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## QUALITY OF LIFE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC FACILITIES AND SERVICES IN SMALL TOWN AMERICA

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of life in small rural American towns is thought to be linked to residents' socio-economic status and civic welfare outcomes measured through objective indicators such as education, poverty, and income. However, subjective indicators, such as space qualities and access to community services and facilities are also considered to have a significant impact on quality of life. Using place-level data, this study examines Colony, a small rural Alabama town and evaluates the opinions of the residents with regards to their quality of life and well-being. The quality of life was found to be highly dependent on space quality and opportunities for the well-being of inhabitants. The findings seem to indicate that subjective indicators are as useful in explaining variations in overall levels of quality of life and changes in levels of quality of life compared with socio-economic characteristics.

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### INTRODUCTION

Small communities in rural America have faced and continue to encounter extremely diverse, complex, and ever-changing challenges (Daniels *et al.*, 1988; Lee and Summers, 2003; Oluwoye *et al.*, 2016). However, according to proceedings from the Center for the Study of Rural America's, "Beyond Agriculture: New Policies for Rural America" conference (1999), the challenges ahead for rural communities are of a different type. Conference participants contend that the Nation's rural economies struggle with problems created by a slump in the farm economy, surging technology and the resulting technical revolution in the agricultural industry, expanding global trade, and shifting demographics. These challenges have led to increased wealth and prosperity for some communities, others have merely survived, while many have perished over time (Wilkinson, 1986a; Daniels *et al.*, 1988).

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Parts of the countryside are doing well, but a majority of rural places have not been swept up in the Nation's economic expansion. Having lost their traditional farming economic base, some communities have found new opportunities which often bring, in turn, new problems. Others face economic decline and the consequences of smaller and older populations. On the other hand, some communities have found a workable balance between conserving tradition while adjusting to change. The Center for the Study of Rural America (1999) contends that a deep divide in the performance of the rural economy makes it highly unlikely that a "new tide will lift all rural boats". Struggling rural economies and small towns have often attached their expectations for economic development on the recruitment of large manufacturing facilities. Many small towns declare that with the right mix of financial and other incentives, their big break is just around the corner (Lee and Summers, 2003). Alabama, fueled by a lust for industrial development, has been successful in attracting large automotive plants such as Mercedes-Benz, Toyota, and Hyundai. However, as Lee and Summers (2003) note, too little attention is being paid to building community, civic

infrastructure and to improving the quality of life in the community. Wilkinson (1986a) observed that little progress had been made toward understanding and solving the problems of the small-town but that three important facts have been brought into focus. These facts remain relevant today. One is that society places considerable value on the well-being of the community. Secondly, the well-being of small towns and rural areas are in trouble as the cherished importance of community is a thing of the past. The third fact is for many years, rural advocates have been searching with little success, for effective policies and strategies to encourage rural development and revitalization of these communities. Wuthnow (2013) supports these contentions as he describes two conflicting images about small towns, one of an uncomplicated life, where the air is fresh, morals are pure and life is simple; while in contradiction, small towns as sorry remnants of an America that has been left behind. Oluwoye *et al.* (2016) discuss the effect of socioeconomic and technical changes impacting rural areas and contend that these changes need to be better understood in order to develop appropriate policies and strategies to improve conditions for rural residents and places.

