association between work ethic and life satisfaction through gender lens are discussed in the model of work ethic and life satisfaction.

### **Model of Work Ethic and Life Satisfaction**

#### **Proposed Model**

Figure 1 describes the model of work ethic and life satisfaction as presented in this article. The model suggests that the association between work ethic and life satisfaction depends on gender and that job satisfaction is associated with life satisfaction (Alghamdi, 2015; Iverson & Maguire, 2000; Mishra, Nielsen, Smyth, & Newman, 2014; Proyer et al., 2011; Rode, 2004).

**Work ethic.** Work ethic may be described as a constellation of rational beliefs and attitudes necessary for one to lead a productive life, create wealth, and achieve success (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002; Weber, 1958). It is considered an integral part of character and a credible source of professional fulfillment and personal happiness in life. In social work, work ethic is necessary for effective practice. Several components of work ethic (e.g., integrity, sense of responsibility, emphasis on quality, discipline, sense of teamwork; Jenkins, n.d.) are helpful for enhancing personal and professional success in social work practice and are vital components of job acquisition, performance, and career progress. Some evidence suggests that work ethic has behavioral and psychological effects on workers. For example, work ethic is associated with work engagement (Czerw & Grabowski, 2015) and work-related rumination in the form of affective rumination, problem solving pondering and detachment (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011). As indicated in a recent study, morality/ethic, leisure, centrality of work and waste of time seem to

be positively or negatively associated with problem-solving pondering (Zoupanou, Copley, & Rydstedt, 2013).

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction may be described as a global judgment about how individuals feel about their past experience (e.g., accomplishments, failures), current conditions (e.g., socioeconomic standing, social relations, challenges and opportunities, physical and mental well-being), and future aspirations (e.g., hopes and dreams, possibilities and opportunities). Myers and Diener (1995) conceived life satisfaction as “defined by three correlated but distinct factors: the relative presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, and satisfaction with life” (p. 11). Because of the relevance of life satisfaction to job satisfaction, it has been suggested that if one is not satisfied with one’s job, such dissatisfaction may be carried over to one’s judgment about satisfaction with life. However, because people often compare life circumstances in reaching conclusions about satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), some evidence suggests that multiple life domains in the form of “satisfaction with health, financial situation, social associations, one’s self-worth, leisure-time, family, and work” are primarily associated with overall judgments of satisfaction with life among workers (Loewe, Bagherzadeh, Araya-Castillo, Thieme, & Batista-Foguet, 2014, p. 71;; see also Borg, Hallberg, & Blomqvist, 2006). Self-reliance (Hampton & Marshall, 2000) and work engagement (Shimazu, Schaufeli, Kamiyama, & Kawakami, 2015) are also deemed to be associated with life satisfaction.

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction has been defined as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1304). It is a reliable source of professional and subjective well-being. Although theoretical and empirical verifications attribute job satisfaction to myriad organizational and attitudinal

factors (e.g., job satisfaction, autonomy, freedom, income, work environment, job safety and security, opportunity for promotion and advancement, coworker and supervisor support, organizational policies; Belfield & Harris, 2002; Knoop, 1994; Shields & Price, 2002; Taylor, Bradley, & Nguyen, 2003), knowledge about job satisfaction among social workers is challenged by the fact that they work with human beings rather than with material things. Nevertheless, self-employment through private practice in social work provides autonomy, freedom, independence, and work flexibility, all integral parts of job satisfaction.

### **Gender as Moderator of the Association Between Work Ethic and Life Satisfaction**

To date, results of research on gender differences in work ethic are inconsistent. Several studies in the '90s suggested that men and women seem to differ in work ethic, with women having higher work ethic mean scores than men (Furnham, 1991; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Hill, 1997; Kirkcaldy, Furnham, & Lynn, 1992; Petty & Hill, 1994). However, results of recent studies have suggested that work ethic did not seem to differ by gender (Akbamejad & Chanzanagh, 2012; Meriac, Poling, & Woehr, 2009), although Axelsson and colleagues (2005) found being female to be associated with work ethic. Nevertheless, several socioeconomic factors seem to be associated with work ethic beyond gender differences. For example, some evidence suggests that work ethic is higher among persons from higher socioeconomic status than those from middle class (Akbamejad & Chanzanagh, 2012) and scores were significantly lower among full-time employed job seekers than among those who had been unemployed for less than 3 months and those who had been laid off from work (Hill & Fouts, 2017).

Similar to results of research on work ethic, some evidence suggests that the results of gender differences in life satisfaction seem to be inconsistent. Some recent studies indicated that women were more likely than men to be satisfied with life, particularly marital/family life (Al-



Attiyah & Nasser, 2016; Daig, Herschbach, Lehmann, Knoll, & Decker, 2009; Dolan & Gosselin, 2000; Joshi, 2010; Ng, Loy, Gudmunson, & Cheong, 2009; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; Sheung-Tak & Chan, 2006; Toker, 2012; Yuen, 2015). However, other studies seem to suggest that men and women did not seem to differ in their perceptions of life satisfaction (Borg et al., 2006; Dolan & Gosselin, 2000; Ng et al., 2009). It is interesting that the relationship between gender and life satisfaction is deemed to be indirect (Hickson, Housley, & Boyle, 1988).

In describing the prevailing inconsistencies, some scholars have noted some shifts in gender differences in life satisfaction over the years. For example, Meisenberg and Woodley (2015) observed that, while women reported higher life satisfaction than men until the early to mid-1980s, their reported life satisfaction scores have been lower since the late 1990s. Still, many contend that perceived gender differences in life satisfaction seem to be minimal rather than substantial (Diener & Ryan, 2009; Inglehart, 2002). Recently, Greenstein (2016) attributed inconsistent findings and perceived minimal differences to the moderating effect of gender. In fact, in analyzing data across 81 countries, Greenstein did not seem to find main effects of gender on life satisfaction but did seem to suggest that gender moderated the effects of “geographical region, age, employment status, education, religious affiliation, and attendance of religious services on life satisfaction” (p. 2).

