

## Determinant of Happiness among Urban Civil Servants of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam

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### Abstract

*Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has initiated vigorous socio-economic and other developmental projects in order to raise the well-being and the quality of life of its people. The present study aimed to reveal insights on the reality of life satisfaction among the urban dwellers in Malaysia, particularly the urban civil servants who lived in the major cities in Klang Valley. Adopting the Allardt's dimensions of welfare, this study explored the subjective meaning of life satisfaction among the administrative staff of a Malaysian university namely Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Sixteen key informants from four different categories of administrative staff of the University's main campus in Shah Alam, Selangor were engaged in the researchers' in-depth interviews whose inputs were later reinforced and verified through written feedback survey. The NVivo version 9 was employed to analyse the data and the main finding has shown that the responses centered around the main theme of moderation. Implications of this study on development policy were also discussed.*

*Keywords: Quality of Life; Happiness; Subjective Well-Being; Subjective Life Satisfaction*

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### Introduction

Urban communities in Malaysia have experienced the impacts of the economic development process since its independence. To illustrate, previous studies have examined the impacts of poverty on the socio-economic condition of the urban poor in Malaysia (Ragayah, 2005; Chamhuri Siwar and Mohd Yusof Kasim, 1997; Ataul Huq, Mohd Asri, Alias & Nizam, 2009). Undoubtly, the urban population in Malaysia faces greater obstacles in coping with the opportunities and challenges of living in urban areas. Therefore, with this rapid urbanization, the concern over the quality of life of the urban residents becomes more crucial in the Malaysian government's policy (Eleven Malaysia Plan 2016-2020).

The issue concerning the urbanites' well-being or quality of life is largely unexplored and still limited in Malaysia. A few studies were conducted on the urban residents' perceptions and satisfactions concerning the physical facilities available in a few cities in the Klang Valley (Hafazah, 2008 & Dasimah, 2009). These studies mainly

evaluated the quality of life from surveys on perceptions of well-being among the residents of major Malaysian cities as it related to the built environment. In spite of this, the measure using objective indicators may not necessarily represent the complete picture of the quality of life as believed for instance by Diener and Suh (1997). As a result, not many studies have looked into the meaning that the people attached to the subjective measure of well-being.

The present study aims to reveal insights on the reality of life satisfaction among the urban dwellers in Malaysia, particularly the urban civil servants. It examines the factors of life satisfaction and their impacts on the urban Malay civil servants' well-being, focusing on the eleven domains of Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) developed by the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department. The findings of this study can also add to the existing literature on quality of life, as this study explores and provides deeper insights into the different meanings of subjective life satisfaction that have been neglected in previous research. Hughes (2006) argues that many quality of life researchers give strong emphasis on elements of affects, but neglect the elements of meaning. He further claims that meaning may be a more fundamental dimension of life quality than affect. Indeed, adding meanings in the quality of life studies, aids in conceptual development. Such concepts eventually enable large scale survey research to be carried out on meanings, which provide greater understanding of the human condition and ways to improve it (Hughes, 2006). Indeed, Jongudormkarn et al. (2006) also explain the significance of the qualitative study in their quality of life study. They contend that the qualitative approach should be employed as it enables acquisition of empirical data that facilitate deeper analysis of the difficulties and happiness in the lives of the informants.

### **Distinction between objective and subjective quality of life**

The concept of quality of life has been seen by Campbell and others to incorporate two respective measurement indicators: objective and subjective. Both dimensions are equally important in determining the quality of life of a person (Campbell, 1976; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Diener and Suh, 1997; Rapley 2003; Fernandez-Ballesteros, 2010; Diener & Biswar-Diener, 2008 & Veenhoven, 2008).

