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Determinants of Subjective Well-Being: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increasing in the number of research focusing on subjective well-being issues in many countries all over the world. It also received considerable attention from the Malaysian government nowadays in order to improve the overall quality of life of the people in the country. Subjective well-being concerning with people happiness and overall life satisfaction towards their own day-to-day life experience. This systematic review is conducted to explore and highlight the determinants of subjective well-being to be research on in detail in the future study. A total of 60 articles obtained from academic search engines and online databases which are Google Scholar, ScienceDirect and Scopus have been chosen to be reviewed within a period from September 2017 until January 2018. Only articles obtained through journals indexed in Scopus and ISI will be included in this study, with only 33 articles eligible for final review. From the review, it was found that besides personality factors, health, religious commitment and spirituality, the socio-economic attributes such as income, financial and employment status are the most focusing determinants of subjective well-being among the researchers. For future research, it is recommended that to further study by conducting an interview with the target respondents, reviewing relevant articles for the purpose of identifying the suitable measurement instrument to be used for the survey and then conducting empirical research for determining the most contribution factors of subjective well-being among the society as the results that will obtain through empirical research will provide more accurate findings and will become a useful guidance for the government in implementing the effective and relevant policies which benefits to the people in the country.

Keywords: Subjective well-being; personality traits; socio-economic attributes; health; religious commitment

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1.0 Introduction

Subjective well-being which denoted as SWB was first introduced by Diener (1984) which attempts to understand people's evaluation of their quality of life, and mostly related to happiness and life satisfaction. Research interest in SWB is growing nowadays among the researchers from various disciplines in many countries. It measures how people feel about their lives and whether a person likes his/her life being experienced. SWB is a part of quality of life where it concerned with individuals' subjective experience of their lives with people's conscious experiences – in terms of hedonic feelings or cognitive satisfactions (Diener & Suh, 1997), in which a broad concept that includes high life satisfaction, low level of negative mood and experiencing pleasant emotions (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2002). SWB is an evaluation judgments about specific aspects of his or life (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997), where according to Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2012), the term of "subjective well-being" refers to a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life; when a person gives conscious evaluation judgments about his or her satisfaction with life as a whole. It can be measured by three major components, which are life satisfaction, positive affect (e.g., joy, enthusiasm, interest) and negative affect (e.g., sadness, anxiety, anger) (Saklofske, Schwean, & Reynolds, 2013). Diener et al., (1997) mentioned that people who are satisfied with their life with frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect are said to have high SWB. In contrast, individuals with low SWB are those who feel dissatisfied with their

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life, experience little joy with negative emotion such as anger and anxiety. Many experts studied the link between SWB and certain attributes including personality, health, wealth, religion commitment, family life, school and work experiences, relationship satisfaction, cognitive processes, emotion regulation, and culture (Eid & Larsen, 2008).

In addition, variables such as life satisfaction and marital satisfaction, lack of depression and anxiety, and positive moods and emotions also been included in evaluating SWB of the people (Diener et al., 1997). It is important for researchers and other practitioners to study SWB actively as the findings obtained through the research will assist policymakers in developing relevant public policies, where people may benefit from that as it will meet their basic needs and desires. It is crucial to note that, whatever policies are taken by the government may affect SWB of the people. Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2015) argued that all government policies such as income security through pensions, unemployment insurance, and compensation for the disabled have been found to be associated with SWB. Thus, as Diener et al., (2015) claimed in their study, the governments can do more in order to accomplish the goals and provide the outcomes that citizens most desire through consistently studying levels of SWB of the people in the country and identifying the causes of its fluctuations. The rationale for undertaking this review is to provide guidance for future research regarding the relevant determinants of SWB among the people that can be studied in detail. Hence, in the present study, a systematic review was done to determine dimensions/attributes used in previous studies when studying SWB, and more importantly, to explore the link between SWB and those dimensions/attributes. To gain more information on determinants of SWB, this study reviewed several articles obtained from various journals available in relevant online databases. In addition, this systematic review is carried out to address the specific questions as follows:

(1) What are the dimensions/attributes significantly influence SWB of the respondents in the study?

