TRENDS IN LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG CANADIANS

1968-1977

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The Social Trends Project is a major part of the Institute for Research on Public Policy's Futures Studies Program. With this project, IRPP hopes to provide decision makers with a challenging new way of thinking about social change in Canada. It will explore trends of the post-war period as a springboard for sketching alternative futures.

This paper reports on an analysis of the changes in Canadians' perceptions of the quality of life over the past decade. As the report indicates, there is evidence of both favourable and unfavourable signs for the future of Canada. Regardless of what we hope that future will be, it is nevertheless useful for us to consider this analysis and its implications as we develop public policies which will determine, at least in part, which sign turns out to be correct.

Michael J.L. Kirby
President
January 1979
PRÉFACE

Une part importante du Programme d'études de prospective de l'Institut de recherches politiques est consacrée à l'analyse des tendances sociales. Grâce à ces travaux, l'IRP compte présenter aux décisionnaires une façon nouvelle et stimulante de concevoir l'évolution de la société canadienne. Le projet analyse donc les tendances d'après-guerre comme point de départ pour l'esquisse des futurs possibles.

Le présent rapport dresse le bilan des modifications qu'a subies, au cours de la dernière décennie, la perception de la qualité de la vie chez les Canadiens. Le rapport accuse des indices tant favorables que défavorables relativement à l'avenir du Canada. Abstraction faite de notre conception d'un avenir souhaitable, cette analyse inductive nous sera précieuse dans l'élaboration progressive des politiques qui détermineront, au moins en partie, que des indices se matérialiseront.

Michael J.L. Kirby
Président
Janvier 1979
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research by the Institute for Behavioural Research at York University, on which a good part of this study depends, was undertaken thanks to financial assistance provided by Canada Council Grant No. S75-0332. The 1968 and 1974 national surveys, also used here, were similarly funded.

The Social Trends Project is led by Marc Laplante. The present report was revised and edited by Russell Wilkins and David Hoffman; the French Abrégé was the responsibility of Monique Charpentier; and the charts appearing in the text were done by Jean Mineau, under the direction of Liane Clish, Department of Geography, University of Montreal.
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Section One

GENERAL SATISFACTION AND THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF LIFE

HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS BE USED IN THE MEASUREMENT OF SOCIAL WELL-BEING?

In order to evaluate a person's general life satisfaction, an interviewer asks him how contented he is with his life situation. What is the worth of a response to such a question? How can a purely subjective expression of satisfaction be integrated into a system of social indicators? These are the sorts of questions which must be considered prior to any discussion of the results of Canadian research into trends in the level of general life satisfaction.

During the past fifteen years, considerable interest has arisen in the development of social indicators as important tools for understanding the direction in which societies are moving, and as diagnostic aids which identify inequalities in the distribution of goods and services within a particular society. Social indicators are intended to be analogous in their function to better-known economic indicators, such as the Gross National Product, the Consumer Price Index, and the Unemployment Rate, all of which are used to plot economic activity. Although definitions of social indicators abound, three elements are usually included in each: they measure conditions relative to some state of individual or societal well-being; they are summary measures or indices rather than statistics on a single system attribute; and they are meant to be measured over time to allow a determination of trends.

By this rather loose definition, the social indicators concept is a large one incorporating measures which derive from economic and physical systems as well as from social conditions. In general, anything which may be remotely related to the quality of life has been included in some proposed typology of social indicators. It is more accurate to think of social indicators as descriptions of conditions which affect society rather than as measures of interpersonal conditions.

Progress toward the development of comprehensive social indicator systems has been slow, although a massive array of government statistics on social, economic, and physical conditions is available in most countries. As yet, there is no consensus on how individual statistics should be weighted and summed to form indicators in specific areas, such as health, let alone to form more general indicators of the quality of life. Nor is there agreement on optimum values for particular statistics. It is generally agreed, for example, that overcrowding is undesirable, but no individual or agency has suggested ideal space requirements for individuals or families. Finally, there is general recognition that the utility of different goods and services varies within the population, a fact which casts some doubt on the validity of any single formula for the determination of social well-being.

As a response to these complexities and in an attempt to develop social
indicators which are more sensitive to individual needs and preferences, some researchers have begun to design measures based on the individual's assessment of his own situation. These measures are referred to as indicators of the perceived quality of life. The central premise of this perspective is that, in one sense, the quality of life is in the eye of the beholder. That being the case, measuring the phenomenon requires asking individual citizens for assessments of their lives, both in terms of satisfaction in general and of satisfaction within specific areas. Extensive research on the characteristics of self-reported measures has shown that individuals can, and do, make such assessments and that they are fairly reliable and valid.

RESEARCH INTO THE SUBJECTIVE ASPECTS OF THE QUALITY OF LIFE

The initial research on perceptions of the quality of life was undertaken in the United States and Britain, with most studies conducted between 1970 and 1975. Canadian research in this area was slow to evolve, but a five-year project with a major focus on perceptual social indicators is now underway.

This research is being conducted at the Institute for Behavioural Research at York University, under the direction of Tom Atkinson, Michael Ornstein, Michael Stevenson, and Bernard Blishen. (See appendix.) Funding is provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council over a five-year period from 1976 to 1981.

The analysis presented here makes use of one small part of the data from the first of three phases planned for this project. By combining these recent data with the results of two earlier studies, it is possible to show trends in the perceived quality of life in Canada over a ten-year period, and cast some light on the dynamics of that phenomenon as well as its implications for the future.


ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES IN THE USE OF SATISFACTION MEASURES AS INDICATORS OF THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF LIFE

By what criteria and according to whose norms is satisfaction to be defined?

Satisfaction is, of course, related to the fulfilment of basic human needs and wants, but it remains nonetheless a fundamentally subjective experience. Rather than being mechanically determined by objective conditions, it depends
on the individual's perception and evaluation of those conditions. In responding to a question requiring the evaluation of his level of life satisfaction, an individual makes a comparative judgement based on his personal values and life experience; he sees his present condition not in relation to some absolute standard, but in relation to his own desires and aspirations, taking into consideration the life conditions of those around him, and in recognition of his own previous situation.

For a better understanding of the pages to follow, we should first consider a few of the methodological problems posed by the measurement of life satisfaction.

Despite some very elaborate methodological research on the attributes of perceptual measures of the quality of life, no consensus has been formed as to the best measures. One type of measure, however, has been included in more studies than any of the others and has been the central variable in most reports on perceptions of the quality of life. That measure is personal satisfaction—with life in general and with various aspects or domains, such as work, health, marriage, and so on. These measures were at the heart of the work of Campbell and Converse in the United States, Abrams and Hall in the United Kingdom, and of the quality of life aspects of the Euro-Barometer surveys conducted by the Commission of the European Communities. The analysis presented here shares this emphasis on satisfaction measures in the determination of the quality of life. Comparability with the few existing pieces of data from the past has been maintained, permitting us to investigate the development of long-run trends as well as to examine the levels of satisfaction at several specific points in time.