For decades, social scientists have endeavored to categorize the factors that affect the well-being and quality of life of communities. An understanding of these factors can play a critical part in developing successful sustainable development policies for neighborhoods and communities. The presence of educated or accomplished persons in an area and the number of reputable families were the focus of early models of societal well-being, while neighborhood elements such as traffic flow, pollution, and walkability are the emphasis of recent models according to Ghorbanian (2011). At the national level, well-being has been equated to the material condition of a country, measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). At the individual and community levels, socio-economic indicators include income, education, and employment. However, GDP and the other socio-economic indicators do not capture all the aspects of human life. Consequently, it was increasingly recognized that new measures were needed. In addition, Kwiatek-Soltys and Mainet (2014) describe new labels that have been developed to qualify new dimensions of attractiveness, such as 'smart cities' or 'green cities', depending on social, environmental or technical aspects. Alternatively, several studies have examined the concept of "subjective" well-being. Subjective well-being refers to persons' individual perception of their environment and their satisfaction with elements of the physical, social, and economic environment. In Campbell and Converse's (1972) highly influential work "The Human Meaning of Social Change", they developed this concept of subjective well-being indicators, which was grounded in the Western notion that the ultimate purpose of the human experience is "happiness" and hence the crucial measure of social good is the degree to which it provides this happiness. Kahneman and Krueger (2006) contend that direct reports of subjective well-being could have a useful role if they are done in a credible way. Numerous studies have supported this premise and have documented the increasingly important role that quality of life plays in the community and economic growth and development (Kesebir and Diener, 2008; Lucas and Diener, 2008). Kwiatek-Soltys and Mainet (2014) attempted to identify criteria and components of the quality of life focusing on subjective aspects and perceptions of the quality of life and attractiveness of small towns in Europe.

They found that in declining industrial small towns residential attractiveness is a priority. They contend that quality of life is currently a tool for local development in France, but it is not treated as a clear factor in the promotion of small towns in Poland.

### Project Goal

Much of the research on the perceived quality of residential environments has been restricted to urban and suburban environments with little attention paid to small rural towns. Neighborhood satisfaction has been related to various socio-economic components, but the moderating effects of individual-level demographics on the association have not been closely examined particularly in a non-urban small town setting. This study intends to assist in filling that gap and examines community satisfaction and well-being from the perspective of the residents of Colony, Alabama. The analysis was based on Wuthnow (2013) contention that small town America could be best understood from learning about and appreciating residents' experiences and perspectives of their own community. Colony, Alabama, an example of a typical small rural town, is located in the southeastern corner of Cullman County. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the town had a total area of 2.2 square miles and a population of 268 persons. During the 1990's the town's population grew by 30 percent to 385 persons, however, subsequently, the town experienced an equally large population decline which has left the leaders grappling with issues about the future survival of the town. The study focuses on the notion of subjective indicators of social well-being, which rely upon and emphasize the individual perception and evaluation of social conditions. The framework of this study was grounded in the acceptance of the position that assessment of the individual's level of satisfaction is essential for socio-economic development and improved quality of life and well-being in communities. Despite major studies that have indicated an absence of a clear theoretical link between any specific policy and any particular individual declaration of happiness, an enormous amount of literature has accepted the notion that individual evaluations of quality of life are essential to understanding the quality of life of nations (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Oluwoye *et al.*, 2016; Lee and Summers, 2003; Wuthnow, 2013).

The individualistic philosophy which contends that quality of life is dependent on the unique life experience of each person, has been adopted in this research. Individuals would be the only proper judge of their quality of life because people differ in what they value. Consistent with this ideology, quality of life was defined in terms of satisfaction with the aspects of life that are considered important to the individual. Therefore, this study seeks to answer two questions. First, what factors of one's community are important in determining overall community satisfaction? Second, how does community satisfaction impact quality of life? The aims of this study were (1) to assess factors that contribute to neighborhood satisfaction and (2) to compare residents' perception and evaluation of social, economic and physical conditions with selected objective indicators (health, poverty, unemployment) of the respondents and the community at large. This study examined the relationship between perceived satisfaction with neighborhood environment characteristics (local services and facilities) and quality of life, and the moderating effects of socio-economic and demographic factors (education, the

length of residency, homeownership, and employment). It was hypothesized that residents ranking of the quality of life in their community would have a statistically significant correlation with the neighborhood and socio-economic characteristics.

### Resident Characteristics/Socio-Economic Status

The socio-economic status of an individual is thought to impact the sense of fulfillment of individuals. According to Kahneman and Krueger (2006), demographic variables such as education and income were positively correlated with happiness or satisfaction. In his study, Oreopoulos (2003) found years of schooling to be positively associated with satisfaction. Kahneman and Krueger (2006) noted the complex effects of age as indicated by the lowest life satisfaction expressed by those who have teenagers at home. Gender, they pointed out had no correlation with life satisfaction and happiness while income showed a modest correlation.