Several factors may be offered to highlight why gender matters in understanding the association between work ethic and life satisfaction and why relevant knowledge may be useful for social workers and human service organizations. Although knowledge about the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction remains sparse, some identified associations seem to have been focused on facets of work ethic. For example, leisure was found to be associated with life satisfaction (Lapa, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2008), although Masuda and Sortheix (2012) found

that “giving priority to family goals over work and leisure goals lead to higher life satisfaction” (p. 1131). Nevertheless, it is possible that how women perceive leisure activities in terms of its relevance to social support and connection with others may have implications for how they will perceive satisfaction with life, whereas how men perceive leisure in terms of competition and camaraderie may have little or no effects on how they perceive satisfaction with life. Similarly, what may be perceived as desirable leisure activities by women may not be perceived as desirable leisure activities by men. Because adult women tend to have more free time and derive pleasure in diverse activities (Dorfman & Kolarik, 2005), it should not be surprising that endorsement of leisure values and ethics is associated with proportionate endorsement of life satisfaction (Lapa, 2013; Rodríguez, Látková, & Sun, 2008).

Similar to leisure, centrality of work (i.e., an unequivocal belief in the importance of work) is another facet of work ethic that can differ for men and women and associated with life satisfaction. For example, some evidence suggests that work values may be crucial for understanding work role centrality for men, whereas for women socialization may matter considerably (Mannheim, 1993). Men and women can differ in sense of recognition, sense of accomplishment, social status, enhancement of subjectivity, and personal transformation engendered by work (Dejours & Deranty, 2010; Mannheim, 1993) and these differences may have implications for differences in judgment about life satisfaction. While success at work can enhance status and masculinity for men, it can be a destabilizing force on gender identity of women (Dejours, 1996 as cited in Dejours & Deranty, 2010) because of the tremendous personal and professional sacrifices women have to make to attain and retain the success and status. Nevertheless, it is possible that women who perceive work as important and successfully juggle the dual role of motherhood and work may demonstrate higher satisfaction with life than women

who attribute less importance to work or struggle with juggling the dual role of motherhood and work.

Prior studies that examined work and life domains have used “gender” and “job” model as well as expectancy value theory to describe the mechanisms by which gender may have effects on centrality of work (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Eccles, 1994; Kostek, 2012; Lorence, 1987; Lu, Huang, & Bond, 2016). The “gender model” posits that the traditional gender roles of men as the provider and bread winner and women as the home maker and family builder can predispose men to investing money and time to developing their careers and women to building their family (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Lorence, 1987). By investing more resources into work men’s identity becomes firmly tied to work and by devoting time to family affairs women lose interest in viewing work as an integral part of their identity (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Lorence, 1987; Lu, Q., Huang & Bond, 2016). Unlike the “gender model”, the “job model” of centrality of work posits that unequal work conditions and inadequate recognition for accomplished tasks often predispose women to having lower perception and attitudes to work than men (Lorence, 1987; Lu et al., 2016). This position is further described by expectancy value theory (Eccles, 1994; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) as follows:

females put more emphasis on life domains other than work, because their prior socialization experiences and the broader socio-cultural milieu downplay their expectations and values gained from work, making WI (i.e., *independence at work*) less attractive. In comparison, males tend to believe that achievement and status fulfilled through work could enrich their other life spheres, and they thus react more strongly to work independence (Lu et al., 2016, p. 281, emphasis added).

These perceived differences in attributes between men and women have been attributed to work segregation in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015) and gender differences in reaction to the “same inducement (i.e., job independence) in the workplace” (Lu et al., 2016, p. 281). Although some studies did not find gender differences in centrality of work (Cohrs, Abele, & Dette, 2006; Schmidt & Lee, 2008), others found that men are more likely to report higher levels of centrality of work than women (Kostek, 2012; Mannheim, Baruch, & Tal, 1997; Harpaz & Fu, 1997). Due to status inconsistency and dual role of motherhood and gainful employment, women of intermediate socioeconomic status are more likely to be particularly “less work-centered than men” (Mannheim, 1993, p. 3). Because differences in work and life experiences may have differential effects on work values, beliefs, and attitudes and judgment about life between men and women, it may be reasonable to examine the moderating effects of gender on the association between work ethic and life satisfaction.

### **Marital Status, Employment Status, Age, and Life Satisfaction**

Beyond gender differences in work ethic and life satisfaction, other sociodemographic differences associated with life satisfaction have been noted. One major demographic variable that has been consistently linked to life satisfaction is marriage, especially being married or being satisfied with marriage (Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005; Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Dolan & Gosselin, 2000; Fakunmoju, Donahue, McCoy, & Mengel, 2016; Ng et al., 2009; Stutzer & Frey, 2006; Zollar & Williams, 1987). However, research indicates that this association is particularly greater for men than for women: “There are substantial differences in the effects of marital status on life satisfaction by gender” (Greenstein, 2016, p. 2). For example, men were more likely to be satisfied with their marriage and those who were satisfied with their marriage were more likely to be satisfied with their lives (Ng et al., 2009). Other studies

have not found an association between marital status and life satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2010; Toker, 2012).

Similar to marriage, working status has been linked to life satisfaction. For example, those who are working or employed were more likely to be satisfied with life than those who were unemployed (Arshad, Gull, & Mahmood, 2015; Chen & Short, 2008; Hao, 2008; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Paul & Moser, 2006; Van Hoorn & Maseland, n.d.). The effects of working status on life satisfaction can be understood from the effects of work-related factors. For example, among social workers, work-related factors linked to life satisfaction include job stress, income, job dissatisfaction, work-and-family conflict, role ambiguity, burnout, and social support (Dhooper & Byars, 1989; Dumitrache, Rubio, & Rubio-Herrera, 2017; Graham, Bradshaw, Surood, & Kline, 2014; Lizano, 2015; Pasupuleti et al., 2009; Hombrados-Mendieta & Cosano-Rivas, 2013). Myriad events within and outside of work often create combined effects on judgment about life satisfaction for social workers, thereby making “social worker happiness . . . a complex phenomenon, comprised of interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of their work, profession, and personal lives” (Graham, Shier, Newberry, & Esina, 2014, p. 4).