The focus of this analysis is satisfaction with life as a whole, as evaluated and reported by representatives of the population of Canada. General life satisfaction has a number of attributes which recommend it as an important measure of the perceived quality of life: it is individually defined and makes no assumptions about the importance of various aspects of experience; it is a single indicator which provides a summary measure of the quality of life; it indicates the extent to which society is meeting the needs of its members in terms of standards of acceptability established by each of those members; finally, it requires personal assessments which are largely cognitive, rather than affective, in nature—that is, the subjective determination of satisfaction requires a considered assessment of one's current status in relation to some personal standard of acceptability, while affective measures, such as "happiness," are better described as gut responses, which are less responsive to changes in objective conditions.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a brief recognition of some of the shortcomings of satisfaction measures is called for. Although it is generally agreed that responses to satisfaction measures require an assessment of one's current situation and a comparison of this assessment against some sort of standard of acceptability, it is difficult to say with certainty exactly what that standard of acceptability might be. Among the standards which have been shown to be relevant are levels of aspiration and expectation, perceptions of what others have, and memories of previous conditions.
A more fundamental problem derives from the concept of happiness itself, because it is clear that at least two kinds of satisfaction are possible—the satisfaction of accomplishment and the satisfaction of resignation. The former results from the achievement of high standards while the latter stems from the acceptance of low standards. It is possible that individuals may judge themselves to have a high quality of life, but be dissatisfied because it is not high enough. Conversely, they may perceive the quality of their lives as low, but having expected nothing better, be satisfied. Small pilot studies undertaken prior to the national survey in 1977 indicated that individuals did distinguish between perceptions of quality and judgments of satisfaction, and that the quality judgments were more closely tied to objective indicators, such as income, than were the satisfaction measures.

The rationale for the use of satisfaction variables, however, goes beyond its convenience and comparability with other studies. The motivation for developing perceptual indicators was a desire to allow for individually defined needs and standards of evaluation. Variation in those standards across the population and the possibility of different types of satisfaction are inherent in any individually based measure. Research currently underway will cast some light on the extent to which satisfaction in different sectors of the population derives from a sense of resignation rather than accomplishment. Early findings are that most satisfaction stems from a sense of accomplishment, and that, where there is evidence of resignation, it does not appear to be tied to obvious social status indicators, such as income.

Satisfaction measures are also of interest for another reason. Regardless of their relationship to other quality of life indicators, satisfaction levels may provide a rough and ready measure of the potential for social and political change. Lack of public acceptance of, and satisfaction with, the social and political institutions and practices which affect an individual's life should be associated with endorsement of change, just as acceptance of these institutions and practices would be expected to result in resistance to change. Levels of satisfaction with the various aspects of one's life have implications for the rate and extent of change which will receive public support. They may serve a dual purpose as measures of the perceived quality of life and of the potential for social change; but while satisfaction levels may indicate the degree of motivation for change, the behaviour required to effect change requires both an awareness of possible alternatives and a sense of personal efficacy. Thus, low levels of satisfaction may not lead to change because the discontented do not know how to change the system.

In sum, the perceived quality of life is a multidimensional concept. Satisfaction is one of those dimensions, but whether it is the most significant of them depends on the theoretical orientation of the reader. One cannot, however, analyse trends without good quantitative data from at least two points in time, and the only available trend data in Canada with respect to the perceived quality of life are the data on life satisfaction. A five-year project, now underway at York University will provide time-series data on a number of different aspects of the perceived quality of life, and determine whether these are sensitive to various socio-demographic factors and different social,
political, and economic events. For the moment, despite the difficulties mentioned above, trends in life satisfaction provide the only clues as to where we have come from and where we are going in terms of the perceived quality of life.
Section Two

THE LEVELS OF GENERAL LIFE SATISFACTION IN CANADA

Three national attitude surveys, done in 1968, 1974, and 1977 and using comparable questions, allow us to conclude that more than 80% of Canadians are at least fairly satisfied with their life, while 35% consider themselves very satisfied. These percentages have changed but little during the course of the ten-year period considered. In spite of certain reservations imposed by the different methods used, the validity of these surveys is sufficiently great to permit useful comparisons to be made over time.

If life satisfaction is recognized as one of several aspects of the perceived quality of life, the results of three national surveys provide the only available measures of perceptions of the quality of life in Canada which are comparable over time. Although two of the surveys were conducted to examine voting behaviour in the federal elections of 1968 and 1974, each included single questions on satisfaction with life in general. The most recent of the three focused on the perceived quality of life and included extensive measures of attitudes to life in general as well as to specific aspects of it, such as job, health, housing, marriage, and so forth. This analysis will be concerned only with the general life satisfaction measure. The results of each survey are presented in table 1 and the corresponding chart.

Before considering these results in detail, the shortcomings of these data must be discussed. Although the text of the question is almost identical in each case, it is unfortunate that the response categories in the 1977 study differed from those of the previous two studies. This difference means that, in the strictest sense, the data may not be comparable and firm conclusions about the direction of change cannot be reached. However, small studies conducted by the Institute for Behavioural Research show that comparability can be obtained by collapsing response categories for the 1977 data; thus, it is argued that a trend analysis is in fact possible. Even so, the results presented below and their interpretation must remain tentative and suggestive, rather than definitive. Nevertheless, our understanding of social change is advanced by this investigation, whereas it could not be if such analyses were restricted to those cases where the data met the criteria of exact comparability.

The first impression that emerges from table 1 is of the fairly high level of general life satisfaction which exists in Canada. Even in the worst year (1974), only 16% indicated that they were less than satisfied with their lives. Slightly more than one-third of all Canadians characterize themselves as "very satisfied." Over the past ten years, the proportion of Canadians considering themselves "very satisfied" has varied between 33% and 40%.

By comparing the response distributions of Canadians in 1968, 1974, and 1977, we see that the percentage of persons declaring themselves to be "very
TABLE 1
Trends in General Life Satisfaction
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

Percentage of the Adult Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Fairly Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>TOTAL (number)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>30 66.66%</td>
<td>47 1284.98%</td>
<td>14 352.76%</td>
<td>100 (2783) = 1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>34 415.56%</td>
<td>50 1239</td>
<td>16 592.32%</td>
<td>100 (1234) = 1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>35 415.15%</td>
<td>53 986.34%</td>
<td>12 1105.04%</td>
<td>100 (3289) = 1.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For persons aged 20 years and over in 1968, or 18 years and over in 1974 and 1977.
satisfied" declined from 38.6% in 1968 to 34.1% in 1974 (a statistically significant change), then more slightly to 35.2% in 1977 (a change which was not statistically significant). Thus it may be concluded that although there was some decrease in the percentage of "very satisfied" persons during the late 1960s and early 1970s, this decline did not continue into the late 1970s. Further examination of Table I reveals that the decline was not the result of more Canadians becoming dissatisfied with their lives—the percentage indicating that they were to some degree not satisfied went from 13.6% in 1968 to 15.7% in 1974, and from there to 12.1% in 1977. Instead, the major change occurred in the degree of satisfaction, with a decline in the proportion who were "very satisfied" and an increase in the proportion who indicated that they were "fairly satisfied."