By definition, the objective quality of life is the degree to which living conditions meet observable criteria of the good life such as income security for everybody, safety in the street, good health care and proper education etc. The objective well-being is the tangible aspect of well-being and so it can be measured. According to Noll (2002:51), "Objective living conditions include certainable living Indicators for objective well-being are measured based on frequency and are external to an individual. In fact, studies that employ the objective indicators have been mainly focused on the perspective of economic development (Diener & Tay, 2016). Such indicators include population density, average household income, crime index and pollution index. However, most of

the SWB scholars have emphatically stressed that objective well-being may provide incomplete evaluation of the quality of life (Schneider, 1975; Diener and Suh, 1997; Kesibir & Diener, 2008; Veenhoven, 2008 & Burkhauser *et al.*, 2016). The economic measures of quality of life, only in terms of market factors, de-emphasize important elements that significantly influence quality of life such as love, self-development, and self-actualization (Bruni & Porta, 2016). In fact, an objective social indicator does not necessarily reflect the life experiences of individuals (Schneider, 1975).

On the contrary, the subjective indicators or the SWB concerns with the personal life experiences and life characteristics (Schneider, 1975; Diener & Suh, 1997). Similarly, Noll (2002: 51) says, “the SWB concerns general as well as domain-specific assessments and evaluations of living conditions and includes cognitive as well as affective components”. Likewise, Diener and Suh (1997: 191), say “the underlying assumption is that well-being can be defined by people’s conscious experiences in terms of hedonic feelings or cognitive satisfactions”. Hence, they have concluded that to understand the individual’s experiential quality of well-being, it is appropriate to examine how a person feels about life in the context of his or her own standard (Rojas, 2008). In other words, the subjective indicator is the evaluation of individuals towards their overall life.

Due to the differences between these two indicators, Rapley (2003) has classified a selection of frequently used objective and subjective social indicators. The objective indicators represent social data independent of individual evaluations, whilst the subjective indicators represent individual’s appraisal and evaluation of social conditions. The differences between the two indicators are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3:

*Objective Social Indicator Vs Subjective Social Indicator*

Frequently used objective social indicator (represent social data independent of individual evaluations)	Frequently used subjective social indicator (individual’s appraisal and evaluation of social condition)
Life expectancy	Sense of community
Crime rate	Material possessions
Unemployment rate	Sense of safety
Gross Domestic Product	Happiness
Poverty Rate	Satisfaction with life as a whole
School Attendance	Relationship with family
Working hours per week	Job satisfaction
Prenatal mortality rate	Sex life
Suicide rate	Perception of distributional justice
	Class identification
	Hobbies and club membership

(Source: Noll, (2000) cited in Rapley, 2003: 11)

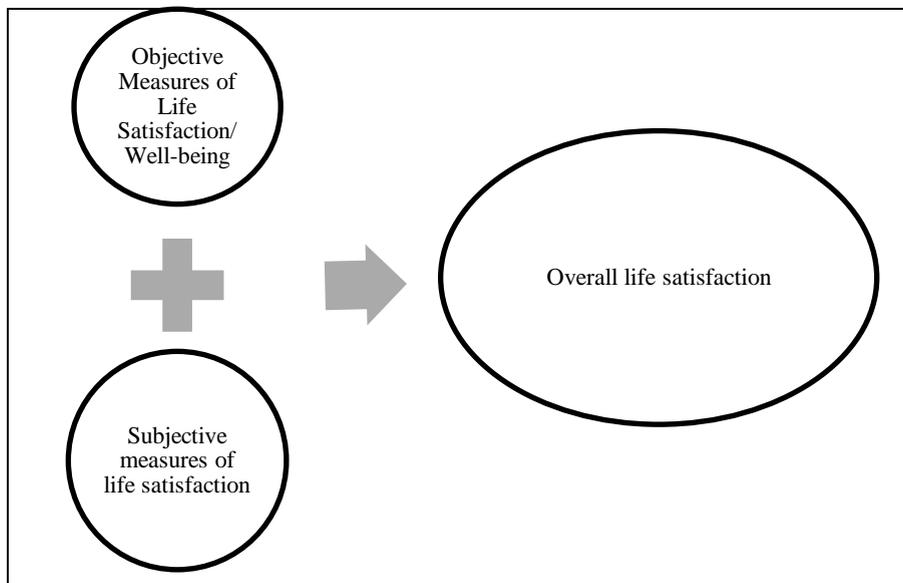
According to Kesebir and Diener (2008), due to the limitations of economic and social indicators, the SWB indicators should be treated as an alternative of equal importance. The main limitation concerning economic indicators stem from their inability to address questions related to life satisfaction and human welfare. The GDP,