Similar to working status, age is another variable that has been associated with life satisfaction. Results of various studies suggest that older age is associated with increase in life satisfaction (Gaymu & Springer, 2010; Stone, Schwartz, Broderick, & Deaton, 2010). However, among the elderly (78–98), Enkvist, Ekström, and Elmståhl (2012) found that as age increases life satisfaction decreases. Similarly, instead of being linear, Stone, Schwartz, Broderick, and Deaton (2010) found the association between age and life satisfaction to be non-linear, specifically, U-shaped.

### **Job Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction**

The association between job and life satisfaction is one of the most frequently established associations in the body of empirical research, although it is not devoid of empirical controversy. For example, findings from meta-analyses of studies (Bowling, Eschleman, & Wang, 2010; Tait, Padgett, & Baldwin, 1989) and a review of the literature (Rice, Near, & Hunt, 1980) suggest that job satisfaction is strongly associated with life satisfaction, although Near (1984) and Rode (2004) did not find any associations between them when the effects of relevant variables (e.g., core self-evaluations and nonwork satisfaction) were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, job satisfaction has been reciprocally associated with life satisfaction (Alghamdi, 2015; Fagin-Stief, n.d.; Mishra et al., 2014) and “the form of the relationship between job and life satisfaction may differ across individuals” (Georgellis & Lange, 2007, p. 3). Among social workers, job satisfaction has been particularly linked with life satisfaction (Freund, 2005; Graham et al., 2013; Hombrados-Mendieta & Cosano-Rivas, 2013; Pasupuleti et al., 2009). Thus, any work variables that have negative effects on job satisfaction may translate similarly to negative effects on life satisfaction.

### **The Present Study**

Based on the above discussions, it was hypothesized as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Being female, being married, and being employed full time will be associated with life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Gender will moderate the association between work ethic and life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Job satisfaction will be associated with life satisfaction.

## **Method**

### **Design**

For this cross-sectional study a tailored design method (TDM; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008) was used to mail a survey to a disproportionate stratified (by gender) sample of social work practitioners from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Massachusetts chapters in the northeast, southeast, central, and western Massachusetts regions. The survey collected demographic information about respondents: age, gender, marital status, field of practice, employment status, race/ethnicity, income, and work experience. A sampling frame of 2,873 (male = 504, female = 2,369) social workers was divided by gender. From the sampling frame, a disproportionate stratified sample of 497 social workers was randomly (simple random) selected, comprising 249 female social workers (approximately 11% of 2,369 female social workers) and 248 male social workers (49% of 504 male social workers).

Of the 497 surveys mailed, 242 were returned, for an approximate 49% response rate. Of the 242 returned surveys, 7 were returned uncompleted (blank), 1 respondent stated that he/she was retired, and 1 completed only half of the questionnaire. Thus, 233 completed response sets reflected a response/completion rate of 47%. Eight of the 233 surveys were excluded from analysis because the respondents were retired or unemployed. Ten surveys were excluded from analysis because of incomplete demographic information and 2 surveys were excluded because of incomplete information on work ethic and life satisfaction. This resulted in a sample of 194 response sets used for analysis. The approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Westfield State University.

### **Sample**

The sample ( $N = 194$ ), about evenly divided between men ( $n = 98, 50.5\%$ ) and women ( $n = 96, 49.5\%$ ), consisted mostly of respondents who were middle-aged and married (living together;  $n = 139, 71.6\%$ ), White/Caucasian ( $n = 187, 96.4\%$ ), and employed full time ( $n = 120, 61.9\%$ ; Table 1). The majority completed a master's degree in social work (MSW;  $n = 181, 93.3\%$ ). The mean age was 52.64 years ( $SD = 10.17$  years), ranging from 23 to 65 years. Most respondents earned between \$40,000 and \$59,999 ( $n = 65, 66.6\%$ ), and almost one third earned between \$60,000 and \$79,999 ( $n = 63, 32.3\%$ ). The mean years of experience was 21.30 years ( $SD = 11.18$ ) and ranged from 1 to 43 years. Although slightly over one third ( $n = 65, 33.5\%$ ) provided services in private practice, the majority ( $n = 68, 35.1\%$ ) worked in nonprivate practice in the area of health, mental health, and addictions. Close to 10% ( $n = 19, 9.8\%$ ) were supervisors/program managers/administrators.

### Measures

A scale was used to measure work ethic and life satisfaction and a single item was used to measure overall job satisfaction.

**Work ethic.** Work ethic was operationalized using the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP; Miller et al., 2002). MWEP is a 65-item self-report measure that captures seven dimensions of work ethic attitudes and beliefs: (a) centrality of work (“belief in work for work’s sake and the importance of work”); (b) self-reliance (“striving for independence in one’s daily work”); (c) hard work (“belief in the virtues of hard work”); (d) leisure (“proleisure attitudes and beliefs in the importance of nonwork activities”); (e) morality/ethics (“believing in a just and moral existence”); (f) delay of gratification (“orientation toward the future; the postponement of rewards”); and (g) wasted time (“attitudes and beliefs reflecting active and productive use of time”; Miller et al., 2002, p. 464). The 65 items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 =



*strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). An example of questions regarding centrality of work: “I feel uneasy when there is little work for me to do” (Miller et al., 2002, p. 483). Centrality of work, self-reliance, hard work, leisure, and morality/ethics are each measured by 10 items; delay of gratification and wasted time are measured by 7 and 8 items, respectively. Leisure was reverse scored to combine with other dimensions. Items 16, 48, and 57 for morality/ethics were reverse coded. Reported Cronbach’s alpha across the seven dimensions ranged from .75 to .89 (Miller et al., 2002; Woehr, Arciniega, & Lim, 2007). The dimensions measured in this study were summed to derive a composite score. The internal consistency estimate of the summed dimensions was .91.