Whether this trend represents a decline from traditionally higher levels of satisfaction or a return to a more "normal" state following an upward surge in the perceived quality of life during the 1960s, we cannot say, because the relevant evidence does not exist. Nor can we conclude with any certainty that the decline has bottomed out. There are only three data points in this analysis and thus it is easy to mistake random variation for trend changes. Research in this area over the next four years will do much to clarify the true direction of the national trend. The later sections of this report will cast more light on future trends by examining the correlates of satisfaction in the Canadian population.

CANADA IN RELATION TO EIGHT WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Lest we be overcome with admiration for the success of our economic and social systems as highly efficient satisfiers of human needs, a comparison of the 1977 Canadian results with similar data collected in eight European countries in 1975 is illuminating because the latter study used exactly the same question and response categories as the 1977 Canadian survey; hence the results are directly comparable. A comparison of the proportion of each national sample indicating very high levels of satisfaction with life in general—that is to say, scale responses 10 and 11—produces the ranking shown in the left-hand column of Table 2.

While there are several ways of using these data to compare nations, this rank-order method indicates that, although Canada scores above the mid-point for these nine countries, it is a considerable distance behind both Denmark and Ireland in terms of levels of life satisfaction.

A discussion of international differences is not the intent of this paper, but a brief comment is in order. A rank ordering of these nine countries in terms of a rough measure of their standard of living—Gross Domestic Product per capita—yields the ranking shown in the column to the right. Clearly, there is a general similarity in the orderings of the two lists. For example, three of the top four in the life satisfaction ratings are in the top four of the list measuring standard of living, lending some support to the contention that national economic success does encourage citizen satisfaction. However,
the exceptions to this rule are remarkable. The Irish are much too satisfied, given their economic situation, while the Germans are much less so than would be expected. Canada has a slightly higher Gross Domestic Product than Denmark, but trails substantially in terms of satisfaction. The effects of economic conditions on the perceived quality of life are far from clear and warrant extensive investigation in their own right.

TABLE 2

Rank Order of Canada 1977 and Eight European Countries 1975
According to Levels of Life Satisfaction and Levels of Gross Domestic Product per Capita

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank Order According to Levels of Life Satisfaction</th>
<th>Rank Order According to Gross Domestic Product per Capita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Very Satisfied</td>
<td>Rank Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Denmark</td>
<td>CANADA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ireland (Republic of)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Belgium</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CANADA</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Great Britain</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Netherlands</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Germany</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. France</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Italy</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section Three

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AFFECTING PERSONAL LIFE SATISFACTION

The indicator of general life satisfaction in Canada is high. All the same, Canadian society is composed of a number of different regions, socio-economic categories, ethnic groups, and so on. Thus, it is useful to examine the possible sources of variation in satisfaction according to each of these main lines of stratification. This analysis in turn reveals the importance of age and income as the two principal factors among the many variables considered.

Although cross-national comparisons and general Canadian trends in the perceived quality of life are of considerable interest, they do not address the two central issues of this study. One major question concerns the distribution of life satisfaction within the Canadian population and the implications for the future of any differences therein. The other involves the degree to which the distribution of satisfaction within the population has changed during the last ten years.

The first issue is important because these demographically based differences in life satisfaction define, in a broad sense, those sectors in which the fruits of Canadian society are unequally distributed, and they provide some clues as to which political, economic, or social factors are responsible for the inequality. Such an analysis may also suggest changes which may be expected to occur in the future, particularly if age is significantly related to satisfaction. The second issue also relates to future perspectives, in that changes in the correlates of satisfaction may foreshadow longer-term trends with clear social consequences. However, since only three observations at relatively close points in time are currently available, and each of these may have been affected by short-term events, any conclusions drawn on the basis of the surveys must necessarily be guarded and suggestive.

The significant differences observed in life satisfaction within the Canadian population cannot be attributed to the small differences in question wording or response-scale attributes. Since each survey is examined individually and comparisons made between the size of the relationships rather than the actual magnitude of the positive response, slight methodological differences are inconsequential and conclusions based on these observed differences will rest on firm ground.

Any analysis which attempts to relate a cluster of socio-demographic attributes to behavioural or attitudinal measures must be sensitive to problems arising from high intercorrelations among the former variables (multicollinearity). Difficulties in interpretation of results often arise when the analysis does not simultaneously assess the effects of the important independent variables. For example, it is not unusual to find researchers reporting that education and income were related to a particular attitude or behaviour, and then suggesting theories which explain those aspects of the educational
process and of the income or class structure which are presumed responsible for the effects. In fact, an analysis which related education and income simultaneously to the dependent variable might reveal that only one of the two was strongly related. The apparent association of the other resulted primarily from its relationship to the stronger of the two. In the tables of the following analysis, we will identify the unique effects of the socio-demographic variables by holding constant the effects of the strongest variables.

Table 3 shows the correlations between a number of socio-demographic factors and general life satisfaction. Two correlations are shown for each year—the first is the direct (or zero order) correlation between each factor and satisfaction, while the second figure is the correlation with the effects of family income discounted or partialled out. This latter figure indicates the size of the differences which would have been expected between groups even if their incomes had been equivalent.

The first three factors—income, education, and occupation—are achieved-status variables which are highly correlated with each other. Of the three, income is clearly the variable most closely linked to life satisfaction, although the size of the relationship is significantly smaller in 1977 than at either of the other two points in time. Since education is less strongly correlated with satisfaction than is income, the relationships are substantially reduced when income is held constant. The relationship between education and satisfaction was small, but negative, in 1977, contrary to the positive correlation in previous years. Correlations involving the five major occupation groups show no consistent link with satisfaction.

The education relationships are not sufficiently strong to warrant extensive comment, but the existence of a modest negative relationship, apparent in the 1977 survey after controlling for the effects of income differences, would represent a significant change if it reappeared in the 1979 survey. It is argued sometimes that education increases an individual's ability to find satisfaction in cultural, creative, and self-expressive activity, and consequently, the effects of education transcend the effects of increased earning potential that go with it. This analysis shows, unquestionably, that the effects of education are smaller than those of income and are significantly reduced when income is held constant. Further, it may now be the case that education is negatively related to satisfaction because the high expectations produced by that education are being frustrated by opposing social forces.

