

## **Explaining Satisfaction and Perceived opportunities in the Flemish Society**

An exploratory study

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## **ABSTRACT**

The goal of the current paper is twofold. First, explaining life satisfaction in the Flemish part of Belgium using objective and subjective determinants. Second, explaining which particular social groups and social circumstances are constraining individuals in their perceived opportunities (to achieve satisfaction). Data of the survey of Equal Opportunities of 2004 is used to perform multiple regression analyses. The results suggest that perceived opportunities is the far most important predictor of life satisfaction and that several social circumstances (e.g., composition of the household) and social groups (e.g., women) are constraining people's opportunities to achieve life satisfaction. Policy implications should be directed towards these social groups and social circumstances. At the same time they should pay attention to the finding that satisfaction and perceived opportunities sometimes differ per domain of life.

# **Explaining Satisfaction and Perceived opportunities in the Flemish Society**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In past research, well-being mainly has been considered synonymous with economic well being (Berger-Schmitt, 2000). The well being of an individual hence often was assessed by his or her income and the well being of an entire nation was indicated by the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). However, the 1960's and 1970's brought along doubt about whether the existence of economic welfare equals social welfare (e.g., Noll, 2002; Veenhoven, 2002). As Mishan puts it, people became aware of the social costs of economic growth (Mishan, 1967). This growing awareness of the limitations of considering economic welfare as a determinant of well being resulted in a growing demand for more subjective determinants to measure well being.

Objective determinants encompass explicitly observable criteria such as income, education and safety, i.e. they consist of social facts (Veenhoven, 1996; Noll, 2000). Subjective determinants, on the other hand, are measures of how people feel about their life; they consist of individual perceptions and evaluations of their social environment (Veenhoven, 1996; Noll, 2000). Veenhoven (2002) provides a number of comprehensive arguments why social policy research should make use of subjective and objective determinants to explain satisfaction. One of the main arguments in favour of using subjective determinants is that people can perceive their life differently while living in the same objective circumstances. These different perceptions are caused by the fact that people differ in their tastes and preferences (Anderson, 1999). However, as Cummins (2000) denotes, although subjective determinants appear to be strong predictors of well being, it is questionable whether it is ethical to merely focus on subjective criteria. Consider someone who is living objectively in a very bad situation (for instance suffers from a severe illness), but subjectively feels happy. In such a situation it is rather unethical to rely solely on the subjective perception of the individual. Therefore, it is better to make use of both subjective and objective determinants of well being.

The emphasis of my study will be on the satisfaction which individuals experience in several personal domains of life. These domains are: education, paid work, personal relations, leisure, health, material welfare and personal development. Satisfaction can be understood as an important domain of subjective well being research (Diener, 1994). Subjective well being, in turn, is considered as a part of the broader domain of quality of life research (Veenhoven, 2000). In the definition used by Costanza et al. (2006) the emphasis of satisfaction within quality of life is apparent. They consider quality of life as a general term which is “meant to represent either how well human needs are met or the extent to which individuals or groups perceive satisfaction or dissatisfaction in various domains of life” (Costanza et al., 2006: 268). In examining what determines the level of satisfaction, the current study will use both, objective and subjective, determinants in order to assess their importance on the level of satisfaction for people living in the Flemish part of Belgium. Consequently, this study will provide a complete and comprehensive picture of which factors influence life satisfaction. This results in a first research question:

*How can we explain life satisfaction in the Flemish society by making use of both objective and subjective determinants?*

Veenhoven (1996) describes theoretically how differences in life chances might influence the level of satisfaction. He/she (1996) defines life chances as ‘opportunity structures’ in the living environment which “are implied in both qualities of society at large and in one’s social position in society” (Veenhoven, 1996: 24). In my current study, life chances are treated synonymously with perceived opportunities., that is to say, the opportunities people perceive within different domains of life to achieve the things they aim to achieve. The main argument in favour of using perceived opportunities is that there can be a difference between the formal opportunities which people receive (determined by law) and the opportunities people perceive (determined, for instance, by their social environment).