**Life satisfaction.** Subjective well-being/life satisfaction was measured by the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), which measures cognitive appraisal of life and well-being as a whole. Using the scale, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 5 items (i.e., “In most ways my life is close to my ideal,” “The conditions of my life are excellent,” “I am satisfied with my life,” “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life,” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *slightly agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale has ranged from .77 to .88; in this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

**Job satisfaction.** A single-item measure of overall job satisfaction was used in this analysis. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a single item (i.e., “If I consider every aspect of my job, I am satisfied with my job from all indications”) on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Although Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy (1997) suggested in a meta-analysis of job satisfaction that “single-

item measures are more robust than the scale measures of overall job satisfaction” (p. 250), “there is no consensus about the best or standard way to measure job satisfaction” (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007, p. 8). Similarly, “no instrument exists for job satisfaction measurement that has, as yet, all of the properties and points of flexibility . . . *that may be deemed . . . achievable and desirable*” (Seashore & Taber, 1975, p. 344, emphasis added). Nevertheless, several authors have endorsed the use of single-item measures of overall job satisfaction (e.g., Saari & Judge, 2004; Scarpello & Campbell, 1983) and several studies have utilized single-item instruments to measure overall job satisfaction (e.g., Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011; Castillo & Cano, 2004; Loo, 2002; Nagy, 2002).

### **Data Analysis**

Various analyses were used to describe the data and test the hypotheses. Missing data for work ethic and life satisfaction were addressed using the ipsative mean imputation procedure (Schafer & Graham, 2002), which was applied to cases missing no more than 25% of the total items. Mean imputation is one of the standard methods for handling missing data and several studies have utilized the method for treating missing values. Ipsative mean imputation entails “substituting the mean of a participant’s own observed items for each of his or her missing items” (H. B. Bosworth’s personal communication with Schafer & Graham in 2001, as cited in Schafer & Graham, 2002, p. 158). Despite the method’s violation of the “principle that an estimand be a well-defined aspect of a population, not an artifact of a specific data set” (Schafer & Graham, 2002, p. 158), it is deemed to be a better approach with less bias than case deletion or the last observation carried forward (LOCF) method (Nakai, Chen, Nishimura, & Miyamoto, 2014; Schafer & Graham, 2002), “especially if the reliability is high (say,  $\alpha > .70$ ) and each group of items to be averaged seems to form a single, well-defined domain” (Schafer & Graham,

2002, p. 158). Nevertheless, listwise deletion was applied to remaining cases after the implementation of the ipsative mean imputation procedure. Thus, 194 surveys were included in the final analysis.

### **Descriptive and Parametric Analysis**

Descriptive analysis was used to describe the demographic distributions and bivariate correlations were examined to determine the degree of correlations among the variables. In analyzing the data, sociodemographic variables were dichotomized into respective categories (Tables 1 and 2). Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the associations among demographic factors, work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction, including the moderating effects of gender on the association between work ethic and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 1 to 3). In predicting life satisfaction (dependent variable), the covariates (age, gender, marital status, employment status, field of practice, social work experience, and income), independent variables (work ethic and job satisfaction), and interaction terms (gender x work ethic) entered the analysis using simultaneous entry. The variables were mean-centered for the analysis (J. Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Data were analyzed using SPSS 20™ (IBM Corporation, 2011).

## **Results**

### **Correlations**

The Pearson's correlations revealed that work ethic was significantly and positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = .40, p = .01$ ) and life satisfaction was significantly and positively correlated with work ethic ( $r = .26, p = .01$ ) and job satisfaction ( $r = .58, p = .01$ ).

### **Association Between Work Ethic and Life Satisfaction**

The overall model describing the association between work ethic and life satisfaction was significant ( $F = 17.32, p < .0005$ ) and accounted for approximately 43% (adjusted  $R^2 = .40$ ) of

the variance in life satisfaction. As indicated in Table 2, three demographic factors, gender ( $\beta = -.172, p = .004$ ), marital status ( $\beta = -.224, p < .0005$ ), and employment status ( $\beta = -.127, p = .039$ ) were significant (Hypothesis 1). That is, being female, being married, and being employed full time were associated with life satisfaction. Interaction between gender and work ethic was also significant ( $\beta = -.150, p = .008$ ), suggesting that gender moderates the effect of work ethic on life satisfaction. For women, high levels of work ethic were associated with high levels of life satisfaction; for men, there was a much smaller association (Hypothesis 2, Figure 2). The association of job satisfaction to life satisfaction was significant ( $\beta = .589, p < .0005$ ), in that higher levels of job satisfaction were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3).

### **Discussion**

The study examined the association between work ethic and life satisfaction on the premise that understanding the association will generate insight that may enhance practice and empirical issues. Results not only indicated an association between work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction but also suggested that life satisfaction was associated with individual factors. Specifically, being female, being married, and being employed full time were associated with life satisfaction. Similarly, gender moderated the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction, such that high levels of work ethic were associated with high levels of life satisfaction for women, whereas there was a much smaller difference in life satisfaction between low and high levels of work ethic for men.