2.0 Methodology

A systematic review is significant research strategy undertaken by researchers to see the pattern occur in previous studies regarding the phenomenon of interest. Particularly, a systematic review was done to answer the specific question(s) highlighted in the specific topic area under study. It is a process of analysing and synthesising existing work done by previous researchers that include three important stages, which are identifying, evaluating and reporting by successively interpreting all sources of the articles that had been reviewed. This study followed five sequential steps as suggested by Khan, Kunz, Kleijnen, and Antes (2003) as shown in Fig. 1.

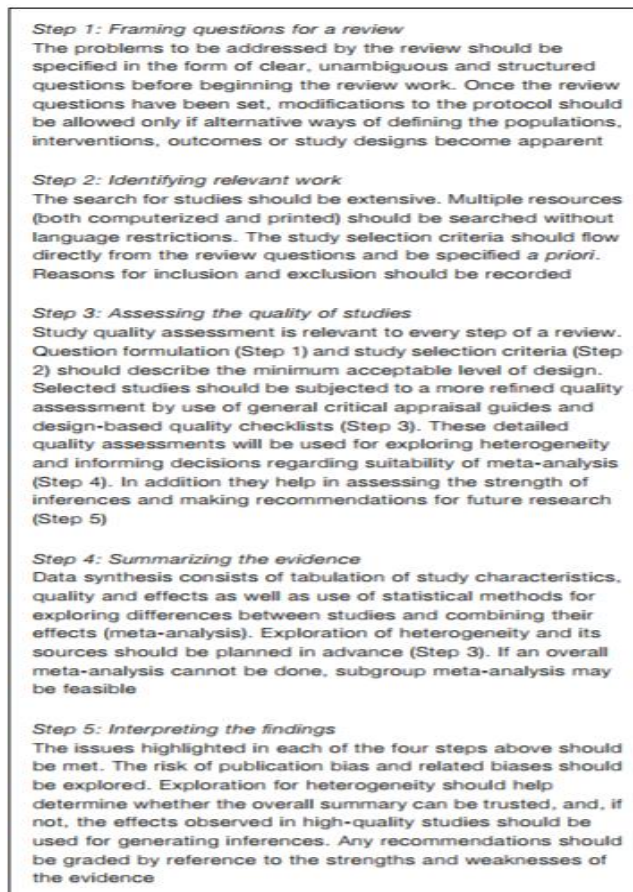


Fig. 1: Five Steps in Systematic Review

(Source: Five Steps to Conducting a Systematic Review (Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, Vol 96, 2003)

In general, there are three main stages followed in this study that comprises Searching Process, Screening Process and Systematic Review Process (Fig. 2). The systematic review of this study was conducted between September 2017 and January 2018, where a total of 60 articles which extracted from academic search engines and online databases (ezAccess UiTM Library) such as ScienceDirect, Scopus and also through Google Scholar have been considered to be reviewed. In order to obtain suitable and relevant articles, all the articles in this study comprehensively retrieve by using keywords and Boolean operators such as "subjective well-being", "dimensions of subjective well-being", "determinant of subjective well-being", "systematic review + subjective well-being", and "subjective well-being + dimensions" as a search strategy. The eligibility of the articles to be included in this study has been confirmed through a screening process. Only articles from related journals indexed in Scopus and ISI and published from the year 1997 until 2018 will be included in this study. Therefore, all the articles obtained from Google Scholar had been technically examined through Scimago and WoS online system to confirm the validity of the journal sources. Other criteria for including articles in the review were based on the context of study in which this study will examine articles from all over the world with the population of the study was adult in any gender. In summary, the scopes of this study strictly depend on the following five inclusion criteria:

- (1) The sources of the articles had been extracted.
- (2) Keywords and Boolean operators used to retrieve the article.
- (3) Year of publication.
- (4) Scopus and ISI indexed journals.
- (5) The context of the study.