### Public Facilities and Services

Alternatively, residential satisfaction is an important component of individuals' quality of life and determines the way people respond to their environment. The neighborhood and the community in which people live exert a powerful influence on them as well as determine the level of persons' quality of life. Gottlieb (1994) argues that emphasis on quality of life as a valuable determinant impacts firm location and employment growth. As such, this research examines subjective indicators of well-being, measured by residents' perception of and satisfaction with key public facilities and services. According to Adejumbi and Odumosu (1998), the desirability of a neighborhood is dependent factors such as cleanliness, safety, attractiveness of the environment, friendliness of residents and the democratic and participatory characteristics of the community. These conditions can be negatively or positively perceived by residents based on their level of satisfaction and expectations. For this research, the authors examined key public facilities and services provided by a typical small rural town. The expectation is that the indicators of residential characteristics would serve not only as exogenous variables, directly impacting the quality of life but also as intermediate variables, indirectly impacting the quality of life through the perception of key public facilities and services. Based on Kahneman and Krueger (2006), use of the subjective well-being indicators provides an external check on economic indicators and conditions of the community.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Geographic location/boundaries of region

The town of Colony is located in the south western corner in Cullman County Alabama. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the town has a total area of 2.2 square miles (5.8 km<sup>2</sup>), of which, 2.19 square miles of it is land, with 0.44% as water. Colony, Alabama, ranked 163<sup>rd</sup> among the 272 (47%) cities and towns that had populations under 1,000 persons in Alabama (US Census Bureau, 2010). Colony Alabama is an example of a typical small rural town. During the 1990's the town's population grew by 30 percent, however, during the following decade, the town experienced an equally large population decline leading to the concerns about the future survival of the town. The 2015 population of 273 persons was

100% rural. Compared to the rest Alabama, Colony's unemployment rate was above the state average; percentage of the population with bachelor's degrees or higher was below the state average; the median house value was below the state average; the black population was above the state average and median age significantly above the state average (US Census Bureau, 2010).

### Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, life satisfaction models proposed by Pavot and Diener (1993) and Blanchflower and Oswald (2011) were used as starting points for construction of a survey instrument. Elements of community satisfaction models as implemented by Ghorbanian (2011) were also incorporated. Ultimately, a 22-item survey that represented the variety of elements that contribute to community satisfaction and quality of life was used. In order to both test the validity of our model and to determine the practical implications of this model's use for city planning, the North Alabama Regional Council of Government assisted in questionnaire design and coordinated efforts with the town council for implementation of the survey. The survey used a convenience sampling methodology. Questionnaires were left at City Hall and residents were encouraged to pick them up and fill them out. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 22) was used for both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Frequencies and cross-tabulations were used to provide a descriptive picture of the interrelation and interactions between and among variables. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between community satisfaction and each of direct and indirect variables believed to impact the quality of life. Results were input into a factor analysis, the components of which were used in a regression analysis with the quality of life serving as the dependent variable.

## Results and Analyses

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

There was a total of 74 survey respondents, 35 (47.3%) of which were males and 32 (43.2%) females with 7 (9.5%) persons who did not indicate their gender. This represented a 28% response rate. About one third (25 persons - 33.8%) of the respondents were 65 years and older. A total of 67 (90.5%) of the respondents indicated that they were Black and 3 (4.1%) and 1 (1.4%) were White and Asian, respectively. Of the 74 survey respondents, 32.4% (24) were single, 35.1% (26) were married and 18.9% (14) were separated. Even though 35% of the respondents were married, almost 40% of them lived alone with only 18.9% living with a wife or husband. A total of 21 persons (28.4%) lived with the family. Only two of the respondents (2.7%) lived with children only. The majority of the respondents – 32 persons (43.2%) had high school diplomas with 24.3% (18 persons) with less than a high school education. A total of 54 persons had household incomes of \$39,000 or less with majority – 32 persons (43.2%) falling into the \$0 to \$19,999 category. Eight persons (10.8%) indicated that they had incomes within \$40,000 and \$59,000 and one with an income of \$80,000 or above. There were eight persons (10.8%) who did not respond to the question about income. The majority of the respondents – 43 persons indicated that they were homeowners. The majority – 48 persons (64.9%) lived in single-family housing units. A total of 28 persons (37.8%) lived alone, 21 persons (28.2%) and 13 persons