which is primarily used as an essential indicator in most research only measures market activity and is concerned with only quantity and not quality. Obviously, the SWB is excluded from such measurement. In comparison, the SWB measure is much easier to modify than the objective measure. In fact, it can be easily compared across domains unlike the latter, which uses different units of measurement for instance: the degree of safety is measured by crime index, the degree of pollution is measured by air pollution, and the level of income is measured in dollars etc.

Malaysia has developed its own measure of quality of life. The Malaysian Economic Planning Unit (EPU) has identified eleven domains of quality of life (EPU, 2004). They are income and distribution, working life, transport and communications, health, education, housing, environment, family life, social participation, public safety, culture and leisure. These domains are measured by sub-indicators that represent the total quality of life. In Malaysia, the MQLI is measured based on the basic needs approach which are evaluated quantitatively with forty-two sub-indicators. In June 2012, the MQLI Report 2011 was launched. It provides insight into the changes and improvements in the quality of life of Malaysian. In particular, most of the indices have shown increase. Nevertheless, the main point to highlight is: to what extent the objective indicators reflect the subjective meaning of life satisfaction experienced by the people themselves? This is the main question that the research intends to explore and the one which also defines in general the scope of this study.

## **Conceptual framework**

In the light of the above review and discussion, the theoretical framework of this research first takes into account the objective and subjective indicators of well-being. To guide further this research, the Allardt's Basic Needs approach whose framework combines both the objective and subjective indicators, was utilized. The following graphic illustration in Figure 1 below summarizes Allardt's model which also justifies our agreement with his more balanced perception on life satisfaction in general.



**Figure 1:**  
Objective and subjective indicators of Overall Life Satisfaction

Based on Figure 1, subjective life satisfaction is internal and ‘inner’ in nature, and therefore, less explored; whereas objective life satisfaction is more tangible and ‘outer,’ and hence, often studied. While both are important in their own right, the former has been somewhat neglected, and thus, this study will explore deeper into the subjective evaluation of life satisfaction as justified earlier.

Allardt (1993) developed this approach and applied it in his research in the Scandinavian countries in 1972. This approach includes the basic elements of people living in developed societies and it is also found to be applicable to developing countries like Malaysia. With some modifications to suit the nature of Malaysian society, Allardt’s general approach is still meaningful to understand the well-being among Malaysians.

Allardt (1993) highlighted the importance of a richer and more inclusive theoretical approach to quality of life based on objective measures of external conditions and subjective evaluation of people’s quality of life. Basic need approach focuses on the conditions without which human beings are unable to survive, avoid misery, relate to other people, and avoid alienation.

Allardt’s Need approach consists of three basic needs that are related to three basic human needs, both material and non-material, which are important to gauge more

holistically the actual level of welfare in a society. The three elements are known as 'Having', 'Loving' and 'Being' needs.

The 'having' need refers to those material conditions which are necessary for survival and for avoidance of misery. In the Scandinavian countries, the material conditions are measured by the domains that are related to material conditions necessary for survival and avoidance of misery such as: economic resource, housing conditions, employment, working conditions, health, and education (Sirgy, 2001). The housing conditions are measured by two factors: space available and housing amenities. Employment is usually described in terms of the occurrence or absence of unemployment working conditions noise and temperature at the workplace, physical work routine, measures of stress. Health is described as various symptoms or their absence of pain and illness and availability of medical aid; while education is described by years of formal education.

On the other hand, the 'loving' needs are defined as needs related to other people and are necessary to form social identities. Examples include attachments in their local community, friendship and relationship with co-workers.

Finally, the 'being' need is defined as the need for integration into society and to live in harmony with nature. Examples include participation in political activities, indulging in leisure activities, doing meaningful work and engaging in activities to enjoy nature.