If the articles obtained not met one of these inclusion criteria, it will be excluded in the study. As shown in Fig. 2, a total of 60 articles were retrieved through three databases with the use of keywords and Boolean operators mentioned above. Out of 60, 25 articles were obtained from Google Scholar, 20 from ScienceDirect and 15 from Scopus. All these articles were assessed for their eligibility to be included in this review. Eleven duplicate articles were excluded, and 9 articles removed as they not published within the range of the year 1997 and 2018. Then another seven articles were excluded as they not indexed either in Scopus and ISI. Thus, out of 60, only 33 articles are eligible and have been chosen to be reviewed at the final stage.

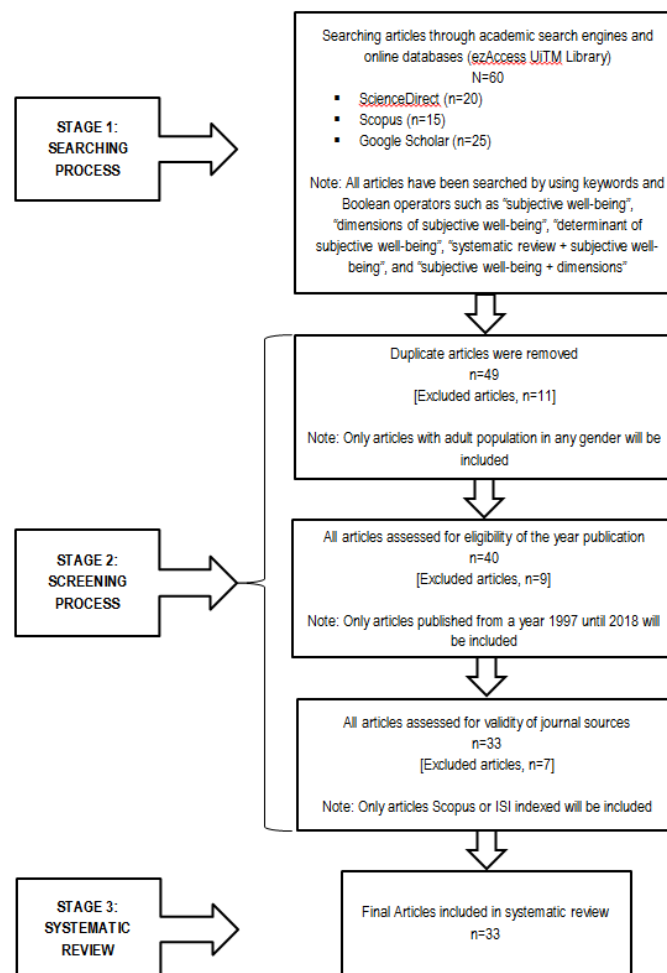


Fig. 2: Flow Diagram of Searching Related Articles

3.0 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Personality Traits

Through the review, it was found that most of the studies tend to relate the personality factors with three components of SWB which are life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect (Chan & Joseph, 2000; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Diener & Lucas, 1999; Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Gutierrez, Jimenez, Hernandez, & Pcn, 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003; Lucas & Diener, 2008; Schimmack, Radhakrishna, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). As suggested by Lucas and Diener (2008), there is a robust relationship between personality and SWB, since previous researchers consistently found the link between personality traits and SWB, with personality traits such as Neuroticism and Extraversion and also self-esteem significantly influence the levels of SWB (Diener et al., 2003). The results of the meta-analysis conducted by DeNeve, Kristina, and Cooper (1998) showed that personality is equally predictive of life satisfaction, happiness and positive affect, but less predictive of negative effect. In addition, they also found that, among Big Five personality factors (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and *Neuroticism*), Neuroticism was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction, happiness and negative affect, while Extraversion and Agreeableness was a significant predictor of positive affect. Likewise, the result from other studies also showed that Extraversion and Neuroticism are the most important determinant of SWB (Gutierrez et al., 2005), in which other study also showed that these two components explained 52% of the total variance in a regression model (Chico Libran, 2006).

