Did job satisfaction really drop during the 1970’s?

ANTHONY F. CHELTE, JAMES WRIGHT, and CURT TAUSKY

That discontent in the American work force is rising has been a commonplace assertion in popular, and even some scholarly literature on employment for the past decade. In contrast, most credible research has shown high and essentially stable levels of job satisfaction. However, a 1979 report by Graham Staines and Robert Quinn, derived from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey (the third in the series), indicated a significant drop in the national job satisfaction level. This article reviews these data and contrasts them with data from similar surveys of the same era. In general, the pattern of decline reported by Staines and Quinn is not replicated in these other surveys.

Surveys of job satisfaction began in the 1930’s and have continued ever since. Regular measurements on national probability samples of the work force have been available for the past 20 years. The wording of specific questions varies among series, but all basically ask workers directly whether they are satisfied with their jobs.

Job satisfaction remained relatively stable throughout the early 1970’s. Elliot Richardson reviewed the Gallup series of 1948–73 and found “scanty proof of widespread worker alienation.” The Gallup series registered a small drop in overall satisfaction in the later 1960’s, but appropriate statistical controls for the changing structure of the labor force erased even this small trend. Curt Tausky reviewed survey data from the Survey Research Center (SRC) of the University of Michigan and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and found that the level of job satisfaction was stable from 1958 to 1976. A similar review in 1974 by Quinn and associates covered three major survey series for the period 1958–73, and concluded, “There has not been any significant decrease in overall levels of job satisfaction over the last decade.” All other reviews of Gallup, NORC, and SRC data through the early 1970’s have reported essentially the same.

In 1969, the University of Michigan initiated a new series on the quality of working life. The first survey, the Survey of Working Conditions, was conducted in 1969–70, and the second and third surveys, the Quality of Employment Survey (QES) were conducted in 1972–73 and in late 1977. A comparison of results of the 1969 and 1973 surveys showed no significant job satisfaction rise or decline. The University of Michigan also conducted a Quality of Life survey in 1971 and in 1978. Here too, the reported levels of job satisfaction were stable. Thus, most surveys, at least through the early 1970’s, conclude that job satisfaction in the American labor force has been essentially high and stable.

Two researchers report decline

The third QOE survey was reported by Staines and Quinn in 1979. A comparison of results from the 1973 and 1977 surveys showed, in sharp contrast to all prior series, a precipitous job satisfaction decline. Like all other series, the Quality of Employment surveys asked, “How satisfied are you with your job?” Between 1973 and 1977, the percentage “very satisfied” showed a modest, 5-point decline. Other indicators of job attitudes were constructed using replies from asking a number of individual questions. They are a “general satisfaction” indicator, and six facet-specific “satisfaction” indicators, which show the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the job, such as pay or coworkers. Both the general satisfaction indicator and five (comfort, challenge, financial rewards, resource adequacy, and promotions) of the specific satisfaction indicators show a definite and statistically significant downward trend (the sole exception is satisfaction with coworkers, which increases somewhat over the era).

Further analysis also revealed that the declines occurred in virtually every segment of the labor force. The decline was somewhat sharper for men than for women.

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was slightly more pronounced among those in lower-
skilled positions, and was more precipitous among older
workers than younger ones. These variations aside, the
basic conclusion of the OQE survey is that job satisfac-
tion declined virtually everywhere in the labor force
from 1973 to 1977.

Staines and Quinn advance three hypotheses to ac-
count for the downward trend. First, demographic
changes in the composition of the labor force have
increased the relative predominance of traditionally less
satisfied workers. Second, the objective, easily identifi-
able characteristics of specific jobs are deteriorating.
Third, workers are raising their expectations about what
they seek or expect in their jobs. The first two of these
are inconsistent with other data from the series. For
example, the first implies that the trend would disappear
with controls for the relevant demographic factors; they
do not. As for the second, Staines and Quinn said that
changes in the objective qualities of jobs and employ-
ment conditions between 1969 and 1977 were not great,
and indicate more gains than losses. The series does not
contain the data necessary to test the third item, but by
process of elimination it is the most plausible.

The suggestion is thus that job satisfaction in the
American labor force declined from 1973 to 1977 main-
ly because of rising expectations. As indicated, the
sharpest evidence favoring the declining reported satis-
faction conclusion is that derived from the summated
indicators by Staines and Quinn in 1979. As of this
writing, no analysis of trends in the component items of
those indicators has been published.

The response format for the individual component
items in that report is as follows: Respondents were given
short statements describing various characteristics of
work (for example, “the pay is good”) and were then
asked to state whether the statement is very true, some-
what true, a little true, or not at all true of their own
jobs.

Every component item (except one) showed a decline
in the percentage of “very true” responses, the drop-offs
ranging from about 5 to about 15 percentage points. On
the surface, then, the item-specific results sharply con-
firm the original Staines-Quinn conclusion.