In the light of the above, the theoretical framework of this research takes into account the objective and subjective indicators of well-being. Therefore, Allardt's basic needs approach whose framework combines both the objective and subjective indicators were utilized. Allardt's need approach consists of three basic needs that are related to three basic human needs both materials and non-materials which are important to gauge more holistically the actual level of welfare in a society. The three elements are known as 'having', 'loving' and 'being' needs (Allardt, 1993). Allardt (1993) highlighted the importance of a richer and more inclusive theoretical approach to quality of life based on objective measures of external conditions and subjective evaluation of people's quality of life.

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In Malaysia context as been mentioned earlier, the empirical data on the measure of quality of life has largely employed objective indicators (see Malaysian Quality of Life 2011) which were used mainly in quantitative research. Moreover, these studies were carried out to survey the urban residents' perceptions and satisfaction towards the physical facilities mainly in a few cities within the Klang Valley (Hafazah, 2008 & Dasimah, 2009). It can also be observed that since 1990 the eleven objective indicators known as Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) have been frequently employed as the main development index to measure the Malaysians' quality of life (EPU Malaysia). This situation has left research on subjective life satisfaction, which is closely connected to subjective well-being, largely unexplored and limited. Furthermore, previous studies on subjective well-being were dominated by perceptual indicators i.e self-report surveys and overlooked the subjects' meaning of life satisfaction. In light of the above, one may ask: if the MQLI has shown high score in the objective indicators, how far does this reflect on the subjective appraisal of life satisfaction of them.

Given this setting, the main motivation for this research is to explore deeper the subjective life satisfaction among urban Malay civil servants in Malaysia. The rationale for choosing qualitative approach is to explore the informants' subjective perspective on their quality of life as most of the quantitative researches on subjective life satisfaction were conducted to study cause and effect and were correlational in nature. Such studies do not reveal deeper analysis of the subjects' feeling and meaning. Indeed, Hughes (2006) has argued that subjective appraisal studies were too focused on the affect thus neglecting the element of meaning in QOL studies. He further argues that in studying QOL, the meaning is more fundamental than the affect as it allows us to understand better the issue of human welfare and subsequently the way to improve it.

## **Research method**

### *Research Design*

The main gap found in the study of subjective life satisfaction which is too focus on the quantitative measures which are not meant to probe in-depth understanding of subjective meaning of life satisfaction. Therefore, a qualitative method is pursued as it could provide insights for understanding a complex phenomenon and served as an important explanatory power for understanding how do participants understand wellbeing and how these understanding vary by any demographic profile (Camfield *et al.*, 2009: 7). This research adopts the emic approach not the etic as the strength of the qualitative research is when the researcher is concerned to probe deeper into the real life

stories and experiences of the participants. In which most cases, the qualitative research describes the research participants as “expert by experiences”. Hence, according to Rapley (2003: 104), the study that takes the emic approach is placed on an equal footing with any theoretical, epistemological and methodological approach. Therefore, this research is interested in understanding the meanings people have constructed about their world and experiences within its real-world context in which the data were collected in natural setting, hence a case study design was chosen as the method of research.

### *Participant*

A total of 16 participants were selected on voluntary basis from the respective four categories representing four grades schemes of the civil servants. The subjects were drawn from the population whose age above 18 years old and have married. Four subjects : two males and two females were selected from each grade category. The type of purposeful sampling technique was employed in the selection of the subject of the study. This method allows researcher to identify the widest possible range of the participant’s characteristics that suits with the study interests.

### *Data collection*

Two techniques of data collection were employed in this research in order to provide an evidence for the study. First, an in-depth interview was the main method of data collection while the second was a written feedback validation. Both techniques were chosen to enable the researcher to triangulate their evidence in order to ensure the accuracy and to confirm the data (Stake, 2010).