The next three factors to be examined are "birthright" variables, that is, they accrue to the individual at birth. Age shows a consistent and substantial correlation with satisfaction, and the size of the relationship increases when the effects of income are held constant. In other words, satisfaction increases with age, but part of the effect is hidden by the fact that income tends to decrease as age increases. Once the effects of income differences are removed, the size of the relationship between age and satisfaction increases. Other correlations indicate that females are more satisfied than males, but differences are small. A negative correlation for the ethnicity variable in 1968 and 1974 means that French Canadians were less satisfied
### TABLE 3
Correlations Between General Life Satisfaction and Selected Socio-Economic Variables
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Economic Variables</th>
<th>Correlations with General Life Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1968 (Income)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/Manager</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Labour</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled Labour</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Size</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritimes</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairies</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.C.</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For persons aged 20 years and over in 1968, or 18 years and over in 1974 and 1977.
than those of other ethnic backgrounds. The change in 1977 from negative to positive relations between ethnicity and satisfaction is quite interesting, but the income and age correlations with satisfaction are considerably stronger. (For a discussion of differences between ethnic groups, see Bernard R. Blishen and T.H. Atkinson: "Anglophone and Francophone Differences in Perceptions of the Quality of Life in Canada," paper read at the Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala, Sweden, August 1978.)

The two location variables, community size and region, are not strongly correlated with life satisfaction. Community size figures indicate slight increases in satisfaction as size decreases, while the only significant regional difference is the shift from a negative to a positive relationship for Quebec in 1977. That relationship is probably a reflection of the ethnicity pattern mentioned above.

THE EFFECT OF INCOME AND AGE ON LEVELS OF LIFE SATISFACTION

It is not surprising to find that different income groups experience different levels of life satisfaction. But how great are the differences between the most and least favoured income groups, and how have these differences evolved over the course of the last ten years? This information is important for decision making. From the results of this study, it would seem that income is being displaced by other factors as an explanation of differences in perceived life satisfaction.

As far as differences by age are concerned, the results lead us to an interesting reflection on the importance of life-cycle effects as compared to generational effects. It appears that the unique experience of each generation creates an environment capable of influencing an individual's perception of the quality of life. Visible in the attitudes of today's younger generations is an evident lack of satisfaction when compared to earlier generations at the same stages of the life cycle. What may be the future consequences of this dissatisfaction?

Clearly, income and age are the two socio-demographic factors with the most substantial and interesting relationships to life satisfaction. It is also evident that, because of their mutual impact on satisfaction, any analysis of one of these factors must proceed with the effects of the other held constant. Controlling for changes in age and income will permit us to illuminate the real trends in life satisfaction—as opposed to the effects of variations in age composition and income levels—over the course of the ten-year period.

Table 4 and the corresponding chart present some of the results of the three surveys, broken down by income levels, after adjusting to remove the effects of age differences between the groups. The figures shown refer to the
Life Satisfaction by Income Level
Controlling for the Effect of Age Differences
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

Percentage of the Adult Population "Very Satisfied"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Percentiles</th>
<th>1-15</th>
<th>16-27</th>
<th>28-40</th>
<th>41-64</th>
<th>65-75</th>
<th>76-85</th>
<th>86-100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For persons aged 20 years and over in 1968, or 18 years and over in 1974 and 1977.

\[ G^2 = 4.256, \quad p < 0.05 \]

\[ \text{TE} = 0.207, \quad p < 0.01 \]

PERCENTAGE OF THE ADULT POPULATION DECLARING THEMSELVES TO BE VERY SATISFIED WITH THEIR LIFE, BY INCOME LEVEL, CONTROLLING FOR THE EFFECT OF AGE DIFFERENCES
Canada, 1968 - 1977

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All income groups

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p.15
percentage of the adult population declaring themselves to be "very satisfied." Each of the three surveys shows a different patterning of income group scores.

In 1968, the relationship between income and satisfaction was strong. The percentage declaring themselves to be "very satisfied" increased in a linear fashion as income level rose. Compared to the median income group, 15% fewer of the lowest income group and 11% more of the highest income group were "very satisfied."

In 1974, although the relationship remained fairly strong, almost all the variations in levels of satisfaction occurred at the lower end of the income distribution. Compared to the median income group, 17% fewer of the lowest income group, but only 4% more of the highest income group, declared themselves to be "very satisfied."

In 1977, the lower income groups evidenced substantial improvement in levels of satisfaction, resulting in considerable reductions in the differences between income groups and a consequential reduction in the correlation between income and satisfaction.

Over the ten-year period, 1968-1977, the satisfaction levels of the lowest quartile of income distribution improved, those of the highest quartile worsened, while the levels of the two middle quartiles remained remarkably constant. This means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict levels of life satisfaction from income characteristics. In short, income appears to be losing its effect as a conditioner of life satisfaction.

This finding is highly significant, but the lack of more extensive historical data leaves us somewhat uncertain as to the meaning of the change. It may be, for instance, that the 1960s represented a break from the past. In this period of economic expansion and prosperity, there may have been a stronger correlation between income and satisfaction than had previously been the case. If this is true, then the data from the seventies indicate a return to an earlier, weaker relationship between income and life satisfaction. On the other hand, it may be that we are witnessing a unique and significant attitudinal change in which social classes, at least as measured by family income, are no longer differentiated by levels of life satisfaction.

Whichever is the case, the trend over the past decade begs for an explanation. A more detailed analysis than is possible here is required, but two general types of explanations are plausible.

It may be that those in high income categories have had relatively greater difficulty in realizing their ambitions than those in lower income categories. Or it may be that it has become more difficult for both low and high income

* In the following sections, the terms "satisfaction" and "general life satisfaction" are used to refer only to those persons declaring themselves to be "very satisfied."
groups to realize their ambitions, but that the lower income groups have re-
signed themselves to the situation--thus producing the satisfaction that comes
with lowered expectations--while those in the upper income groups have not
reduced their expectations and hence have become increasingly frustrated and
dissatisfied. Each of these possible explanations will be examined in turn.

The critical element of the first explanation is that, over the past ten
years, life in general has in fact become somewhat more difficult for those in
higher income brackets and somewhat less difficult for those in the lower
income categories. By more difficult, it is meant that the problems encoun-
tered in realizing one's ambitions and expectations have increased. Since
satisfaction results in part from a realization of expectations, lower rates of
success in achieving high economic and occupational status would have led to a
decline in satisfaction. The unemployment rate in Canada rose from 4.7% in
1968 to 5.8% in 1974, and to slightly over 8% in 1977. There is some evidence
to suggest that unemployment among the well educated has risen at a faster rate
than among other groups. Journalistic reports of high unemployment among recent
college and university graduates are common and are supported by job placement
statistics from those institutions. Assuming that unemployment rates are indic-

tative of a more general restriction in job opportunities, it seems likely that
the possibilities for placement and advancement in desired occupations declined
between 1968 and 1977, and that the rate of decline was greatest among the well
educated and the children of the (financially) well off.