Moreover, there is also a positive association between Openness and positive and negative affect (Gutierrez et al., 2005). Although happiness was best predicted by Extraversion and Neuroticism; Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were predicted well of life satisfaction (Hayes & Joseph, 2003). Aziz, Mustaffa, Samah, and Yusof (2014) studied the relationship between personality and happiness among 317 academicians in Malaysia. The findings revealed that happiness among the lecturers has been influenced positively by Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness, while Neuroticism effects negatively on happiness. Similar to the above findings, Malkoc (2011) also found that Neuroticism was negatively influenced SWB, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness were positively affected SWB. Based on the articles reviewed above, it is shown that different context of studies will reveal different findings, in which the link between personality traits and SWB including it direction (negatively influence or positively influence) might be influenced by the study context focused by researchers. It is found that, lack of study attempts to see whether the influence of personality traits on SWB is due to the difference in respondent demographic such as gender, race, education level and etc., where the researcher may consider to examining these factors with comparison analysis in the future study.

3.2 Socioeconomic Status

Numerous studies also showed the link between socioeconomic status and SWB, especially on the income-SWB relationship, as through income, the spending affordability of individuals can be assessed. A meta-analysis conducted by Pinguart and Sorensen (2000) has synthesized findings from 286 empirical studies, where the result showed that there is a relationship between socioeconomic status which is income and SWB. Other survey conducted towards US residents also supported that high income strongly influence life satisfaction, as low income will cause low life evaluation and low emotional well-being (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). By comparing the levels of SWB among three groups of people who are rich, average and poor, Cummins (2000) found that money buys happiness. Even though income not a sole predictor of life satisfaction and happiness of individuals, but according to Lucas and Diener (2008), income and wealth still have an important implication on SWB. A greater part of the variance in SWB can be explained by taking together income and wealth as suggested by Hochman and Skopek (2013). The result from their study also showed that by controlling for income, wealth has an impact on general life satisfaction, with the poor reporting less satisfaction of life, while debt was found to slightly decrease respondents' general life satisfaction. A comparison study by Ng and Diener (2018) also revealed that people with higher income had higher life evaluation and positive feelings and lower negative feelings as compared to those who earned lower incomes. The longitudinal household survey with four countries in China conducted by Cai and Park (2016) showed that permanent income shock significantly increases SWB.

Although economic development may improve SWB, Wu & Li (2017) claimed that it has also associated with income inequality. Hence they conducted panel data analysis to examine whether life satisfaction affected by income inequality, and the result revealed that there is a negative effect of income inequality on life satisfaction. Apart from relative income both in the past and in the future that shown to be important for current happiness to the people in rural China (Knight, Lina, & Gunatilaka, 2009), previous studies also reported that financial success was associated with higher scores on happiness (Chan & Joseph, 2000). Moreover, it is also vital to examine the link between employment status and SWB, because it is believed that indirectly, it will influence both income and financial circumstances of individuals. Past decade study reported that employment status influence SWB of the people, as in comparison to those who are employed, an unemployed person showed a low level of SWB (Tomas, 1997). Winkelmann (2009) examined the level of SWB with reference sample consists of individuals who made a transition from employment to unemployment between two consecutive survey years. The results from this study proved that on average the level of SWB significantly dropped both for men and women when being unemployed rather than employed. The level of SWB also found to be lowest for unemployed men as compared to women, with both employed men and women have the highest SWB, followed by retired, unemployed and non-working disabled (Stam, Sieben, Verbakel, & de Graaf, 2016). Another study also conducted to examine the effect of a husband's unemployment on his wife's SWB based on data obtained from Korea Labour and Income Panel Survey (2001, 2003-2007). The finding from the study indicated that the level of SWB for a wife with unemployed husband was significantly low (Kim & Do, 2013). Based on the current situation where unemployment problem getting worse and cause of living drastically rise from time to time, hence these findings lead important direction for future research, in which the association of employment-income-financial and their implication on SWB are crucial to being studied

in detail because it will give a clear pictures on what people being experienced in to day life. Additionally, a deeper study on both household and individual income-financial conditions should be considered as it offering more understanding on the related issues, which can assist policymakers in making good policies which benefits to the society.