### *In-depth interview*

The interviews were conducted personally during the time period in from June until October 2011. The choice of the interview method of data collection is necessary in this research because in studying the perception of people, we cannot observe behavior and feelings and how people interpret the world around them (Merriam, 2009: & Stake, 2010:). An interview schedule was prepared as a guide for data recording procedures. They meant to explore further respondents’ subjective satisfaction level and were set to correspond with the eleven life domains used by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) in its Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI). The interview schedule was categorized into two main categories: 1) the key/opening questions, and 2) the follow-up questions. The former were more general and the latter were meant for deeper exploration into their feelings regarding respective domain and therefore may have several lower levels of questioning depending on the need for depth of investigation. The above strategies in interviewing respondents were employed by Li Liu (2006) to investigate the viewpoints and to probe more deeply into the factors/elements that trigger and substantiate these

different viewpoints on the other. Each session of an interview was conducted within 60-90 minutes. Before the interviews were conducted, informed consent was asked. The entire interview was audio taped and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### *Written feedback validation*

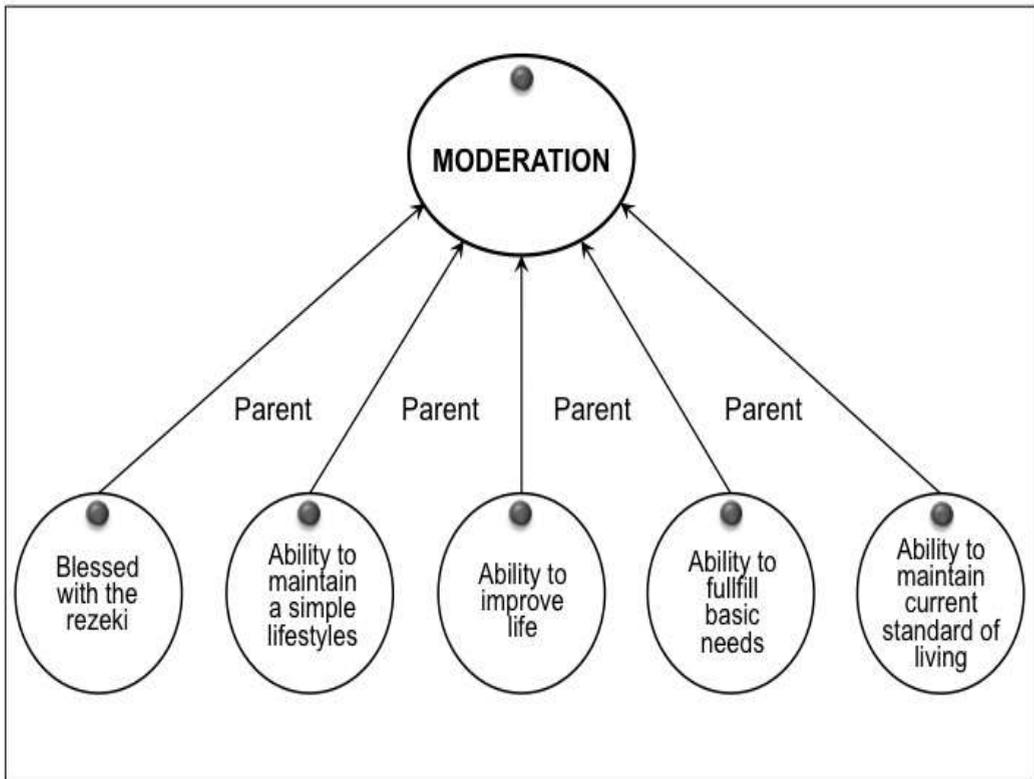
Apart from interview, a written feedback validation was also distributed as another mean to validate the data collected from the participants' interview. This method served was useful to reduce the researcher's bias responses. The written feedback was distributed to the participants at the end of the interview session and was collected after they were being interviewed, but in some cases, a few of written feedbacks were returned through email. The written feedback consisted of a total of four questions; one closed-ended and three open-ended.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis employed was a thematic analysis provided by King and Horrocks (2010). In assisting the analysis, the computer software NVivo version 9 was used to help with data management. King and Horrocks (2010) defined the thematic analysis as recurrent and distinctive features of participants' account, characterizing particular perceptions or experiences, which researcher sees as relevant to the research questions" (King and Horrocks, 2010:150). In this technique, the themes emerged by comparing the similarities and differences between cases. This process is mainly guided by the main research questions in order to capture its meaning (King & Horrocks, 2010). This technique involves three main stages; the descriptive coding, interpretative coding and the thematic analysis coding. For ensuring the validity and reliability, member-checkings were performed on the findings of all of the participants.