While concerns about economic and occupational status have a major impact
on life satisfaction, other factors also play important roles in determining
levels of general satisfaction. Research in Canada, the United States, and
Great Britain has demonstrated the centrality of marriage and family experi-

cences as determinants of life satisfaction. An analysis of the 1977 Canadian
data indicated that higher income groups were more likely to report misgivings
about their marriages and children than those with low incomes. The correla-
tions between family income and satisfaction, and marriage and children were
significant, though small and negative; that is, high income individuals
tended to be less satisfied with both areas of life than were lower income
individuals. Assuming that expectations about marriage and family are at least
as high in the upper income groups as in the lower, recent social trends which
affect the legitimacy of these institutions may reinforce the economic trends
in creating large discrepancies between expectations and achievements, thus
lowering levels of satisfaction.

In contrast to the higher income groups, those less well off may have
experienced a relative increase in their financial security since 1968 as a
result of more extensive income, health, and social security programs. In
spite of the fact that income inequalities have increased since 1968, the cer-
tainty offered by government programs may have produced a sense of greater
economic security.

This explanation receives some support from American research on life sat-
isfaction, which shows that judgements about one's level of satisfaction result
in large part from a comparison of the current situation and the best situation
previously experienced. Judgements that the current situation is equal to, or better than, the previous best will lead to high levels of satisfaction, and the reverse will be true when the best previously experienced situation substantially exceeds that of the current situation. The effects of the social forces described above would be to produce favourable comparisons for the lower quartile, unfavourable ones for the highest quartile, and neutral or unchanged comparisons in the two middle quartiles.

An alternative explanation for the decrease in the effect of income on life satisfaction is that the reduction in employment opportunities cited above may have affected both the high and low income quartiles negatively, but with different results. It may be that the high income group experienced a decline in life satisfaction as a result of unfulfilled expectations and aspirations, while the low income group resigned itself to the situation and showed an increase in satisfaction merely as a result of falling expectations. To date, the analysis of the 1977 survey has produced very little evidence to support such an explanation. Expectation levels for the lowest income group were below those of the highest group, but the gap between expectations and the current situation is about the same for both groups.

Age and life satisfaction

Any analysis of social trends and their implications would be remiss if it ignored the effects of age. While we might not want to pursue other variables if they were found to be unrelated to life satisfaction, the relationship of age to satisfaction has important implications, regardless of the direction or strength of that relationship. For example, if no relationship with age were uncovered, levels of satisfaction could be expected to be unaffected by the changing demographic structure of the Canadian population. However, a positive relationship between the variables—indicating that older people have higher levels of satisfaction—may suggest that as the proportion of Canadians in the older age categories increases, the average level of satisfaction will increase, other factors being equal.

Table 5 and the corresponding chart report life satisfaction levels by age group, showing the percentage of individuals in a given group that indicated that they were very satisfied. The effects of income have been held constant in order to gain a clearer picture of the impact of age. Since older people are generally poorer than the average, the difference in levels of satisfaction due to age is usually obscured by the depressing effects of the low income levels of the elderly. Ten-year age groups were used to maintain a sizeable number of respondents in each group, thus improving the reliability of the estimates.

Table 5 contains a number of interesting relationships. The first is that in general life satisfaction increases with age. A closer examination reveals that the age relationship is more complicated and has changed over the past decade. In 1968, the distribution of satisfaction by age was clearly curvilinear, with fairly high levels among the young, the lowest levels in the
TABLE 5
Life Satisfaction by Age Group
Controlling for the Effect of Income Differences
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

Percentage of the Adult Population "Very Satisfied"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>18-19</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40-49</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-69</th>
<th>70</th>
<th>All Age Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This age group was not sampled in the 1968 survey.
middle-aged groups, and the highest level reported in the oldest group. In 1974, the shape of the distribution was similar, but flattened somewhat, especially at the lower end. In 1977, the relationship was linear, with satisfaction rising with every increase in age.

It is also clear that the major reason for the decrease in overall levels of satisfaction over the course of the decade was a sharp drop in satisfaction among the young. In the 20-29 year-old group, those declaring themselves "very satisfied" declined from 43% to 29% in ten years—a reduction of nearly one-third in this category. The proportion of 18-19 year-olds indicating high satisfaction levels declined by almost one-quarter between 1974 and 1977. If these age groups had not been represented in the samples, life satisfaction would have shown a slight increase over the decade.

Apart from decline in satisfaction in the under-30 age groups, satisfaction levels for the other age groups remained remarkably stable. The changes in levels of satisfaction in the over-30s were small enough to be well within the range which would result from sampling error if, in fact, there had been no change in these groups. These data clearly support the conclusion that the past ten years have seen significant reductions in the life satisfaction levels among the young. They suggest that, as these generations grow older, the overall level of satisfaction in Canadian society will decrease.

Two types of effects may explain and predict trends in satisfaction by age. On the one hand, increasing age may have an effect on satisfaction because of specific events which occur most frequently to individuals or families at particular stages of the life cycle. In addition, there may be differences in the way each generation or cohort (a group born during the same period) responds to these events. Such effects stem from differences in perspectives and values resulting from critical historical experiences during particular life-cycle stages. For example, it is reasonable to expect differences between two groups of 30 year-olds, one of which was composed of individuals who were teenagers in the 1930s; the other, of those who were teenagers in the 1950s.

The effects of age or life-cycle stage were examined in table 5, but the effects of generation could not be clearly seen. In table 6, the data for cohorts (with ages given in parentheses) are presented to determine some of the effects of generation. Table 6 reinforces many of the impressions gained from table 5. The sharp decline in satisfaction among those born after 1938 is evident, as is the stability in response of those born between 1919 and 1938. Among the older groups, in those born prior to 1919, we see some trends not as clearly visible in the previous analysis. The increasing levels of satisfaction in persons born prior to 1919 (that is to say, of persons aged 49 and over in 1968, 55 and over in 1974, or 58 and over in 1977) are much more impressive here than in table 5 and invite closer scrutiny.