In the literature there is a long ongoing debate about two themes around equality (e.g., Phillips, 2004; Phillips, 2006; Anderson, 1999). The debate mainly concentrates on whether equality should be considered as equality of outcome or equality of opportunities or as Anderson (1999) describes it: a debate between equality of fortune and democratic equality. The main argument disfavours equality of outcome is that it does not consider the fact that people have different tastes and preferences and therefore make different decisions (Phillips, 2004). Equality of outcome lacks to take into account peoples’ own responsibility stemming from their own choices. In contrast, the main argument in favour of equality of opportunities is that it does recognize the importance of personal responsibility. Receiving equal opportunities is receiving the same means to strive to the same outcome. However, Phillips (2004) and Anderson (1999) explain how people can be socially constrained in reaching equal outcomes,

while they did have equal opportunities. These social constraints are, for example, caused by role expectations which the environment of the individual holds. As Young (2001: 8) describes: “A large set of the causes of an unequal distribution of resources or unequal opportunities between individuals, however, is attributable neither to individual preferences and choices nor to luck or accident”. This indicates how merely giving everyone equal opportunities or redistribute all resources (in the realm of equality of fortune) will fall short in creating equality, because social constraints might nevertheless prevail. Anderson (1999) therefore emphasizes that we need democratic equality which integrates the principle of distribution with equal respect in creating equality. She continues that all law abiding citizens always should have access to the social conditions of freedom. In the situation of democratic equality, in contrast with the situation of equality of fortune, “people make claims in virtue of their equality, not their inferiority, to others (Anderson, 1999: 289).” Pursuing equality of fortune means that goods are redistributed between the lucky ones and the unfortunates, this will be stigmatizing the unfortunates (which are perceived as inferior to those who are lucky). Pursuing democratic equality, in contrast, means that socially created discrimination is being abolished. In other words, equality of fortune is solely concerned with the equal distribution of goods (e.g., income, opportunities) between individuals; democratic equality takes into account the social relationship in which these goods are distributed. In the case of democratic equality, the principle of equal recognition of individuals in society is integrated with the principle of equal distribution (Anderson, 1999).

In my study, it will be examined whether membership in specific social groups or social conditions in the Flemish society are socially constraining individuals in their perceived opportunities and their subsequent levels of life satisfaction. This leads to my second research question:

*Which social groups and social conditions are constraining individuals’  
perceived opportunities?*

Formally, all different social groups, respectively defined by sex, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation, are subject to the policy of equal opportunity in the Flemish part of Belgium. By means of a group comparison, however, it can be assessed whether the Flemish society indeed adheres to the principle of democratic equality.<sup>1</sup> The extent to which individuals indeed experience life

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<sup>1</sup> Young (2001) emphasizes that comparing different social groups in assessing injustice and inequalities will reveal structural inequalities between groups. She furthermore states that: “Structural social groups are relationally constituted in the sense that one position in structural relations does not exist apart from differentiated relations to other positions” (Young, 2001: 12). For this reason, I shall examine different social groups and make a comparison with other groups in order to assess whether some social groups are more

chances (i.e., perceive opportunities) generally is determined by the quality of the society (e.g., national determinants), an individual's positions in the society (e.g., age, gender, educational level) and his or her opportunity for participation in society (e.g., paid work, voluntary organizations). In my study, however, only the latter two aspects of life chances (positions and participation) will be used as determinants of perceived opportunities and satisfaction of Flemish people. As I am concentrating on the Flemish population of Belgium only, national or regional determinants cannot be taken into account in the current study.

In my analyses, I thus shall take social structural location into account. Past research repeatedly showed that social background characteristics (e.g., educational level of the parents) influence the achieved status of the individual (e.g., Stocké, 2007; Blau and Duncan, 1967). This study will examine whether social background characteristics are influencing opportunities individuals perceive and their subsequent level of life satisfaction.

I shall also consider aspects of the household context respectively people's living conditions ('art of living'). Research suggested that, for instance, the number of children affects women's labour supply, because women tend to invest more time in domestic work and childrearing after childbirth (Vlasbom and Schippers, 2003). Other research (Veenhoven, 1996) suggested that people who are living with a disability show less life satisfaction in comparison to people who are healthy. The current study aims to examine whether these ecological criteria indeed affect perceived opportunities and satisfaction in the case of Belgium.