### **Findings**

Having analyzed the data, a major theme had emerged which described in greater depth the nature of participants' view on their subjective life satisfaction. Such a main theme was "moderation" with five sub-themes namely: 1) ability to fulfill the basic needs, 2) ability to maintain current standard of living, 3) ability to improve the quality of life, 4) ability to maintain simple lifestyles, and 5) being grateful to God for his "rezeki" or bounty. The NVivo generated model of the main theme and its sub-themes is presented in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2:**  
 Main theme and Sub-Themes of Subjective Life Satisfaction

The following section elaborates the above findings in greater detail by way of examples of the respondents’ narratives.

**Ability to fulfill the basic needs**

Being able to fulfill the basic needs of life represents the main determinant of life satisfaction. The basic needs are seen as fundamental in understanding the meaning of life satisfaction. Aris, a young male participant who previously worked in the private sector felt that joining the public sector has not made any difference in his life in terms of satisfying his material needs in spite of the decrease in his present earning. He said:

*“Now that I am 31 years old and I have been working with the government for four years. So if, I were to compare, working in the private sector, and in the government there is a big salary difference. But my dream is to own a house, car or whatever I want and I feel I am about to achieve it as I already bought a car and all that.”*

Indeed, Ridzuan, another senior male participant has described his satisfaction after having fulfilled his material needs in a simpler manner and without being too brand-conscious. He said:

*“I have never starved, if other people own a car, so do I, and when others got a motorbike, and I have one too. The only difference is the brand.”*

Reza said the following regarding his satisfaction:

*“..When all basic needs are met and life is blessed by Allah s.w.t.”*

### **Ability to maintain the current standard of living**

A few respondents felt that they were satisfied with their life when they managed to fulfill their basic needs and maintain or keep up with their present standard of living. Saiful, a young and new administrative staff said:

*“As for now I don’t think so. So far, I don’t feel the pressure, that means what I think now is to just work hard to provide the basic needs for my family and maintain that satisfaction.”*

### **Ability to improve in quality of life**

A few respondents viewed improvement in the current life. Compared to their previous ones as a measure of their quality of life. For them, working in UiTM has improved their lives. For instance, Salasiah, a senior lady managerial staff said:

*“Alhamdulillah, when we work here long enough (we can get it). In the past you only dreamed of buying a house. When we work here, Alhamdulillah, even though it takes time to buy a house and a car but if we don’t work here definitely we won’t achieve that dream”.*

### **Ability to maintain a simple lifestyle**

Living a simple life was the secret of satisfaction among the respondents. Due to limited or insufficient income, such a choice worked well with them especially when they have to live in a city. Reza expressed this as follows:

*“ If we have a life principle, we will be able to distinguish between what is halal and haram, what we can do and what we cannot do.*

*From this, we can derive the concept of moderation, from this also we would be able to be grateful with what we have, thereby we would have a good quality of life. But if we are not thankful with what we have. That is the start of finding ways to get things. Then we will feel stressed. If the spirituality is not strong, it will affect our lifestyle. If we do not know how to look at ourselves, are not thankful with what we have, the quality of life that we want will not be achieved.”*

Milah a young female staff said that she was satisfied with her life as she managed to fulfill her essential needs in a simple way saying that:

“I’m not that materialistic, I already have a house and a car, education, food, clothing and everything is ok now. I’m not a “datin” anyway.”