(17.6%) had household sizes of 2 and 3, respectively. There were 30 persons (40.5%) who were the majority of the respondents that were retired. Of the 26 persons (35.1%) that were employed, 18 persons (24.3%) were employed full-time; 8 persons (10.8%) worked for the private sector while 6 persons (8.1%) worked for the government. For those who worked, 20% of them had commute times of 15 to 30 minutes, while 7% had to travel almost an hour for work. The personal vehicle was the major means of transportation to work for the survey respondents. Overall the survey shows that the sample population provided a good representation of the residents of Colony with few variations. The sample was over-represented in individuals within the 65+ age group category, and under-represented the White population. The respondents of the survey have substantially represented the population in the town of Colony. This was validated by comparing the survey respondent's demographic and socio-economic profile to that of the town's profile based on the 2010 Census data and the 2015 American Community Survey data. The characteristics were comparable with some key exceptions. The survey respondents had over-represented the lowest income category (under \$20,000) and persons who were unemployed. Meanwhile, there was an under-representation of individuals within the highest income category (\$60,000 and above), private sector employees, and the White population.

### Overall Quality of Life

The majority of respondents ranked the quality of life in Colony as fair (44.6%) to good (33.8%). Only 9.5% (7 persons) ranked their quality of life as poor. Eight respondents (10.8%) felt that the quality of life was much better today than five years ago. However, 33.8% of the respondents felt that their quality of life was somewhat better while 35.1% of the respondents felt that there was no change. Ten persons felt that the quality of life was worse (7 respondents - somewhat worse, and 3 respondents - much worse). In general, the majority (82.5%) of Colony's residents had positive regard of their quality of life.

### Quality of Life and Socio-economic Status Indicators (SES)

The respondents' valuation of their overall quality of life was compared according to typical socio-economic indicators of educational attainment and household income. College educated individuals were equally divided in their appraisal of their quality of life with poor, fair and good rankings each getting 33% of the respondents. None of the college educated respondents indicated that their quality of life in Colony was excellent. The large majority of persons who had less than a college degree ranked quality of life as fair and good. Persons with high school diplomas (include GED) and some years of college, interestingly were less likely to rank the quality of life as poor with 7.7% ranking it as excellent. The relationship between educational attainment and quality of life was not clearly evidenced by the results of the survey. However, previous studies have suggested that the benefits of postsecondary education could not only be extended to individuals, but also to families, communities, states, and the nation as a whole. Educational opportunities allow individuals to enrich their life, and therefore it is expected that persons with postsecondary education would have a higher quality of life and would relate themselves to this. For the town of Colony, however, this would not be the case. Similarly, an expectation would be that the level of income would influence

residents' attitude towards their quality of life. However, results showed that almost 47% of those in the lowest income category (\$0 - \$19,999) ranked quality of life as good. On the other hand, only 25% of the respondents with higher income (\$60,000 and above) felt that the quality of their life was good. This implies income may not be a major factor in determining the quality of life in the town of Colony. The data reveals that the longer the residency, the more positive persons felt about their quality of life. A total of 80.7% of the respondents who lived in the town for 20 years and more felt that the quality of life was good/fair. However, interestingly, all of the respondents who lived in Colony less than a year, felt that quality of life was fair. This denoted a positive relationship between the length of residency and quality of life. In addition, more homeowners (81.4%) ranked quality of life as fair/good. A larger proportion of the unemployed rated the quality of life as poor. None felt it was excellent, while 30.8% and 7.7% of the employed felt that quality of life in the colony was good and excellent, respectively.