However, more detailed consideration of these results
suggests the need for some skepticism. First, the very
consistency of the pattern across items is suspicious, if
only because such consistent and unambiguous results
are rare in social science measurement. More important-
ly, while the overall declines in the summated indicators
seem plausible enough, some of these item-specific trends seem highly implausible. There is, for example, a
10-point drop in “having enough time to get the job
done,” which on the surface suggests a massive and
hitherto undetected speed-up of American industry in
the span of 4 years. Many of the other specifics have
this same curious character: an 8-point drop in “the
work is interesting,” an 11-point drop in “opportunity to
develop my own special abilities,” roughly a 12-point
drop in “having enough help and equipment to get the
job done,” a 7-point drop in “the physical surroundings are pleasant,” an 11-point drop in the ability
to “forget about personal problems at work,” and so
on. On the assumption that workers themselves provide
the best evidence as to the nature and characteristics of
their work, these data thus suggest nothing less than a
wholesale transformation of the workplace over the 4
years. It is certainly possible that such a transformation
in fact occurred, but it is not very likely.

Comparison with other surveys

As noted, Staines and Quinn reported a 5-point drop
in the overall proportion of workers “very satisfied”
with their work. Similar, although not identical, ques-
tions on general job satisfaction were also included in
two other survey series covering approximately the
same span, the 1973 and 1977 NORC General Social
Surveys, and the 1971 and 1978 Quality of American
Life Surveys. All three series are based on representa-
tive national probability samples. The pattern reported
from the Quality of Employment series is not replicated in ei-
ther of the other two series, neither of which shows a
statistically significant change in job satisfaction over
the time span (table 1).

Another frequently employed indicator of job satisfac-
tion or work motivation is the question, “If you were

| Response                      | National Opinion Research Center
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1973</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>1,141</td>
<td>1,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately satisfied</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little satisfied</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very dissatisfied</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>15,634</td>
<td>23,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely satisfied</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largely satisfied</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly satisfied</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly dissatisfied</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largely dissatisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely dissatisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Weighted for 1971.
to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?” This item is contained in both NORC and QES. Again, no significant trend is indicated in the percentages according to the tabulation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>National Opinion Research Center</th>
<th>Quality of Employment Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue . . .</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop . . . . . .</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Quality of American Life Series contains exact replicas of nine component items; both series were products of the same organization (table 2). Sharply contrasting the item-by-item results from the employment series, identical items from the Quality of American Life series show no statistically significant declines.

Perhaps the best data ever assembled on worker expectations are those contained in the first two QoE surveys. Both surveys presented respondents with the same list of job traits and asked them to state how important each trait was. Unfortunately, the “how important” sequence was dropped in the 1977 survey.

Lacking 1977 data from this series of questions, perhaps the best remaining national data on worker expectations for the era are contained in the NORC series, which presented workers with a list of five job characteristics and asked them to rank them. On the whole, trends on these measures of “worker expectation” are modest and are not consistent with the third Staines-Quinn hypothesis. In fact, there is a slight, but statistically significant, decrease over the 4 years in the proportion ranking “work is important and gives a feeling of accomplishment” as their first preference.

Consistent with the announced decline in job satisfaction, Staines and Quinn also report a decline in overall life satisfaction, specifically, an 11-point drop in the percentage characterizing their lives as “very happy.” A nearly identical question was also included in the other two series (table 3). Again, the pattern of decline indicated in the employment series is not replicated in the other two.

The Staines-Quinn findings appear implausible for the following reasons:

- The announced decline is inconsistent with a long history of prior research on job satisfaction trends, all showing high and essentially stable levels of job satisfaction.

### Table 2. Comparison of item-by-item results for two surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and responses</th>
<th>Quality of employment</th>
<th>Quality of life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The work is interesting&quot;</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>2,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I have the opportunity to develop my own special abilities.&quot;</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>2,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I am given a chance to do the things I want to do best.&quot;</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>2,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and responses</th>
<th>Quality of employment</th>
<th>Quality of life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I am given a lot of chances to make friends.&quot;</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>2,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The physical surroundings are pleasant.&quot;</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>2,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true . . . . . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Results are based on the weighted number of respondents.
While the overall declines on multiple-item indicators seem plausible enough, many of the trends on the specific component items seem curious and implausible.

The drop in overall job satisfaction registered in the employment series is not replicated in either of two other series covering approximately the same time span.

The downward trends in specific component items are not replicated in the only other national survey series containing those items.

Three hypotheses are offered in the initial article to account for the announced decline. Two are ruled out by data from the employment series itself, and the third is not supported by independent evidence presented here.

A parallel decline in overall life satisfaction registered in the employment series is also not replicated in two independent tests.

The announced decline may itself be in error, and job satisfaction in the American work forces may have been essentially constant during the mid 1970's. It is unclear why the QOE employment series would show a trend if one did not exist. A possible reason could be that the 1977 employment sample included only a fraction of the relatively more satisfied 1973 respondents, thus producing an artificial decline in satisfaction. Whatever the explanation, it is apparent that the 1977 employment survey contains proportionally more people who are unhappy with their jobs, and with their lives, than do other reputable national surveys of the same era. Until some plausible account of this difference is given, the results of the 1977 employment survey must be treated with some caution.

--- FOOTNOTES ---


6 Quinn and Sheppard, The 1972-73 Quality of Employment Survey.