

Palmore E & Luikart C. Health and social factors related to life satisfaction.
J. Health Soc. Behavior 13:68-80, 1972.
[Duke University, Durham, and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC]

In an analysis of health, activity, social-psychological, and socio-economic variables thought to influence life satisfaction in middle age, it was found that self-rated health was the predominant variable. The amount of organizational activity and belief in internal control were the second and third most important. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index®* (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 150 publications since 1972.]

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May 16, 1985

I had come to Duke University in 1967 and helped design the Duke Adaptation Study (now called the Duke Second Longitudinal Study of Aging). Since then, I had become convinced that, of all the hundreds of variables we were measuring, longevity and life satisfaction were the two most important outcomes to investigate. I had already done some analysis of the predictors of longevity, and by 1971, the data on life satisfaction from the first round of examinations were ready for analyses.

Clark Luikart, a graduate student from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, came to me and offered to help analyze the data in exchange for using some of it for his master's thesis. I accepted his offer because I wanted to do a rather ambitious analysis of all the factors related to life satisfaction to find out which were most important. I hoped this would help us discover what causes happiness, for whom, and why. Having a capable and eager graduate-student assistant to help and to spur me on was important to the successful completion of the investigation.

When we found that self-rated health, organizational activity, and internal orientation were the most important predictors of life satisfaction, we decided that the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* would be the appropriate place to publish the results.

However, the first version of the paper that we sent to the journal did not contain any analysis of the correlates of the predictors. Among several suggestions for revisions, there was a suggestion that the correlates of these independent variables would also be interesting. Essentially, the reviewer wanted us to explore what caused the predictor variables. So we did the additional analysis and included it in the revised version, which was then accepted for publication.

Frankly, I was surprised to find that this article has become "one of the most cited items in its field." I have puzzled over why and I now think the following factors help explain its popularity.

The results confirmed some general expectations and thus seemed reasonable, and yet there were enough surprises to make it interesting. The findings confirm the ideas that "health is the most important thing" and "money can't buy happiness." But it was more surprising that organizational activity and belief in internal control might contribute to life satisfaction. Also of interest was the way the correlations varied by gender and age. Most surprising was the lack of any relationship between life satisfaction and age, gender, total social contacts, marital status, and intelligence.

The fact that we published this paper in a medical sociology journal rather than a gerontology journal (which is where most of my articles are published) probably gave it a wider audience among social scientists.

It was one of my earlier articles and has had 12 years to accumulate citations. This gives me hope that some of my more recent publications in this area will eventually become *Citation Classics*.

For example, while this earlier article was a cross-sectional analysis, the results of longitudinal analyses of the same data have been reported in another paper¹ and in my book, *Social Patterns in Normal Aging*.² These analyses confirm the importance of health as the primary predictor of life satisfaction but modify the picture for the secondary predictors.

1. Palmore E & Kivett V. Change in life satisfaction. *J. Gerontology* 32:311-16, 1977. (Cited 50 times.)
2. Palmore E. *Social patterns in normal aging: findings from the Duke longitudinal study*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981. 135 p.