The association between being female and life satisfaction supports previous studies that found women to be more likely than men to be satisfied with life (Al-Attayah & Nasser, 2016; Daig et al., 2009; Dolan & Gosselin, 2000; Joshi, 2010; Ng et al., 2009; Moksnes & Espnes,

2013; Sheung-Tak & Chan, 2006; Yuen, 2015). It is not surprising that women consistently rate their satisfaction with life higher than men despite their exposure to unfavorable life circumstances and despite being more likely than men to encounter life challenges (e.g., gender discrimination, victimization from domestic violence, health challenges, child care responsibilities). It is perhaps challenging to explain why women rate their life satisfaction higher than men without recourse to differences in personal attributes and characteristics. The first of these may be attributed to gender differences in source of happiness. For example, some evidence suggests that men and women perceive accumulated wealth, financial stability, career success, promotion opportunities, and comparative knowledge about material status of friends and acquaintances differently in making judgments about life satisfaction (see Schafer, Mustillo, & Ferraro, 2013). Similarly, they seem to perceive quality of family and social relations and emotional well-being differently in evaluating subjective well-being. Although “conflict between work and family, social support from significant others, confidence in job skills, and comfort in physical and emotional expression with other men” seem to be important variables in judgment about satisfaction with life for men (Rochlen, Good, & Carver, 2009, p. 44), social networking, large number of friends, social activities, and family relations tend to be relatively crucial in judgment about life satisfaction for women (Oshio, 2012; Sheung-Tak & Chan, 2006). Therefore, differences in evaluating sources of happiness seem to be important in overall judgment about life satisfaction for both men and women.

The second possible explanation for higher ratings of life satisfaction by women may be described from an understanding of women’s ability to maintain work-life balance, willingness to seek help and support, and readiness to utilize self-care opportunities in comparison with men who seem to be less consistent in utilizing these resources and opportunities. These factors are

elucidated in recent work by Graham and colleagues (Graham, Shier et al. 2014) regarding social workers' subjective well-being. From examining the subjective well-being of social workers from the perspectives of spouses and colleagues of the examined social workers, it was found that "ability to find a personal balance between work demands and personal family life, individual temperament characteristics, self-care behaviors, and involvement in social support networks" (p. 11) had some effects on subjective well-being of social workers.

Beyond the main effects of gender on life satisfaction, gender was found to moderate the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction. Because some evidence suggests that women generally report higher scores in work ethic and life satisfaction than men (Daig et al., 2009; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Hill, 1997; Joshi, 2010; Kirkcaldy et al., 1992; Petty & Hill, 1994; Sheung-Tak & Chan, 2006), it is not surprising that higher work ethic was associated with higher satisfaction with life for women, whereas high and low work ethic did not seem to make a significant difference in men's judgment about life satisfaction. Even though high work ethic had high effects on life satisfaction for women, it is possible that similar effects may not necessarily be obtained for work engagement. For example, it was recently found that "men showed a higher level of life satisfaction when work engagement was high...*and* women showed lower levels of life satisfaction the more they engage in their work" (Williamson & Geldenhuys, 2014, p. 315, emphasis added). Thus, high work ethic values and beliefs and high work engagement may have different effects on life satisfaction for men and women.

Nevertheless, several factors may be attributed to why gender moderated the association between work ethic and life satisfaction. First, beyond holding specific work values, beliefs, and attitudes, some evidence suggests that women may differ in their experience or realization of work ethic-related values. For example, women seem to differ in their accomplishment of self-

reliance and independence (Prentice & Carranza, 2002, 2004), ability to partake in leisure activities (Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Jun & Kyle, 2012), and ability to postpone gratification of needs (Silverman, 2003). They also seem to differ in their access to social support (Bellman, Forster, Still, & Cooper, 2003; Matud, Ibáñez, Bethencourt, Marrero, & Carballeira, 2003), exposure to unfavorable work conditions (Bond, Punnett, Pyle, Cazeca, & Cooperman, 2004; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2013), and ability to achieve work-life balance (Fujimoto, Azmat, & Härtel, 2013; McGinnity, Russell, & Smyth, 2008; Wilson, Vilardo, Fellingner, & Dillenbeck, 2015). These differences suggest that women could differ in their appraisal of subjective well-being to the extent that those whose experience was favorable would be more likely to rate their subjective well-being higher than those whose experience was unfavorable.

Second, it has been suggested that “men need to feel satisfied with their lives to achieve success in undertaking, something that does not seem relevant in the case of women” (Salvador & Mayoral, 2011, p. 247). Work may be important for men and women in different ways: while it may enable men to accumulate wealth and ensure financial stability, it may enhance women’s self-reliance and financial independence from men (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Statistics Norway, 2017; United States Congress, 2016). Therefore, it is possible that the ability to be self-reliant and financially independent may have greater effects on life satisfaction for women than the ability to accumulate wealth and maintain financial stability does for men (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010; Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Howell, Kurai, & Tam, 2013; Johnson & Krueger, 2006; Xiao, Chatterjee, & Kim, 2014). Thus, gender has the potential to moderate the effects of work ethic on life satisfaction. However, more research is needed to determine the validity of these explanations and assertions.

In addition to gender, marital and employment status were found to be associated with life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with previous studies that established the effects of marriage on life satisfaction (Demerouti et al., 2005; Diener et al., 2000; Dolan & Gosselin, 2000; Ng et al., 2009; Stutzer & Frey, 2006; Zollar & Williams, 1987), as well as the effects of gainful employment on life satisfaction (Arshad et al., 2015; Chen & Short, 2008; Hao, 2008; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003; Van Hoorn & Maseland, n.d.). Although it is not clear why being married is consistently associated with life satisfaction, some authors have offered some possible explanations. For example, there are indications that security, support, comfort, financial and material benefits, and protection against adverse events of job and life “seem to contribute to spouses’ well-being” (Stutzer & Frey, 2006, p. 326; also, Zollar & Williams, 1987). As job satisfaction is likely to spill over to life satisfaction, the possibility of life satisfaction crossing over between partners (Demerouti et al., 2005) makes marriage a potent factor for the experience of life satisfaction.