### **Being grateful to God with the “rezeki”**

Being grateful with the “rezeki” (God’s bounty) or being satisfied with the present state of livelihood was what some respondents considered as the main requirement for life satisfaction. Jalil, a senior staff with four children said that he was satisfied when he earned from halal source and lived a descent life. He said:

*“We cannot say we are not satisfied as God has given us life. Thank God because at least I am a clerk here, if I am not a clerk now I might be something else.”*

### **Discussion and conclusion**

As concluded earlier, the sixteen participants regardless of their grade positions were generally pleased with their life subjectively. However, this research has also been able to generate significant insights on the meaning of life satisfaction as also reported earlier. This is especially pertinent to the main theme that described their life satisfaction which is centered mainly on the moderation theme. Interestingly, the findings prove to be consistent with the previous studies which show that income or wealth was not the main contributor to life satisfaction (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Boes & Winkelman, 2010; Rojas, 2007, 2008, 2009; Christoph, 2010; Bonini, 2008). This research, however, has been able to discover a unique fact that is fulfilling the material needs of life in moderation is considerably significant for civil servants. In this context, it can be concluded that for the participants, life satisfaction can be attained once their material needs were fulfilled in moderation. This can be a good hypothesis for further investigation to be confirmed especially through quantitative study involving larger number of respondents.

In line with this, this study disclosed that most of the respondents thus did not seem to overly place a higher value or substantial importance on material gain for their living. This seems to agree with Philips (2006), who states that those who place a high value on materialism tend to be less happy than what would be expected from their income levels.

Within the context of the Muslim respondents sample, this finding is quite significant as having ‘moderate life’ or *Al-Wasatiyyah* is one of the noble values taught by Islam. The practice of this philosophy of moderation by the majority of the respondents, regardless of gender and social class, enabled them to feel satisfied with their lives even when they have to live on a modest or low income in a high living standard environment of the city. Moderate lifestyle here means being able to practice a simple life against the demanding life expectations. *Al- Wasatiyyah* in Arabic according to Ahmad Omar Hashem (2000:1) means, “the existence of balance between two extremes so that neither of the two extremes overweighs the other”. In a similar note, Mohd Kamal Hasssan (2013) has concluded that a holistic structure of *al-Wassatiyah* in the Quran and Al-Sunnah comprise three main qualities; justice, excellence and balance or moderation. These elements are in fact inter-related and cannot be separated in a Muslim’s pursuit of holistic well-being. For a good Muslim such a balance is necessary to ensure successful life in here and in the hereafter. This means, humans should not ignore the needs related to food, shelter, clothes and other material things, but they also have to fulfill their spiritual needs at the same time. In the Quran, Allah says, “Thus, we have made of you an *ummah* justly balanced” (Qur’an, 2: 143). This finding has also revealed that the predictors of happiness vary across culture as supported by Oishi and Gilbert (2016).

Therefore, it can be concluded that development policy in Malaysia should also look into a new dimension in the development of policy in Malaysia. The main priorities of the urban Malay civil servants are not very different to other people in the rest of the world. This suggests that eventhough the subjective life satisfaction was at moderate level, however Malaysia government should also emphasis on the non-material development of human being. Thus, this highlights that material gains should not come at the expense of the family happiness, health or adherence to religious and spiritual needs. The challenge facing Malaysia now is not the issue of lower level of needs, but the focus should be on improving the well-being of developing nation into a higher level. People needs are significant in the development of the policy. This shows, for the participants, the economic satisfaction does not determine good life but concerns over the family, health and spiritual being needs are the issues of the grass root. As Malaysia is moving towards a high income country in 2020, Malaysia should alert on the difficulties and stresses facing the people to cope with life. Taking care to this aspect of life would ease the burden of the people to cope with life pressures. These areas of life deserved more attention than material development as these are important

domains of life satisfaction. This shows well-being not just about economic growth that will result in higher income, but it means more to satisfying the non-living needs that bring more long lasting happiness and promotes higher well-being that could not be measurable in *ringgit* and *sen*. The main implications of the study suggests that the government has to re-look its development policy. Government should balance up the economic and non-economic determinants of life satisfaction. Strategies of increasing income must be balanced with the social development programs however recently, people highly value subjective well being or happiness more than material success (Diener & Tay, 2016). Providing more social support and benefits such as work-life balance would ease the people's life stresses. Whether this hold true for the general population remains to be seen and it is suggested this will be the subject of on-going study in particular the quantitative study to broaden the understanding on differences in culture and happiness.

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