The results reveal that none of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents had a statistically significant association with their assessed overall quality of life. However, amongst respondents' characteristics, it was their gender that had the strongest positive relation with their gauged overall quality of life. Based on the responses from the survey females were more satisfied with their quality of life. Other studies (Dolan *et al.*, 2008; Alesina, *et al.*, 2004; Cummins *et al.*, 2003) corroborate these results. Education, type of residence, and employment status, work commute time, means of transportation to work, and the type of agency working for also had positive but weak associations with residents' valued quality of life. Meanwhile, age, race, income, the length of residence, homeownership, marital status, type of persons living with, and the number of people in households were characteristics that had negative, though weak, associations with the perceived quality of life in the town of Colony by the respondents. Numerous studies point to the positive association between an individual's subjective well-being and income (Dolan *et al.*, 2008; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; Diener, *et al.*, 1993), however, that was not this case in this study.

### Assessment of Subjective Well-Being Indicators

The largest proportion of respondents ranked housing programs, health facilities and services and school facilities very poorly. Garbage/trash pick-up service and library facilities fared better and were predominantly as fair or good. None of these programs, facilities or services was ranked as excellent. However, services and facilities such as fire, police, parks/recreation and water/utility service ranked fair to good. Issues that were rated the poorest by the respondents included roads and infrastructure, job training programs, housing programs, health facilities and services and public transportation. Garbage/trash pickup service and parks and recreation received the most positive reviews. The data implies that there is a relationship between residents' ranking of roads and infrastructure and their perceptions on quality of life in their community. Respondents who ranked roads and infrastructure as very poor and quality of life as poor in Colony accounted for twelve percent 12% of the total participants. Meanwhile, 48% who ranked roads and infrastructure as very poor, ranked quality of life as fair. However, there were 34% of persons who even though ranked

roads and infrastructure poorly, felt that their quality of life was good. This would indicate that the relations between these variables may not be that strong. The literature indicates that the infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and water systems for development in rural America, have deteriorated, and that the decline has reached an alarming level. Research results of low-level satisfaction of respondents over the roads and infrastructures in Colony were consistent with previous studies. A similar pattern was noted in respondents' ranking of existing job training programs in Colony also reflected the similar ranking of their quality of life. It could be noted that 14.6% and 45.8% of the respondents who respectively ranked these programs as very poor and fair also regarded their quality of life in Colony as poor and fair. Likewise, it could be noted that while 33.3% ranked the training programs very poor, they still ranked the quality of life at Colony as good. This could be accounted for by the respondents aged 65 and above as most of them have likely retired from employment, they might not anymore consider job training programs as a vital contributor to their quality of life.

Housing satisfaction could be determined by the "perceived gap between a respondent's needs and aspiration and the reality of the current residential context" (Galster, 1987). As a basic necessity for life, housing could be considered as one of the most important factors in measuring a person's perceived quality of life. In general, the homeowners rated the quality of life in the town of Colony better than the non-homeowners. Overall 58 percent of the respondents rated housing programs in their town as very poor, nonetheless, 81 percent who rated housing programs as very poor still rated the quality of life as fair/good. Seventeen percent of the respondents who rated health facilities and services very poorly, also felt that their overall quality of life in Colony was poor. Meanwhile, respondents who also rated the health facilities and services as very poor, valued their quality of life as fair (43.9%) and good (34.1%). Furthermore, 66.7% of the respondents who rated health facilities and services as fair, at the same time felt that the quality of life was fair. Again, overall, a large percentage (78) of these respondents still had a positive perception of their quality of life and rated their overall quality of life as fair/good. Of the individuals who rated quality of life as good, 60 percent ranked public transportation as good. Even the 78 percent who ranked public transportation as very poor, ranked overall quality of life as fair/good.

#### **Quality of Life with Facilities and Services that were highly rated**

Fifty-two of the seventy-four respondents (70%) ranked garbage/trash pickup services as fair/good. Of the 52, there were 46 respondents (88%) who ranked quality of life as fair/good. Fifty-four of the seventy-four respondents (73%) ranked parks and recreation as good/fair. Of these, 29 respondents (56%) ranked quality of life as fair while 19 respondents (35%) ranked quality of life as good. Fifty-one of the seventy-four respondents (69%) ranked water and utility service as fair/good. From the same, there were 27 respondents (53%) who ranked their quality of life as fair, and 18 respondents (35%) perceived their quality of life as fair. All of the neighborhood features except for one had statistically significant correlations with subjective well-being. Amongst the factors, Garbage/ trash pick-up services had the strongest association with the respondent's overall quality of life. Although, it should be noted that the influence of