Before turning to a detailed examination of the relationship between age and satisfaction among the young and the old, the separate effects of age and generation evidenced in tables 5 and 6 can be summarized. These data indicate
TABLE 6

Life Satisfaction by Controlling for the Effect of Income Differences
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

Percentage "Very Satisfied" (Ages Given in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>43 (20-29)</td>
<td>33 (30-39)</td>
<td>32 (40-49)</td>
<td>34 (50-59)</td>
<td>42 (60-69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>34 (18-25)</td>
<td>32 (26-35)</td>
<td>27 (36-45)</td>
<td>37 (46-55)</td>
<td>30 (56-65)</td>
<td>50 (66-75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>25 (18-20)</td>
<td>30 (21-28)</td>
<td>32 (29-38)</td>
<td>34 (39-48)</td>
<td>35 (49-58)</td>
<td>46 (59-68)</td>
<td>57 (69-78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not included in sample.
that the changes in satisfaction occurring in the older groups are age or life-cycle changes, not generation differences; that is, they have occurred in the same way for both groups which have reached these ages during the ten years covered by this study. The differences among the young, however, are generational differences in that those under 30 now are substantially less satisfied than the group which was that age ten years ago. Furthermore, the under-30 group of 1968 has lost a good deal of its high level of satisfaction in the ensuing ten years, although no other group was so affected. It must be noted, however, that the decrease returned this cohort to the levels of the previous cohort when they were in their thirties. The past decade has seen the coming of age of younger generations that do not share their predecessors' high levels of satisfaction, and unless checked by other factors, general levels of satisfaction in Canadian society will decline as these groups age. Whatever the causes of the decline, its impact has been almost entirely on those born after 1938.

While these interpretations are well supported by the results, the absence of data from the pre-1968 period again limits the analysis. Interpretation of life-cycle and generation effects and forecasts based on them are dangerous when only two cohorts have passed through each life-cycle stage. The consistency of these data and the reasonableness of the explanations of them are reassuring, but some reservations will remain until the analysis is extended in time.

In table 7, data for the younger cohorts are presented in five-year groups to further clarify the nature of the change in this sector of the population. These figures are statistically less reliable than in the previous analysis because of the smaller number of cases in each group, but two features of the table are evident. Those who were in their twenties in 1968 experienced a significant decline in satisfaction between 1968 and 1974, while the decline among those who were younger seems to have occurred between 1974 and 1977. It is not clear whether this latter drop is the result of economic factors specific to the 1974-1977 period, or the outcome of the youngest age group's first contact with the labour market.

Although the 1965-1974 period is regarded by many as one of economic expansion, employment opportunities during that period were not expanding rapidly enough to absorb the great numbers of young people wishing to enter the labour force. Unemployment among males under 20 years of age rose from 10% in 1965 to 16% in 1975; and among males 20 to 24, from 5% to 13%. Females fared as poorly, with the unemployment rate for those under 20 increasing from 7% to 15%; and for those in the 20-24 age group, from 4% to 8%. By contrast, the unemployment rate for males between 25 and 54 years of age increased from 4% in 1968 to 5% in 1975, while the one for women in the same age group increased from 3% to 5%. The economy may have been expanding during this period, but the economic realities facing the young (at least as indicated by the unemployment rate) were worsening.

Increasing competition for jobs and reduced opportunities for advancement among the young may have burst, or at least deflated, the bubble of optimism which characterized this group in 1968. When combined with the social trends
**TABLE 7**

Life Satisfaction in the Younger Generations
Controlling for the Effect of Income Differences
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>41 (20-24)</td>
<td>44 (25-29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>37 (18-20)</td>
<td>32 (21-25)</td>
<td>34 (26-30)</td>
<td>29 (31-35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>25 (18-20)</td>
<td>28 (21-23)</td>
<td>31 (24-28)</td>
<td>31 (29-33)</td>
<td>33 (34-38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not included in sample.

**TABLE 8**

Life Satisfaction in the Older Generations
Controlling for the Effect of Income Differences
Canada 1968, 1974, 1977

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort Birth Years</th>
<th>1914-18</th>
<th>1909-13</th>
<th>1904-08</th>
<th>1903 or before</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>32 (50-54)</td>
<td>37 (55-59)</td>
<td>37 (60-64)</td>
<td>57 (65 up)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>27 (56-60)</td>
<td>34 (61-65)</td>
<td>47 (66-70)</td>
<td>50 (71 up)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>39 (59-63)</td>
<td>52 (64-68)</td>
<td>54 (69-73)</td>
<td>59 (74 up)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
described above, it is likely that the young have had to face a serious discrepancy between their expectations and ideals on the one hand, and economic and social facts on the other.

Finally, table 8 presents the satisfaction levels of the older cohorts by five-year cohort groupings. The dominant feature of these figures is the large increase in satisfaction that occurs as each group passes age 65. Reading down the year columns, it becomes clear that the single significant jump occurs at age 65 in each case. Following each cohort over the decade leads to the same impression. Since 65 is the usual retirement age, we can only conclude that retirement, either directly or indirectly, leads to life-styles which are more satisfying. The direct effects of retirement may include freedom from a job which was boring or exhausting, while an indirect effect might be the availability of time to engage in more satisfying leisure activities. Contrary to the currently popular notion that retirement reduces the quality of life, these data indicate that for most individuals retirement improves it. Again, additional research which focuses on age of retirement would be helpful.

A word of caution is in order here. The analysis of age effects presented here was conducted with the impact of income held constant to allow a better understanding of the impact of life cycle and cohort. If income had not been held constant, the differences between age groups would have been less impressive. The interpretation of these results should be tempered by the reminder that in real life the effects of age and income are in partial opposition to each other.
Summary and Conclusion

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES THAT THE LEVEL OF GENERAL LIFE SATISFACTION WILL DECLINE IN THE FUTURE?

A single social indicator—a subjective one—was used to trace important attitudinal changes over a ten-year period of recent Canadian history. In spite of the limitations of any such study, the results can be used to facilitate our thinking about the future of Canada. Although more in the nature of speculation than of prediction, this process of thinking about our possible futures is a source of hopes as well as fears.

Canadians' perceptions of the quality of life were examined through an analysis of responses to three national surveys conducted during the last decade. While it was argued that the measure used—personal satisfaction with life in general—is but one of several dimensions of the quality of life, it is unquestionably a major social indicator and the only perceptual measure related to the quality of life for which data were available over such a long period.

The findings can be summarized as follows:

- There was a decline in the percentage of persons declaring themselves to be "very satisfied" over the past decade, with most of the drop occurring between 1968 and 1974. The decline, although significant, was not large and was primarily the result of an increase in the proportion of people reporting that they were "fairly satisfied" rather than "very satisfied," while the percentage of "unsatisfied" persons actually declined from 1968 to 1977.
- Only two of the socio-demographic factors examined—income and age—showed substantial relationships with general life satisfaction. Judgments of life satisfaction increased with income and age, but these relationships counteracted each other to some extent because income and age were negatively correlated.
- Income seems to be losing its effect as a determinant of life satisfaction. Differences between the perceptions of income groups have narrowed considerably as the lower quartile has become more positive; the higher quartile, less positive; and the two middle quartiles, unchanged.
- A major part of the decline in the percentage of "very satisfied" persons occurred in the younger age groups, with the under-30 cohort in 1968 losing much ground in the ten years and with those entering the adult population since then being substantially less likely to consider themselves "very satisfied" than were their predecessors.
- The percentage of "very satisfied" persons increases with age from 60 upward, with a large jump at age 65. With revenue held constant, retirement apparently increases, not decreases, perceptions of the quality of one's life.