Life satisfaction was not only associated with individual factors; the association was found to be stronger with job satisfaction. The zero-order correlation between job satisfaction and life satisfaction is consistent with previous findings (Iverson & Maguire, 2000; Proyer et al., 2011) and past meta-analytic reports (Bowling et al., 2010; Tait et al., 1989). The direction and strength of the correlation between work ethic and job satisfaction also fall within the range of past studies (Hudspeth, 2003; Miller et al., 2002). It is indisputable that work ethic endows individuals with internal drives that predispose them to activities and endeavors that enhance their satisfaction with the job. To those who agree with ideals of work ethic, it seems work serves as a reinforcement of strongly held values and beliefs about work, unlike those who disagree with the ideals and who may perceive work as a burden to be endured for survival (see



Blood, 1969; Furnham, 1984). Individuals deemed to possess strong work ethic are believed to persevere and persist in work-related activities and are known to be less likely to give up easily (Saks, Mudrack, & Ashforth, 1996).

The conjunction of good work ethic and favorable work conditions leads to positive appraisal of work, which consequently would have an effect on life satisfaction. In the realm of work, many determinants of job satisfaction (e.g., coworker and supervisor support, job stress, work conditions, nature of work) seem to have simultaneous effects on life satisfaction, such that a favorable or unfavorable judgment about satisfaction with job may translate to a favorable or unfavorable judgment about satisfaction with life. This interplay between job satisfaction and life satisfaction may become even clearer when one realizes that individuals differ in socialization experience and exposure to work conditions. Differences in socialization and work exposure may have effects on the extent that preexisting values and attitudes are brought to bear on job performance to the extent that they will be able to influence satisfaction with job and life.

Without a doubt, the association between job satisfaction and life satisfaction is particularly real for social workers, considering some characteristics of social work practice and the unique underlying motive for becoming a social worker. For example, many social workers engage in social work practice for altruistic purposes or concern for the welfare of others. A social worker may therefore be satisfied with practice or job by virtue of his or her ability to effect meaningful changes in the lives of clients. In this instance, satisfaction with job for social workers, particularly those in private practice, may be dependent on positive outcomes for clients as opposed to material outputs, as is the case with other professions. Similarly, many factors in social work practice contribute to job satisfaction in ways that translate to life satisfaction. For example, private practice in social work provides opportunities for self-employment that

guarantee autonomy, freedom, independence, and work flexibility in ways that may translate not only to job satisfaction but also to life satisfaction.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

This study has recognized strengths and limitations. A particular strength of the study relates to its being the first known study to examine the relevance of work ethic to job satisfaction and life satisfaction among social workers. By collecting data from a disproportionate stratified sample of middle-aged social work practitioners, it was possible to capture some meaningful associations and interactions among the examined variables. Another notable strength of the study relates to the insight gained from inconsistent findings on the association between work ethic and life satisfaction. By identifying the moderating effects of gender, the findings support the notion that work ethic might be in part associated with satisfaction with life (Blood, 1969; Kwizera, 2011), at least for women, thereby calling for reconsideration of the view of work ethic being unrelated to life satisfaction (Cohen, 1999; Luna-Arocas & Tang, 2004; Tang et al., 2002). In general, the knowledge gained from the data has potential relevance for social work practice and the administration of human service organizations, some of which are described below.

Despite the above-mentioned strengths, the study has some limitations. The first relates to the realization that associational rather than causal relationship among the variables was examined. As a result, work ethic may not be deemed as the cause of life satisfaction and gender may not be attributed to the cause of the relationship between work ethic and life satisfaction. The second limitation relates to cross-sectional nature of the study, which has implications for generalizability of findings. Generalization is particularly problematic because these NASW members were generally not representative of the population of social workers in the state.

Because of its limited focus on predominantly Caucasian social workers in Massachusetts and given the low response/completion rate (47%), findings may not be generalizable to the population of social workers in the state. As a result, findings should be considered temporary and interpreted with caution, as alternative explanations for the present results cannot be ruled out. Third, concerns for common method biases associated with self-report measures in cross-sectional studies cannot be ruled out. Common method biases have the potential to overestimate correlations between variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, because attitudinal variables (e.g., work ethic, job, life satisfaction) are relatively stable and unambiguous over time (unlike mood-related variables, which are relatively unstable), self-reports utilized in this study were relatively suitable for their measurement (Chan, 2009).

### **Implications for Practice, Human Service Organizations, and Research**

Considering the study strengths and limitations, several implications can be drawn from the findings in this study, although these implications should be considered not only in the light of current findings but also in the light of similar findings in future studies. First, the findings highlight the importance of gender in understanding the association between work ethic and life satisfaction, suggesting that work values, attitudes, and beliefs may be relevant to understanding female social workers' judgments about life satisfaction. This realization should help human service administrators to recognize that gender-specific measures may have positive effects on work ethic and life satisfaction of female social workers. Similar measures to improve work ethic may result in more positive judgments about life satisfaction for women than for men. Thus, improving work ethic may be more crucial to improving life satisfaction for female social workers than for male social workers. Similarly, differences in work ethic may be given

consideration in recruitment and selection processes for positions that are contingent on satisfaction with job or life for optimal performance.

Second, the association between job and life satisfaction may help employers to recognize that job-related interventions (e.g., interventions focused on improving work conditions, supervision, reward and recognition, promotion, training and development, vacation/leisure opportunities) aimed at improving satisfaction with the job also have the potential to improve satisfaction with life. It also may help managers and supervisors to recognize that creating conducive work environments and positive work associations to enhance satisfaction with the job may not only activate preexisting work values and beliefs but also improve satisfaction with life.

Specifically, the current findings have implications for women-focused measures and policy. To enhance women's life experience through work, human service organizations need to recognize variations in work ethic among women and realize that among different policy measures those capable of strengthening their work ethic may be of primary relevance. Greater attention to variations in work ethic and their interactions with work-related experiences can inform the design and implementation of measures that are less disruptive to women's work ethic and work engagement. Because of the association of work ethic with work engagement (Czerw & Grabowski, 2015), work-ethic friendly policies may improve women's work engagement, perception of work as a valuable activity, and perceived fit with their organizations. An organizational shift from reactive to proactive measures that focus on personal development (e.g., learning new skills), pay parity, career development, work flexibility, and leisure may empower women and enable them to navigate work and life changes. Similar measures that

focus on collaborative decision making may increase women's perceptions of influence in decision making.