neighborhood features to subjective well-being has been unresolved in previous studies, which could be attributed to the reduced significance ascribed to neighborhoods by individuals who could satisfy their needs outside its boundaries (Ahlbr and t, 1984). However, the results of this analysis have shown that quality of life for residents of Colony was more dependent on subjective well-being indicators rather than the residents' socio-economic status. The next section of the research examines the contribution of the subjective well-being indicators to the respondents' valued quality of life.

#### **Factor Analysis and Regression**

Due to the significant correlations among and between the indicators of subjective well-being, a factor analysis was conducted in order to concentrate on a smaller number of variables capable of explaining the observed variances. Based on the analysis only the Parks/ Recreation and Water/ Utility Service were significant such that the variance in the assessed quality of life by the respondents was attributed to 56.8% and 12%, respectively. As the results identified 2 factors, a rotated component matrix for each of the 2 factors was produced. In the first factor, Housing Programs (0.902), Health Facilities and Services (0.387), School Facilities (0.829), Public Transportation (0.773), Job Training Programs (0.706), and Garbage/ trash Pick-up Services (0.547) were the variables with the highest values as such factor 1 could be identified as Community Services (CS). On the other hand, as Water/ Utility (0.885), Parks/ Recreation (0.880), and Roads and Infrastructures (0.519) were the variables that had the highest values for factor 2, in essence, it could be referred to as Community Facilities (CF). In order to establish the influence of community services and facilities on the valued quality of life of the respondents, regression modeling was conducted. Data reveals that 28.5% of the variation in the assessed quality of life of the respondents' could be explained by their rating of Colony's community services and facilities. Respondents' ratings of Colony's community services and facilities statistically and significantly predict how they value their overall quality of life,  $F(2, 71) = 14.149, p < 0.0005$ . This indicates that the model was a good fit of the data. Furthermore, results indicated that the ratings of the respondents on the Community Facilities had a higher impact on their assessed overall quality of life. Moreover, the equation to predict the overall quality of life (OQL) of the residents of Colony would be:

$$OQL = 6.378 + 6.289(\text{Rating on CS}) + 8.086(\text{Rating on CF}) \dots (1)$$

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

The quality of life is a multi-dimensional concept incorporating social well-being, economic well-being, quality of public services and other aspects of life at a local level. The results of this research show that quality of life in Colony was more strongly correlated to perceptions about the community's facilities and services than with the socio-economic status of the individual respondents. The quality of life for Colony was more dependent on subjective well-being indicators rather than the residents' socio-economic status. Public services and facilities are designated to fulfill supportive functions related to the health and well-being of the citizens of a society. The provision of public services and facilities in a community has a significant impact on the quality of life that residents and

others enjoy. Good quality local public services, including education and training opportunities, health care and community facilities are identified as one of the key elements for a good quality of life. Citizens often feel that public services help to level the playing field in an otherwise unequal society. This research provides policy insights as it provides local policy makers with a deeper understanding of the role of public sector services in promoting the quality of life of citizens, contributes to a central area of public policy debate concerning neighborhoods and quality of life and offers evidence on the influence that PSOs can exert on outcomes at different hierarchical levels and across public sector organization boundaries. A community's public facilities and services reflects a government's commitment to excellence in providing a framework in which the community functions. Services such as public safety, education, solid waste disposal, general government, and a variety of other services play a vital role in how a community functions, perceives itself, and how it is perceived by outsiders. Often, communities provide a competitive edge in attracting investment and residents by providing high-quality and efficient public services for the lowest cost possible. The provision of cost-effective and efficient public services and infrastructure is instrumental to the overall health and well-being of a balanced community. Key considerations for Colony's future include providing facilities and services for youths and elderly; strengthening health care service and encouraging additional commercial/shopping opportunities. Additional key needs identified included job training programs, housing programs, health facilities and services and public transportation.

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