As to what all of this means for the future, it can be argued that there are good and bad portents in this analysis. First the bad. The drop in satis-
faction levels among the young indicates that, in national aggregate, the perceived quality of life will decline over the next several years as this group forms an ever-increasing segment of the adult population. Nothing in the near term would suggest a weakening of the social and economic trends which seem to be responsible for the decline.

In the longer term, there will probably be some increase in satisfaction among the young, but it may come about in two completely different ways. If our institutions are able to come to grips with the social and economic problems confronting them, population trends will take the pressure off the labour market and reopen the doors of opportunity and mobility. Satisfaction would then increase as a result of greater optimism and achievement. If current problems are not abated, satisfaction may increase anyway as expectations are depressed, but it will be a satisfaction resulting from resignation. However, it is not clear that expectations can be depressed by a continuing lack of opportunity in one's own country. The ready availability of information from other countries may provide the necessary models to make the young aware of what could be, rather than of what is.

As for the good news, the decreasing differences in satisfaction between income groups can be taken as a socially positive sign. Social class differentiation increases as the number of attributes distinguishing the classes from each other increases. Any indication that important psychological differences are diminishing suggests that the cleavages between classes are lessening and the danger of social conflict along class lines is being reduced.

Earlier, it was suggested that decreases might result from comparisons between current and past situations which were positive for lower income groups and negative for higher groups. A second possibility, and one not excluded by the first, is that income is becoming a less central aspect of individuals' lives. If true and extended into future years, this change would also be a welcome one since it might herald a movement away from materialistic, consumption-oriented life-styles. Either way, this decrease is positive, even if some of it comes at the expense of declining levels of satisfaction in higher income groups.
Appendix

TECHNICAL NOTES ON THE THREE NATIONAL SURVEYS


The 1977 survey was conducted in May through July by York University's Survey Research Centre. The sample of 3288 was stratified to produce proportionally higher takes than usual in the Maritimes and British Columbia. The census metropolitan areas of Montreal and Toronto were also oversampled. All data used in this analysis have been weighted to compensate for stratification, non-response, and household size. The completion rate for the survey was 67% (projected at 70% if the sampling strategy had been strictly proportional to size). The non-response resulted from the following causes: 9.8% could not be contacted; 16.5% refused to participate; 3.6% were ill or aged; 2.4% could not respond to interviews in either English, French, or Italian; the remaining 1% was due to miscellaneous.

The text of each of the questions was:

- 1968 Would you say that in general you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or quite dissatisfied with your life so far?
- 1974 Let's think about your life as a whole. Would you say that you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with your life as a whole right now?
- 1977 All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole? Which number comes the closest to how you feel?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
completely dissatisfied neutral completely satisfied

It has been shown elsewhere that shortening the satisfaction response scale results in the top two categories of the larger scale collapsing into the single highest response of the shorter scale. This being the case, the two highest responses to the 1977 question are comparable to the "very satisfied" response in 1968 and 1974. (See T.H. Atkinson: "Is Satisfaction a Good Measure of the Perceived Quality of Life?" paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Statistical Association, August 1977.)
Depuis une quinzaine d'années, plusieurs efforts ont été faits en vue de mesurer le bien-être social. La plupart des pays industrialisés ont cherché à dépasser la pure et simple évaluation quantitative des niveaux de vie (possession de biens, revenus des familles, consommation des ménages, etc.), et à étudier les aspects non matériels de la vie: conditions de travail, santé, environnement physique, etc. Des indicateurs de type objectif ont été développés à cet effet, permettant d'évaluer la situation concrète des individus, tant au plan économique qu'au plan social.

Au début des années 1970, des sondages d'opinion aux États-Unis et en Grande-Bretagne—notamment les enquêtes de Campbell et Converse aux États-Unis, d’Abrams et Hall au Royaume-Uni et les études Eurobaromètre de la Commission des communautés européennes—ont cependant révélé l'importance de la dimension subjective dans la mesure du bien-être. La manière dont les individus perçoivent leur situation, la satisfaction ou l'insatisfaction qu'ils éprouvent quant à leurs conditions de vie, les besoins et les aspirations qu'ils expriment dans divers domaines sont autant d'indices perceptifs de la qualité de la vie qu'ils mènent. Cette perception subjective peut varier indépendamment de transformations dans la situation objective des individus. Ainsi, de meilleures conditions de travail ou une augmentation de revenu peuvent satisfaire un groupe, mais en laisser un autre insatisfait. Des aspirations et des besoins différents mènent à des perceptions également différentes de la qualité de la vie.

Dans l'évaluation globale du bien-être d'une collectivité, il importe de tenir compte de ces facteurs psychologiques. Les informations fournies par les individus eux-mêmes sur la qualité de leur vie complètent la dimension objective du bien-être.

Il existe plusieurs manières de mesurer la qualité de la vie dans sa dimension subjective. Les enquêtes américaines et européennes utilisent souvent le concept de satisfaction. Elles évaluent le degré de satisfaction—ou d'insatisfaction—éprouvé envers la vie en général ou dans certains domaines particuliers, tels le travail, le logement, la santé, le mariage, etc. La satisfaction est étroitement liée aux conditions objectives des individus. Ces derniers seront plus ou moins satisfaits selon que les changements "sociaux" auront été dans le sens ou à l'encontre de leurs besoins. La satisfaction mesure donc indirectement la qualité de la vie d'une collectivité, à travers l'évaluation subjective qu'en font ses membres.

La mesure de la satisfaction n'est pas sans poser de problèmes. Il est difficile, par exemple, de distinguer la nature de la satisfaction exprimée lors d'enquêtes. Elle pourrait découler de changements réels dans les conditions de vie de l'individu et de la réalisation de certaines de ses aspirations. Mais elle pourrait tout aussi bien être le résultat d'un processus d'adaptation, par lequel l'individu se réjouit à accepter son sort.


### Tendances dans la satisfaction de la vie au Canada

Le niveau de satisfaction est fort élevé dans l'ensemble. Environ 85% des Canadiens sont moyennement ou très satisfaits de la vie en général. Comme l'indique le graphique de la page 8, cette proportion est demeurée constante depuis dix ans. Le pourcentage d'insatisfaits a même légèrement diminué durant cette période, passant de 14% en 1968 à 12% en 1977. (Pour le détail des données, consulter les tableaux dans le texte anglais.)