The realization that work ethic has consequences for perception of life satisfaction for women is particularly helpful for managers and supervisors in examining work conditions and events that foster work ethic of women. Because of the association of work ethic with job and life satisfaction (Hudspeth, 2003; Iverson & Maguire, 2000; Proyer et al., 2011; Rode, 2004; Salahudina et al., 2016), managers and supervisors ought to realize that negative experience and discriminatory practices at work may foster gender inequality at workplace and weaken the values women place on work, how they feel about their job, and ultimately how they feel about their life.

To enhance organizational commitment for women, managers and supervisors may carefully examine aspects of organizational policies and practices that enhance facets of work ethic (i.e., centrality of work, self-reliance, hard work, leisure, morality/ethics, delay of gratification, wasted time) for implementation. For example, implementation of measures that foster self-reliance (e.g., granting more work autonomy, positive work engagement, opportunities for training and professional development), remove barriers to leisure opportunities (e.g., reduction of excessive workload, integration of flexible work arrangement, break and relaxation opportunities at work), and provide future rewards/delay of gratification for current commitment to work/hard work (e.g., retirement benefits, promotion/advancement opportunities) may improve how women feel about work and life. Because men and women react differently to the same inducement at work (Lu et al., 2016), similar implementation of measures that facilitate conducive work environment (e.g., employee and coworker support), judicious use of time/wasted time (e.g., reduction of redundancy and monotony, time management skills), and fair

treatment/morality/ethics (e.g., pay parity or congruence between effort and reward, equitable task allocation decisions and performance ratings) may enhance women's values about work and life.

When managers and supervisors implement organizational policies in gender-friendly manner, the resultant effects could strengthen work values and beliefs in ways that could lead to favorable accomplishment of organizational goals. For example, because supervisory support is critical for turnover decisions for women (Fakunmoju, Woodruff, Kim, LeFevre, & Hung, 2010), supervisory or managerial support in the form of work autonomy, flexible work arrangement, reduction of excessive workload, and fairness in task allocation decisions and performance ratings may strengthen values of self-reliance, leisure, and morality/ethics for women in ways that are different for men. Such dispositions have the potential of enhancing women's ability to translate work values to active work engagement, performance, and productivity. Without necessarily endorsing preferential treatment at workplace, managers' and supervisors' attunement to differential exposure of men and women to work and life conditions will facilitate the sensitivity that is necessary for implementing measures that will enhance work values and life satisfaction of female employees.

To enhance understanding of the associations among work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction beyond the conclusions reached in this study, future analysis may utilize longitudinal data to examine the possible effects of dispositional and work-related factors (e.g., work conditions, work experience, burnout, stress, workload, turnover intentions) on the examined variables.

In conclusion, although work ethic correlated with life satisfaction, gender moderated the association between work ethic and life satisfaction when the effects of other variables were

taken into consideration, thereby suggesting that the association between work ethic and life satisfaction may depend on gender. Therefore, work ethic values and beliefs may be more translatable to life satisfaction for women than for men.

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Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

<i>Sample characteristics</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Sample characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Age			Primary field of practice <sup>d</sup>		
Mean = 52.64			Private practice	65	33.5
SD = 10.17			Nonprivate practice		
Gender			Health, mental health, & addictions	68	35.1
Male	98	50.5	Child welfare and families	8	4.1
Female	96	49.5	Educator/Community Organizer/Immigrant	10	5.2
Race/ethnicity			Geriatrics/Others	24	12.4
White/Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)	187	96.4	Supervisor/Program Manager/Administrator	19	9.8
Other <sup>a</sup>	7	3.6	Work experience		
Marital status			Mean = 21.30		
Married (living together)	139	71.6	SD = 11.18		
Other <sup>b</sup>	55	28.4	Income		
Employment status			Less than \$20,000	2	1.0
Full-time	120	61.9	\$20,000 - \$39,999	20	10.3
Other <sup>c</sup>	74	38.1	\$40,000 - \$59,999	65	33.5
Educational background			\$60,000 - \$79,999	63	32.3
BSW/BA	1	.5	\$80,000 - \$99,999	22	11.3
MSW/MA	181	93.3	Over \$100,000	22	11.3
DSW/PhD	12	6.2			

<sup>a</sup>American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American (Non-Hispanic), Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and Biracial/Multiracial.

<sup>b</sup>Married and currently separated, single and never married, living together in a committed relationship, divorced, and widowed.

<sup>c</sup>Part-time employee and self-employed.

<sup>d</sup>Field of practice was merged from 12 fields of practice examined. A few participants reported more than one field of practice.

Table 2. *Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relation Between Work Ethic, Job Satisfaction, and Life Satisfaction, controlling for Demographic Characteristics*

Variable <sup>#</sup>	Life Satisfaction				
	$\beta$	t	Sig.	95.0% C.I.	
				LB	UB
Age	-.021	-.358	.721	-.014	.009
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.172	-2.912	.004	-.296	-.057
Marital status <sup>b</sup>	-.224	-3.947	<.0005	-.384	-.128
Employment status <sup>c</sup>	-.127	-2.075	.039	-.262	-.007
Income	.036	.606	.545	-.072	.135
Work ethic	.046	.733	.464	-.024	.053
Job satisfaction	.589	9.270	<.0005	.577	.889
Gender x work ethic	-.150	-2.665	.008	-.081	-.012