In sum, the aim of the current study thus is twofold. First, I want to explore which factors, using both objective and subjective determinants, influence satisfaction. Second, it will be examined how social groups and social circumstances constrain individuals in their perceived opportunities to achieve satisfaction. This enables me to assess whether the Flemish society adheres to the principles of democratic equality.

## **BACKGROUND**

The purpose of the current study is both explorative (examining life satisfaction and its reflection in perceived opportunities in the Flemish society) and explanatory (testing its main theoretical/empirical determinants). This section considers three dimensions to assess the perceived opportunities: positions in society, participation in society and art of living. It is assumed, as indicated by Veenhoven (1996), that life perceived opportunities are strongly related to the satisfaction individual's experience. Therefore, one could expect that the

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socially constrained in their perceived opportunities and as a result in their level of satisfaction than others.

opportunities that people perceive, that is the subjective evaluation of peoples' life chances, are likely to influence their level of satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> An increase of perceived opportunities will result in greater levels of satisfaction, whereas a decrease in perceived opportunities will result in lower levels of satisfaction (*hypothesis 1*).

### **Positions in society**

The positions individuals possess within the society can be subdivided on the basis of resources, social group and social background. First, people hold different societal positions based on their *educational level* and their *income* (i.e., their resources). The relation between educational level and the level of satisfaction in modernized western societies is often found to be weak. However, in poorer countries the strength of the relation increases (Veenhoven, 1996). The same pattern applies to income (O'Connell, 2004). This is also supported by Schijns (2002) who showed that there is a positive relation between income and individual satisfaction, although the marginal utility of income decreases when the income increases. Based on these previous findings it might be expected that income and educational level, although the relation is expected to be positive, do not have a large influence on the perceived opportunities and satisfaction people experience because the Flemish society is a modernized wealthy society (*hypothesis 2*).

Besides on individual resources, an individual's societal position might also be based on the *social group* people belong to, as defined by someone's sex, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. Although current policies aim at creating equal opportunities with special attention to these groups, it might be the case that different social groups experience different social outcomes with regard to opportunities and satisfaction. This is not necessarily a consequence of own choice and responsibility, but might be due to social structures in society which constrain the individual in reaching his/her goals.<sup>3</sup> In comparing these different social groups, it can be examined whether there is inequality (in opportunities and satisfaction) due to these social structures (Young, 2001).

Finally, although not all literature is conclusive, it appears that the *social background* of an individual can be of considerable impact on achievements in

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, in satisfaction research there is more to the picture than merely life chances, however, in the domain of social research the main focus lies on life chances. In contrast, studying life-satisfaction in relation to for instance life- events is often an issue in health related studies (Veenhoven, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Young (2001) provides an example (originally by Susan Okin) of how women can experience unequal outcomes not due to their own choices, but because of the gendered division of the household in which certain role expectations create a dependent situation for women. This example is illustrative for how social structures, more than personal choice, can constrain women.

further life (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Stocké, 2007; Hansen, 1997). This study will examine to what extent social background of the individual is constraining individuals' perceived opportunities and satisfaction. It might be expected that, since background characteristics are influencing peoples' achievements it is also of influence on peoples' perceived opportunities and satisfaction (*Hypothesis 3*).

### **Participation in society**

Participation in society refers to the extent to which individuals participate in social activities (Veenhoven, 1996). One of the major determinants of participation in the society is an individual's employment situation. According to Veenhoven (1996) and Helliwell and Putnam (2004), there appear to be especially large differences in satisfaction between people who participate in either unpaid or paid work and people who are unemployed. In the current study it will be examined whether the same effect can be found in the Flemish survey. As stated by Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2008) people are increasingly seeking for more meaning in their work than merely economical meaning. Consequently, it can be expected that the benefits of being employed extends to the overall satisfaction in life, more than merely the domains of material well being and paid work.

Participation in the society is also referred to as civic engagement (e.g., Shortall, 2008). Durkheim was one of the first to point to the importance of civic engagement (social participation) and to demonstrate what could be the consequences of non-participation. Shortall (2008: 452) states that: "There is no doubt that participation in social activities, and to state more simply, belonging, is central to social well being". It might be expected that civic engagement, as indicated by labour participation, participation in voluntary work, membership of an association and leisure activities, is influencing individuals' life satisfaction. At the same time, civic engagement might also lead to increased social capital and consequently provide access to certain opportunities to achieve satisfaction (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004) (*Hypothesis 4*).