La proportion des "très satisfaits" a diminué. Malgré le sentiment généralisé de satisfaction qui prévaut au Canada, on peut déceler des changements dans le degré de satisfaction exprimé. La proportion des "très satisfaits" est passée de 39% en 1968 à 35% en 1977, ce qui a eu pour effet d'augmenter le nombre des "assez satisfaits" et non celui des gens franchement mécontents de leur sort. Examinons maintenant en détail cette diminution de la satisfaction dans la catégorie des "très satisfaits".

Plusieurs variables pourraient influencer la perception de la qualité de la
Une deuxième tendance à noter est la baisse de la satisfaction chez les Canadiens de moins de 30 ans au cours de la dernière décennie. Alors que tous les autres groupes d'âges affichent une grande constance dans leur évaluation de la vie, le pourcentage des jeunes de 20-29 ans se déclarant très satisfaits de leur sort est tombé de 43% en 1968 à 29% en 1977, une baisse d'environ un tiers. Parmi le groupe des 18-19 ans, la proportion des "très satisfaits" est tombée de 34% en 1974 à 26% en 1977.

La détérioration du contexte socio-économique canadien est vraisemblablement responsable de ce phénomène. La croissance du taux de chômage depuis le milieu des années 1960 a touché plus durement les jeunes groupes d'âges. Parallèlement à leur entrée sur le marché du travail, les possibilités d'emploi et de mobilité sociale ont diminué, d'où un sentiment de frustration et d'impuissance chez les jeunes générations.

CONCLUSIONS ET HYPOTHÈSES RELATIVES À LA SATISFACTION FUTURE DES CANADIENS

L'indice de satisfaction au Canada est fort élevé dans l'ensemble, et plus d'un tiers de la population se déclare très satisfait de la vie en général. Mais une tendance vers une diminution du degré de satisfaction exprimé se dessine depuis dix ans. Moins de gens se déclarent aujourd'hui très satisfaits et davantage, par contre, affichent une satisfaction moyenne.

La baisse du niveau de satisfaction provient en grande partie des jeunes générations. Au fur et à mesure que celles-ci avanceront en âge et grossiront les rangs de la population adulte, la tendance actuelle s'accentuera. Rien n'indique que les problèmes socio-économiques, responsables du déclin de la satisfaction chez les jeunes, seront enrayerés à court terme. Les taux d'inflation et de chômage sont à la hausse et, à moins que des changements majeurs ne s'opèrent dans ces domaines, le niveau de satisfaction de la vie en général continuera à diminuer au Canada.

Pour ce qui est de l'impact déclinant du revenu sur l'évaluation subjective de la qualité de la vie, deux conclusions sont possibles. Le nivellement des différences de satisfaction entre les groupes de revenus pourrait signifier qu'une réduction des différences psychologiques entre diverses catégories sociales est en train de s'opérer au Canada. Dans cette optique, les clivages et les risques de conflits entre classes auraient tendance à se résorber et non à s'accentuer, ce qui représenterait une transformation sociale importante.

Autre hypothèse: le fait que le revenu ne conditionne plus autant l'appréciation subjective du bien-être indique peut-être un changement dans les modes de vie au Canada. Moins individualistes, moins matérialistes et moins orientés vers la consommation, les gens se baseraient aujourd'hui sur d'autres facteurs que le revenu pour juger de la qualité de leur vie.

Ces interprétations peuvent aller de pair. Elles expriment toutes deux des tendances sociales positives, même si les changements doivent se faire au détriment des groupes à revenu élevé, dont la satisfaction va décroissant.
vie: âge, sexe, appartenance ethnique, occupation, éducation, revenu. Une mise en corrélation de ces divers facteurs sociodémographiques avec l’indice de satisfaction démontre que ce sont le revenu et l’âge qui déterminent le plus le niveau de satisfaction des Canadiens depuis dix ans. (Quant aux différences entre francophones et anglophones dans leur perception de la qualité de la vie, on peut se référer à l’étude de Bernard Blishen et Tom Atkinson, "Anglophone and Francophone Differences in Perceptions of the Quality of Life in Canada", communication présentée au IXe Congrès mondial de sociologie, Uppsala, Suède, août 1978.) La corrélation entre revenu et satisfaction n’est plus aussi forte aujourd’hui. Comme l’illustre le graphique de la page 15, en 1968, le niveau de satisfaction augmentait avec la taille du revenu: on trouvait une plus grande proportion de gens très satisfaits dans les tranches supérieures de revenu. De 1968 à 1977, la satisfaction est demeurée constante dans le groupe de revenu médian, mais a changé aux deux extrémités de l’échelle des revenus: en 1977, moins de gens à revenu élevé se sont déclarés satisfaits de leur sort, tandis que le niveau de satisfaction a augmenté dans les tranches inférieures de revenu.

Il y aurait eu, apparemment, atténuation des différences de satisfaction exprimées selon les groupes de revenus depuis dix ans. Plusieurs explications sont possibles. Selon les études américaines, les individus ont tendance à évaluer leur situation actuelle d’après le passé. Si leur situation présente leur apparaît meilleure, ils exprimeront un haut degré de satisfaction. Il se pourrait qu’au Canada, les groupes à faible revenu s’estiment aujourd’hui plus avantagés, alors que les classes riches se sentent frustrées et plus limitées dans la satisfaction de leurs besoins et la réalisation de leurs aspirations. Même si le taux d’inflation frappe durement les classes moins favorisées, celles-ci ont néanmoins pu bénéficier, depuis 1968, des programmes gouvernementaux dans les domaines du bien-être, de la santé, du travail. Elles se considèrent aujourd’hui relativement plus nanties ou en sécurité, donc plus satisfaites que par le passé. Ainsi, la comparaison situation présente/situation passée aurait tourné à l’avantage des groupes de revenus inférieurs, et au désavantage des groupes à revenu élevé depuis dix ans, d’où le nivellement des différences observé dans le graphique de la page 15.

Le revenu a été maintenu constant à travers toute l’analyse de l’incidence de l’âge sur la satisfaction. Cette opération déforme quelque peu la réalité: on sait que le revenu, en fait, diminue avec l’âge et que les plus âgés ont tendance à être plus pauvres. L’ajustement effectué atténue l’impact négatif des revenus faibles à un âge avancé et fait ressortir les liens entre l’âge et la perception subjective de la qualité de la vie au Canada.

Le graphique de la page 19 illustre deux phénomènes intéressants. Tout d’abord, il semblerait que la satisfaction augmente avec l’âge, contrairement à l’idée assez répandue selon laquelle la retraite entraîne une détérioration de la qualité de la vie. A partir de la soixantaine, et notamment après 65 ans, les Canadiens très satisfaits de la vie en général sont proportionnellement plus nombreux que dans tout autre groupe d’âges. Ce résultat s’explique en partie par l’invariabilité du revenu, et il importe d’interpréter ces données avec soin. Le vieillissement en soi peut donc avoir un effet sur la satisfaction.