

Public Services and Government

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2007: Core Module Report 2 – Subjective perceptions of well-being in Scotland

Lisa Given and Catriona Webster

The Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey was launched by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 1999. Since then it has tracked the social, political and moral attitudes of people living in Scotland. The Scottish Government has funded a 'core' module of questions on the survey since 2004. In 2007 this module included questions designed to measure how happy and satisfied people in Scotland were with their lives in general and how satisfied they were with certain domains in particular. This report summarises the key findings from the report exploring levels of subjective well-being in Scotland

Main Findings

- Levels of subjective well-being are relatively high in Scotland. When asked how happy they considered themselves to be, the mean score was 8 out of 10, where 0 was 'extremely unhappy' and 10 was 'extremely happy'.
- Satisfaction with life as a whole was also high. Again, the average score of people living in Scotland was 8. People were equally satisfied with their family and personal relationships and their general standard of living. The average score for 'job satisfaction' however was 7, a point lower than for the other aspects of life asked about. Across Europe, people also rated their jobs less positively than other domains of their lives.
- The highest 'happiness' score across 23 countries in Europe was 8 out of 10. Scotland was one of 13 countries in Europe to have this as an average score. Similarly, 8 was the highest score on the measure of satisfaction with life as a whole and here Scotland was one of 9 countries to have this as its average score.
- Job satisfaction was slightly lower among men than women (34% of men had below average score compared with 26% of women).
- Life satisfaction was significantly lower among unemployed people than those in paid employment. Half (48%) of unemployed people had a below average (7 or less) life satisfaction score, compared with a quarter (25%) of those in paid employment.
- People who are married or living as married were happier and more satisfied with their lives as a whole than people who were single, separated or divorced. Married people and those living as married were around twice as likely as those who were separated or divorced to rate their satisfaction with 'family or personal life' as 9 or 10 out of 10.
- Job satisfaction is lower among those who live in a household with children than it is for those with none. (35% had a below average job satisfaction score compared with 27% for those with no children in the household).
- A person's perception of how they are coping financially is more strongly related to their subjective well-being than their actual income. People who said they were finding it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to cope were significantly (around three times) more likely than those who were coping, to have a lower than average score on the question asking how happy they consider themselves to be.
- Those living in the most deprived areas in Scotland were almost twice as likely as those living in the least deprived areas to have a below average happiness score (46% compared with 25%).

Introduction

This summary presents key findings from the 2007 *Scottish Social Attitudes* (SSA) survey report on subjective perceptions of well-being in Scotland. The report addresses the following key questions:

- How 'satisfied' are people living in Scotland with particular aspects of their lives?
- How 'happy' do they consider themselves to be?
- Is there any evidence to suggest that some groups of people living in Scotland are more 'satisfied' and 'happy' than others?

SSA 2007 included 5 measures of subjective well-being:

- Satisfaction with life as a whole
- Happiness
- Job satisfaction
- Satisfaction with family or personal life
- Satisfaction with general standard of living

For each of the measures, respondents were asked to place themselves on scale of 0 to 10 where 0 was 'extremely dissatisfied' and 10 was 'extremely satisfied.' On the happiness measure 0 represented 'extremely unhappy' and 10 was 'extremely happy'. An average score of 4 or under means that more people are dissatisfied than are satisfied, while for a score of 6 or above the opposite is true.

Subjective well-being in Scotland

When asked how satisfied they were with their life as a whole, the average score was 8 out of 10, where 10 was 'extremely satisfied.' Eight was also the average score on the question asking people how 'happy' they consider themselves to be.

Much has been written about the importance of family and relationships in ensuring high well-being and with an average score of 8.4, it is clear that the majority of people living in Scotland are satisfied with this aspect of their life and more satisfied with it than the other domains asked about.

People were also asked how satisfied they were with their 'general standard of living' and again the average score was 8 out of 10 indicating that more people are satisfied with it than are dissatisfied.

Those in paid work were asked how satisfied they were with their job and while the average score of 7 was the lowest of the five scores it is still comfortably above the mid-point on the scale indicating that more people are satisfied with their job than are dissatisfied with it.

How do levels of SWB in Scotland compare with levels in other European countries?

Subjective well-being scores in Scotland are high and while encouraging, it is not unusual for scores in Western developed countries to be positively skewed (Bramston, 2002). To compare Scotland's apparently high levels of happiness and life satisfaction with other countries, the questions included in SSA 2007 were the same as those asked in the 2006 European Social Survey (ESS). ESS 2006 was carried out in 23 countries across Europe using rigorous methods similar to those employed on SSA.

Levels of subjective well-being in Scotland compare favourably with those of other countries in Europe surveyed. Scotland is one of 9 countries in Europe to have a mean 'life satisfaction' score of 8 and one of 13 countries to have an average 'happiness' score of 8 out of 10 on the happiness measure. On both these measures 8 was the highest score returned by any country.

SSA 2007 found little evidence to support Bell & Blanchflower's (2007) conclusion that people in Scotland are less satisfied and happy than those in the rest of the UK. Scotland had a mean life satisfaction score of 8.1 compared with 7.2 for the rest of the UK.

Across Europe it appears that people are less satisfied with their jobs than their life in general.

Factors associated with subjective well-being

Despite encouraging levels of subjective well-being at the aggregate level there was evidence that some groups of people living in Scotland are less happy and satisfied with life than others.

On 4 out of the 5 measures included in SSA 2007 there was no significant difference between the assessments of men and women. The exception was 'job satisfaction'; on this measure a third (34%) of men had a lower than average score (6 or less) compared with 26% of women.