### **Art of living**

My study will use a broader notion of the art of living than initially suggested by Veenhoven (1996). Besides looking at health, this study will also consider *how* people are living. That is to say, this study takes into account how the household situation of the individual looks like.

First, as stated previously, it might be expected that life satisfaction and perceived opportunities will be higher if a person does not suffer from a disability in comparison to the situation in which someone does suffer from a disability. Scheafer, King and Bernard (2007) found that there is a positive

relation between life satisfaction and five dimensions of health<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it might be hypothesized that people who suffer from a disability perceive less opportunities to achieve their goals and as a result are less satisfied than people that are in a healthy condition (*Hypothesis 5*).

Second, it also might be expected that the composition of the household is influencing the level of satisfaction. Results of Evans and Kelley (2004) support this idea when they show that married people are more satisfied than singles, cohabitators, divorcees, and widow(er)s (taken into account that these latter two do not have a new partner). In addition, they found that the union of cohabitation is not as satisfying as the union of marriage (Evans and Kelley, 2004). Their study is conducted in Australia but it is line with findings in other countries<sup>5</sup>. Notably, the effect of marriage appeared to be stronger for collectivistic societies, compared to the more individualistic societies. This might be due to the fact that in collectivistic societies, cohabiting and divorce is less accepted. The current study is capable in exploring how different types of households influence the level of satisfaction in the Flemish part of Belgium. In addition, it also examines if some household types experience less satisfaction, due to fewer perceived opportunities (i.e., whether they are socially constrained). I expect that, although the Flemish society is rather individualistic than collectivistic, people living in more traditional households are more satisfied (*hypothesis 6*).

Finally, it will be examined whether time availability (due to investments in, for instance, domestic work) influences satisfaction. It can be expected that when a lot of time is spent on domestic work, people perceive fewer opportunities in life and will be less satisfied (*hypothesis 7*), due to a lack of time. As is repeatedly been suggested (e.g., Greenstein, 2000), the division of household labour has become more equal, but nevertheless, women remain doing the largest share of household tasks. Consequently, it might be the case that women experience fewer opportunities and less satisfaction in life, partly because of a lack of time.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This article uses data from the survey 'equal opportunities' [in Dutch: Survey Gelijke Kansen] collected in 2004 in the Flemish part of Belgium. The data is collected by the centre for policy research for equal opportunities in Belgium, which is a supporting office for the Flemish government. The survey measures opportunities, using objective and subjective determinants, in six spheres of life and two well-being domains of life, respectively: education, paid work, unpaid

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4 Respectively: social, spiritual, psychological, occupational and physical health.

5 For instance, Diener et al. (2000) did a cross-cultural study (42 nations) and found that married people were more satisfied compared to none-married people.

work, relations, leisure, health, material welfare and personal development (surveygelijkekansen.be). The selection of these eight domains of life was based on qualitative interviews. In analyzing the qualitative interviews, these domains appeared to be of particular importance (Lenaers, 2006). One of the domains of life, namely unpaid work, is left out of the current analyses, due to ambiguous questioning in this domain.<sup>6</sup>

The research population consisted of people who live in the Flemish part of Belgium aged 30 to 70 years. The selection of this age category is based on the assumption that people with the minimum age of 30 already have experiences in all eight domains of life. Subsequently, a two-step stratified sample is taken. First, different municipalities (n=20) were selected. The selection of municipalities was not entirely random, since the urbanisation level of the municipalities was taken into account. From these municipalities a random sample is drawn (N=2655), which had a netto-response rate of 66.4%. The data was administered by means of post-interviews. Respondents received a gift-voucher of five Euros to encourage their participation. To increase the response rate, a reminder was sent to the respondents after 2, 4, and 6 weeks. Some of the general descriptive statistics about the different population groups, subject to the policy of equal opportunities, are shown in table 1.