3.3 Health, Religious Commitment and Spirituality

Health can be considered as one of the contributing factors of SWB, where it is believed that the level of SWB will decline for people suffered by a certain disease. As reported by the previous study, the association between health and SWB of individuals were statistically significant and positive, which mean by improving people's health, the government can improve the SWB of their citizens (Ngamaba, Panagioti, & Armitage, 2017). There is a bidirectional relationship between physical health and SWB, with SWB and health are also closely linked to age (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stoone, 2015). From their review, Steptoe et al., (2015) also found that older people with an illness such as coronary heart disease, arthritis and chronic lung show both increased levels of depressed mood and impaired hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Besides health can predict well of SWB as confirmed by studies mentioned above, by controlling demographic profiles and baseline health covariates, the level of SWB both life satisfaction and positive affect significantly predicted lowered risks of all-cause and natural-cause of mortality (Xu & Roberts, 2010). Similarly, Diener and Chan (2011) also suggested that SWB such as life satisfaction, an absence of negative emotions, optimism and positive emotion leads to better health and longevity. Apart of separation, unemployment and lack of social contact, a study was done by Dolan, Peasgood, and White (2008) also claimed that poor health, strong negatively associated with SWB.

On the other hand, a study by Lucas and Diener (2008) argued that, besides income and wealth, religious commitment also showed consistent correlation with SWB. The findings from Neal (2003) also suggested that levels of self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction were higher for older adults who derive a sense of meaning in life from religion activities. Moreover, spirituality also found to moderate the influence of stress faced by people with their life satisfaction, hence spirituality is a useful resource for maintaining life satisfaction when facing a stress (Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000). A study among Eastern Muslim culture also showed that, other than work satisfaction, social support, social class, income level and marital status, religious affiliation also found to be one of the best predictors of SWB (Kausar & Haroon, 2004). For future studies, as health and SWB were interconnected to each other, it is interestingly to examine both the influence of health on SWB and the influence of SWB on health simultaneously, where it will provide useful findings for better action to be taken by the policymakers. Since it is found that the religious commitment and spirituality are the important attributes that will guide and assist people to feel good about their life, hence beside assessing the direct effect of these attributes on SWB, it is also more useful to examine whether they (religious commitment and spirituality) can mediate the effect of other factors such as socioeconomic status, personality traits and health on the SWB of the respondent in future study.

4.0 Conclusion

To sum up, although there are inconsistent findings revealed in the previous studies, from this review it was found that personality traits, socioeconomic circumstances including financial, income and employment, health and religious commitment are the most frequent dimensions used by the previous researchers in studying SWB. Among personality dimensions, it showed that the level of SWB mostly contributed by Extraversion and Neuroticism. However, it truly depends on the context of study with might be due to the different socio-demographic status of respondents. In addition, unemployment and low-income people are found to have lower levels of SWB. Furthermore, health conditions are also closely related to individual SWB, and those who are less healthy have the lowest SWB. Based on these findings, it is also suggested that high commitment to religious practices can increase the level of individual SWBs.

5.0 Recommendation

Future studies may consider reviewing articles from other search engines and online databases that published before the year 1997 to gain more insight and get a clear picture of dimensions of SWB. It also suggested that for the researchers to conduct an interview with a target respondents, so that they will get more relevant information and deeper understanding on what actually respondents being experienced. Besides determining the important dimensions of SWB, a review related articles for identifying the suitable measurement instrument used when studying SWB also needed and requires further exploration before a real research ready to be conducted. Next, empirical research of SWB should take place as the results that will obtain through empirical research will provide more accurate findings on determinants of SWB and will become a useful reference for the government in implementing more holistic and effective public policies to the people in the country by making sure that no one is left behind.

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