The relationship between age and well-being has been well documented. Recent evidence has consistently pointed to a 'U-shaped' relationship – that is that well-being is at its lowest among the middle age groups in society. There is evidence of this 'U-shaped' pattern among people living in Scotland. When asked how satisfied they were with their lives as a whole and how happy they considered themselves to be, it was the youngest and oldest age groups that gave the most positive assessments. Forty-eight percent of 18-24 year olds and 56% of people aged 65 or over had an above average score on the 'happiness' measure compared with just 28% of 35-54 year olds. However, once a range of other factors were controlled for in the analysis, the relationship was no longer significant suggesting that there are other factors which are more strongly related to subjective well-being than a person's age.

There was some evidence that people with no educational qualifications were less satisfied with their job and general standard of living than those with qualifications. However, multivariate analysis confirmed that other factors were more strongly correlated with these measures than level of education. This is in line with Layard's conclusion that education has limited impact on happiness (Layard, 2005).

A key factor associated with four out of the five measures included in SSA was employment status. Despite the relatively small number of unemployed people that took part in the 2007 survey, it was still the case that they were significantly *more* likely than people in paid work to have *lower* than average subjective well-being. Half (48%) of those who were unemployed had a overall life satisfaction score of less than eight compared with a quarter (25%) of those in, or waiting to take up paid work.

Retired people had the highest levels of subjective well-being with only around one in five having lower than average scores across the board. Although 27% of retired people did have a lower than average score for satisfaction with 'general standard of living'.

People working in routine and semi-routine occupations had the most negative assessments of their job and standard of living. Half (48%) of these people had a below average job satisfaction score compared with a fifth (20%) of 'Employers, managers and professionals'.

SSA 2007 data supports Bell and Blanchflower's (2007) conclusion that in Scotland married people are happier than single people. A person's marital status was found to be a key factor relating to how satisfied they were with their life as a whole, their family or personal life and how happy they considered themselves to be. For example, around half

(46%) of people who were married or living as married gave a score of '9' or '10' out of 10 when asked how satisfied they were with life as a whole, compared with 31% of unmarried people and 30% of those who were separated or divorced.

There was no relationship between whether a person lives in a household with children or not and their satisfaction with life as a whole. However job satisfaction was lower among those who lived with children than those who did not. Forty-nine percent of those living with children had an above average job satisfaction score compared with 54% of those who did not live with children.

The paradox at the centre of the debate on happiness and well-being is that while Western developed countries have become wealthier; they have become no happier as a result. Yet there is evidence that within developed nations wealthy people are happier than those who are less well-off financially. In Scotland, there is a significant and independent relationship between a person's household income and how satisfied they are with their job and their general standard of living. People on the *lowest* household incomes were much *more* likely than those on higher incomes to have a lower than average score on these measures.

A person's assessment of how they are coping financially is more strongly related to their subjective wellbeing than their actual income. On all five of the measures included in the survey, people who said they were living 'comfortably' or 'very comfortably' were happier and more satisfied than those finding it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to cope financially. It is perhaps not surprising that the difference was most pronounced with regards satisfaction with 'general standard of living' but the impact goes beyond this. People finding it difficult or very difficult to cope were three times as likely as those living comfortably to have lower than average scores for 'happiness', 'satisfaction with family life' and 'satisfaction with life as a whole'.

The level of deprivation of the area a person lived in was a key factor relating to their assessment of how happy they were, how satisfied they were with their life as a whole and their job in particular. On all 3 of these measures people living in the most deprived areas were least happy and satisfied. For example, people living in the most deprived areas in Scotland were almost twice as likely as those living in the least deprived areas to have a below average happiness score (46% compared with 25%).

Job satisfaction was lower among people who reported having an illness, disability or health problem than it was for those with none (43% had a lower than average score compared with 27% with none). However, a person's

assessment of their health was more strongly related to their subjective well-being than presence of a health condition. For example, those who described their health as 'bad' or 'very bad' were almost four times as likely as those who described it as 'very good' to have a lower than average life satisfaction score (57% compared with 16%).

Conclusions

At the national level, subjective well-being is high and is on a par with most other countries in Europe. However, there is clear evidence that some groups of people living in Scotland are significantly less satisfied and happy with their lives than others.

A person's marital status and whether or not they are in paid employment or not were both strongly related to their subjective well-being. Socio-economic classification and household income were related to a person's assessment of both their job and their standard of living.

In addition to these objective indicators, two subjective measures were also highly correlated with well-being – self-assessed health and self-perceived financial hardship. The

findings suggest that subjective well-being is as much about how a person feels about their situation as it is about the actuality of the situation. A person may be relatively wealthy or healthy but if they don't feel that this is the case, then it is likely to impact upon their assessment of how happy and satisfied they are with their life.

Along with existing evidence, it is clear that it is those who are truly experiencing financial hardship and/or poor health that are most susceptible to poor subjective well-being. The Scottish Government's 2008 action plan 'Towards a mentally flourishing Scotland' will aim to tackle these inequalities and ensure that the mental health and well-being of everyone living in Scotland improves.

Methodology

The Scottish Social Attitudes survey involves around 1,500 interviews annually, with respondents selected using random probability sampling to ensure that the results are robust and representative of the Scottish population. The 2007 survey, which was conducted between May and early November 2007, involved face-to-face interviews and a self-completion questionnaire.

This document, along with "Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2007 – Core Module Report 2: Subjective Perceptions of Well-Being in Scotland" the full research report of the project and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Social Research website at: www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or telephone 0131 244 7560.



Social Science in Government

ISBN 978-0-7559-7194-7