### Measurements

This section provides information about the variables which will be used in the analyses. Table 1 provides some descriptive statistics about the two dependent variables, satisfaction and perceived opportunities. It contains information about the aggregate dimensions (life satisfaction and perceived life opportunities) as well as domain specific information. Tables 2a and 2b provide general descriptive statistics for the independent variables.

*Satisfaction* is measured in each domain of life, respectively: education, paid work, relations, leisure, health, material welfare and personal development. The respondent had to indicate on a 10-point Likert scale to what extent he/she reached the goals he/she intended to reach. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of satisfaction. This question was repeated identically for all seven domains of life, thus the satisfaction within all domains can be easily compared.

Furthermore, taking together these items results in a valid multidimensional indicator of overall life satisfaction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Questions applied to both voluntary work and domestic tasks, whereas the former is often considered as something belonging to personal development, the latter is not. Moreover, the latter aspect, domestic tasks, is often seen as a burdensome. These two different things are difficult to coincide.

<sup>7</sup> Reliability analysis reveals that a scale, containing seven domains of life, is reliable (Cronbach's alpha of 0.77). Removing one of the items from the scale would make the scale less reliable.

*Perceived opportunities* were measured in the same way as satisfaction. The respondent had to indicate on a 10-point Likert scale whether he/she perceives more or less opportunities than other people in the specific domain of life. Higher scores on the scale indicate more perceived opportunities. The advantage of using perceived opportunities instead of actual life chances or opportunities is that in modern western democratic societies formally everyone has the same opportunities to get along in life, however, people might not always feel that they have the same opportunity, due to for instance, social constraints.

Again the seven domains, with regard to perceived opportunities can be combined in an overall index measure. As a result, we obtain a reliable indicator of perceived opportunities in life.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Positions in society***

*Educational attainment* of the respondent is measured by the respondent's highest attained educational level. For the statistical analyses, this variable was recoded into three categories which indicate low, moderate and higher educational levels.

*Income* is determined by the net monthly household income the respondent receives. The question is divided into categories of a range of 500 Euros. The lowest category contains people who earn less than 500 Euros and the highest contain people who earn more than 5000 Euros. For my analyses, I recoded this variable into three categories to facilitate comparison between low, moderate and high income groups.

The *social groups* which are considered to be of importance in the current study are the social groups which are subject to the policy of equal opportunities in the Flemish society. In the first place these groups are based on: sex, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The composition of these social groups is presented in table 3. In addition, this study will also take into account the social group defined by age.<sup>9</sup>

The *social background* of the respondent is indicated by three variables. First, the highest attained educational level of the mother. Second, the highest attained educational level of the father. Third, the subjective perception of the household income of the time the respondent was raised. The exact question was: "To what extent was your family capable to make ends?" The respondent could indicate this on a 6-point scale ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Reliability analysis reveals that this scale is reliable with the Cronbach's alpha being 0.81.

<sup>9</sup> It should be mentioned that, although the majority of people still fall within the age range of 30 through 70, the social group based on age is somewhat broader than initially planned.

<sup>10</sup> The main advantage of using the subjective household income is that there are less retrospective difficulties in retrieving this perception compared to the situation in which the respondent has to retrieve the actual income. Furthermore, the height of an income is

***Participation in society***

The *labour situation* of the respondent examines to what extent the respondent is participating in the labour market. The respondent could choose nine different options, of which some are grouped together for the ease of interpretation. Eventually, there are five types of labour situations: no income (e.g., domestic work, student), unemployed (e.g., medically retired), paid labour (e.g., part time, full time), retired and other labour situation.

*Leisure time* is indicated by two variables. First, the variable which directly assessed the available time. This is time excluding paid work, caring tasks, domestic tasks and fulfilling essential needs, such as sleeping and eating. Thus, the respondent indicated how many hours of spare time he had during a normal week. The distribution of this variable contained several outliers, it appeared that people over-estimated their leisure time.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the outliers (n=25) are transformed by replacing their scores by three times the standard deviation above the mean. This means that these people, who had scores above 72 (hours) are replaced by the score 67.25 (hours).

