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LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG THE JAPANESE LIVING ABROAD

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ABSTRACT. *The present study was designed to examine differences in life satisfaction between groups of Japanese living in three different countries using the Life Satisfaction Battery (LSB). The LSB was developed by Sorenson (1986) and consists of 12 scales: positive mood, negative mood, physical discomforts, satisfaction, daily routine, competence, accomplishments, resources, stress, motivation, internal obstacles, and external obstacles. This self-report inventory was administered to 747 native Japanese subjects located in three different countries: the United States (325), Egypt (72), and Japan (350). Results demonstrated significant differences between the three groups: Japanese in the United States were generally more satisfied than a comparable group living in their home country, and these two groups were substantially more satisfied with various areas of their lives than were Japanese subjects living in Egypt. This study demonstrates the effects of cultural differences on life satisfaction for people living temporarily in foreign societies, and attempts to explain the differences by interpreting the subjects' expectations and by examining access to help. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd*

INTRODUCTION

People's general life concerns have been found to be quite similar across cultures. Cantril (1965) surveyed subjects' feelings in 13 countries and found similarities in the structure of their perceptions of life components and how they integrate those perceptions in evaluating well-being. Similarly, Andrews and Inglehart (1979) surveyed the structure of perceived well-being in nine western countries and concluded that people in different societies think in basically similar ways about well-being.

With modern technology making the distance between countries seem shorter, and with the growing importance of international exchange in business, communication, art, and science, people are increasingly called

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upon to travel and live for extended periods in foreign countries. Such changes in location also involve changes in many aspects of daily life. Because people who live temporarily in foreign countries must adjust to different lifestyles, customs, vacation styles, languages, working schedules, and so forth, they often suffer much stress, inadequate recreation, and other problems.

Japan is an excellent model to examine because of its rapid progress in the world business community and its maintenance of social customs. It is to be expected that problems should develop while adjusting to a new environment. The troubles will vary depending on the social characteristics of the host country. The present study was undertaken to examine life satisfaction among Japanese people living temporarily in an open society like the United States and in a less open and more traditional society like Egypt. The subjects living abroad are compared with their peers who have remained in Japan.

One of the fundamental hurdles in research of this sort is accurately measuring life satisfaction (subjective well-being or happiness). Myers and Diener (1995) state that subjective well-being (SWB) depends on feeling good frequently, feeling bad infrequently, and a general feeling of satisfaction. In general, SWB does not vary according to sex, race, or socioeconomic status, once basic needs are met. Abrams (1973) has pointed out that one should look to "subjective social indicators", beyond "real world" facts, to measure quality of life. He defined quality of life as "the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction felt by people with various aspects of their lives". This sense of well-being, according to Abrams, is produced by filtering the objective world through individual perceptions, and so must be measured in terms of expectations, experiences, and attitudes as well as present situation.

We chose the Life Satisfaction Battery (Sorenson, 1986) as an instrument. The LSB is based on Flanagan (1974, 1978) who breaks the sense of well-being down into fifteen "quality of life components". This scheme is consistent with Lazarus' (1966) notion that stress and discomfort may be explained as a function of low-level problems of daily life more than as a function of more severe (but less frequent) stressful events. Myers and Diener's (1995) measures of frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and a global sense of satisfaction with life parallel the LSB measures of positive mood, negative mood, and overall satisfaction. Myers and Diener propose that there are some essential components to happiness: the ability to adapt to life events; a cultural worldview regarding the individual's ability to control the environment; the degree to which the world is essentially benevolent for the individual; whether an individual has goals, and the degree to which these goals are fulfilled. The LSB, along with the above researchers, assumes that human happiness in large part depends on whether or not expectations are met. Hejri and

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