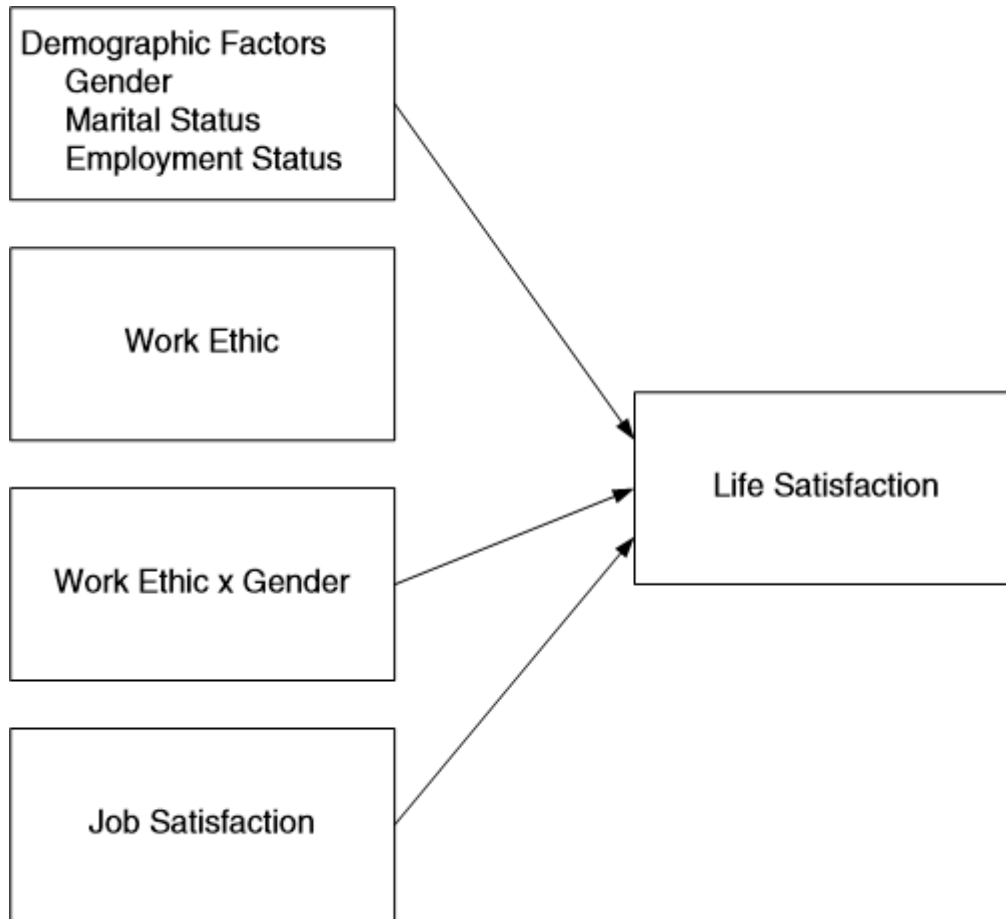
Note: CI = Confidence interval; LB = Lower bound; UB = Upper bound.

<sup>#</sup>Categorized variables for life satisfaction were centered as follows:

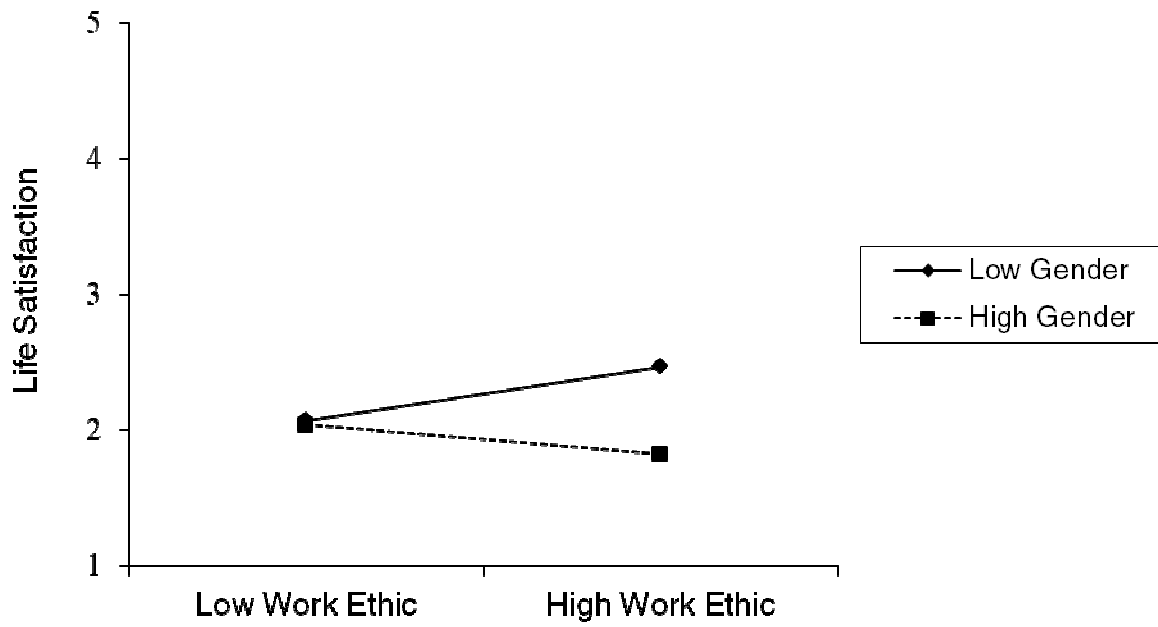
<sup>a</sup>Gender = Female (-1); Male (1).

<sup>b</sup>Marital status = Married (-1); Married (currently separated), Single (never married), Living Together in a Committed Relationship, Divorced, Widowed (1).

<sup>c</sup>Employment status = Part-time employee and self-employed (1), Full time (-1).



*Figure 1:* Model of work ethic, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction.



**Figure 2.** Gender as moderator of the relationship between work ethic and life satisfaction. *Note:* High gender = Male, Low gender = Female.