



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.¹ 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.² 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."³ 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.⁴ 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 1976.⁵ 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.⁶ 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,

Anthony F. Chelte is writing his doctoral dissertation on the quality of work life at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and is currently visiting assistant professor of management at West New England College. James Wright and Curt Tausky are professors of sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

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 QOE survey is that job satisfaction declined virtually everywhere in the labor force from 1973 to 1977.

Staines and Quinn advance three hypotheses to account 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 identifiable 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 employment 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 mainly because of rising expectations. As indicated, the sharpest evidence favoring the declining reported satisfaction 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, somewhat 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 confirm 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 importantly, 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 the percentage saying it is very true that fringe benefits are good. In fact, the same survey series shows an increase in the proportion of the labor force receiving various fringe benefits. There was another

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 decline 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, questions 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 representative national probability samples. The pattern reported from the Quality of Employment series is not replicated in either 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 satisfaction or work motivation is the question, "If you were

Table 1. Job satisfaction responses for two independent surveys

[In percent]

Response	National Opinion Research Center	
	1973	1977
Number of respondents	1,141	1,262
Very satisfied	49	48
Moderately satisfied	38	39
Little satisfied	8	10
Very dissatisfied	4	3
	Quality of life	
	1971	1978
Number of respondents	15,634	2,380
Completely satisfied	36	32
Largely satisfied	30	32
Slightly satisfied	13	15
Neutral	12	10
Slightly dissatisfied	4	5
Largely dissatisfied	2	3
Completely dissatisfied	2	2

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:

Response	National Opinion Research Center		Quality of Employment Survey	
	1973	1977	1973	1977
Number of respondents . . .	819	940	2,083	2,273
Continue . . .	69	70	67	72
Stop	31	23	33	28

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

[In percent]

Questions and responses	Quality of employment		Quality of life		Questions and responses	Quality of employment		Quality of life	
	1973	1977	1971 ¹	1978		1973	1977	1971 ¹	1978
<i>"The work is interesting."</i>					Somewhat true	27	34	25	28
Number of respondents	2,066	2,246	5,654	2,378	Not very true	12	15	12	10
Very true	61	53	63	63	Not at all true	9	9	6	7
Somewhat true	22	28	28	28	<i>"The chances for promotion are good."</i>				
Not very true	12	12	7	3	Number of respondents	1,781	1,909	5,472	2,307
Not at all true	6	7	3	3	Very true	20	16	22	26
<i>"I have the opportunity to develop my own special abilities."</i>					Somewhat true	28	26	26	26
Number of respondents	2,057	2,241	5,346	2,377	Not very true	23	28	29	25
Very true	43	32	42	50	Not at all true	28	30	23	23
Somewhat true	27	32	32	28	<i>"I am given a lot of chances to make friends."</i>				
Not very true	19	21	17	14	Number of respondents	2,029	2,228	5,645	2,380
Not at all true	11	14	9	8	Very true	61	57	64	65
<i>"I am given a chance to do the things I want to do best."</i>					Somewhat true	31	35	23	24
Number of respondents	2,049	2,239	5,645	2,777	Not very true	6	7	9	8
Very true	41	31	47	49	Not at all true	2	1	4	3
Somewhat true	30	33	32	30	<i>"The physical surroundings are pleasant."</i>				
Not very true	17	22	14	13	Number of respondents	2,051	2,240	5,645	2,372
Not at all true	13	14	7	8	Very true	42	35	49	50
<i>"The pay is good."</i>					Somewhat true	32	37	31	33
Number of respondents	2,061	2,246	5,630	2,376	Not very true	18	19	13	13
Very true	41	27	38	37	Not at all true	8	9	6	5
Somewhat true	35	38	38	39	<i>"I have enough time to get the job done."</i>				
Very true	15	20	17	17	Number of respondents	2,063	2,244	5,628	2,375
Not at all true	10	15	7	6	Very true	41	31	51	52
<i>"The job security is good."</i>					Somewhat true	40	45	31	31
Number of respondents	2,056	2,246	5,620	2,396	Not very true	14	17	13	11
Very true	53	42	57	55	Not at all true	5	7	5	6

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 hypothesis 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

Table 3. Indicators of life satisfaction from three series
[In percent]

Response	Quality of employment		Quality of life		National Opinion Research Center	
	1973	1977	1971	1978	1973	1977
Number of respondents	2,080	2,280	2,147	3,647	1,500	1,527
Very happy	38	27	29	27	36	35
Pretty happy	56	65	61	63	51	53
Not too happy	6	9	10	8	13	12

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 —

¹ See Harold Sheppard and Neal Herrick, *Where Have all the Robots Gone: Worker Dissatisfaction in the 70's* (New York, Free Press, 1972); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974); Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Class Consciousness* (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1973); and James O'Toole, *Work in America* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1973).

² Graham Staines and Robert Quinn, "American workers evaluate the quality of their jobs," *Monthly Labor Review*, January 1979, pp. 3-12.

Elliot Richardson, *The Creative Balance: Government, Politics, and the Individual in America's Third Century* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976).

⁴ Robert Quinn, Graham Staines, and Margaret McCullough, *Job Satisfaction: Is There a Trend?* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974.)

⁵ Robert Quinn and Linda Sheppard, *The 1972-73 Quality of Employment Survey* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1974); and Curt Tausky, *Work Organizations: Major Theoretical Perspectives* (Itaska, Ill., F. E. Peacock, 1978).

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