The second indicator of leisure time contained the actual activity of leisure, that is to say how often the respondent is going out (e.g., performances, sport games, cinema) and how often the respondent visits friends. Both questions are measured using a 5-point scale. For “going out” this scale ranges from more than once a month to never and for “visiting friends“, the scale ranges from never to (almost) daily. For ease of interpretation the “going out” scale is reversed in which higher scores indicate more leisure activity.

Finally, *voluntary work* is also indicative for the participation in society. This is indicated by two questions: first, how many hours does the respondent spend on unpaid voluntary work in a normal week. This variable is dichotomized into no voluntary work (=0) and voluntary work (=1). Second, the respondent is asked if he/she is a *member of an association*. The respondent could initially indicate if he/ she was a member of one association, more than one, or none association at all. In the analyses a dichotomized variable is used indicating either no membership (=0) or membership of an association (=1).

***Art of living***

As an indicator of *health*, the respondent had to indicate whether he/she was suffering from a disability or not. The variable indicated no disability (=0) or a disability (=1).

The *composition of the household* is measured by asking the respondent who takes part about his/her current family. Respondents could indicate whether it

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also time- related, therefore, the actual income of the parents is also more difficult to compare.

<sup>11</sup> It could be the case that people overestimated their amount of leisure time, because they included the time they spent on other needs as well.

was only themselves, a partner, children, parents, brother(s)/sister(s) or other members living in their household. This variable was recoded into the following composition categories: living alone, cohabiting with partner, cohabiting with children, cohabiting with partner and children, or any other family situation (e.g., living with other relatives). Unfortunately, there is no variable which indicates whether the respondent is married or not; therefore the current study is not capable in distinguishing between the unions of marriage and cohabitation.

Finally, the *time spend on domestic work* is taken into account by asking the respondent how many hours during a normal week he/she spent on domestic and caring tasks within the household.

### **Methods**

The current study consists of two statistical analyses. Both analyses will entail a multiple regression analyses. Multiple regression analyses are considered as suitable, because the aggregate dependent variables (i.e., life satisfaction and perceived life opportunities) are continuous and they constitute a normal distribution. For ease of interpretation only the domain specific correlations higher than 0.150 will be listed between the objective determinants and either perceived opportunities or satisfaction.

First, to be able to answer the first research question, a multiple regression analysis will be used to explain life satisfaction in the Flemish society. In this analysis all objective determinants as defined by individuals' position in the society (model 1), participation in society (model 2) and art of living (model 3) will be entered consecutively into the model. Besides these objective determinants, the current study also will take into account the subjective perception (model 4) of opportunities in explaining life satisfaction. Pearson correlations will be examined to reveal specific differences between life satisfaction and domain specific satisfaction.

In a second analysis I shall investigate on the key determinants of people's perceived opportunities in life. This enables us to examine which people and what social conditions are constraining people in their opportunities to achieve a satisfied life. Again, the first model contains all variables considering someone's position in the society, in the second model the variables determining someone's participation in society are added and the last model also includes the variables indicative for the individuals' art of living. Again, Pearson correlations are used to reveal differences between the aggregate measures of perceived opportunities in life and the domain specific measures.

### **RESULTS**

Following the above lineout, results are being reported in two parts. The first part contains the results of the multiple regression and Pearson correlations for

explaining life satisfaction, which relates to the first research question. The second part constitutes the results of the second multiple regression analysis and Pearson correlations which explains what is influencing perceived opportunities in life, referring to the second research question.

### **Results of analysis predicting satisfaction**

Table 4 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis predicting life satisfaction. It shows the standardized regression coefficients to reveal the relative contribution of each single variable. The domain specific correlation matrices are presented in Tables 6 till 12. Although the table presents all four models, the last model is most meaningful, since here all variable have entered the model, so all other effects are controlled for.

### ***Position in the society and satisfaction***

First of all, the results suggest that an individual's position in society is influencing the degree to which someone is satisfied. With respect to individual resources, it appears that people with a higher income and a higher educational level are more satisfied with their lives compared to those who are lower educated and who earn lower incomes. There are two domains in which there are no high correlations between the individual resources and satisfaction, namely in the domains of health and leisure.

Considering the different social groups, the results only point to a difference in the level of life satisfaction between males and females. A remarkable result is that the effect of gender appears to become non-significant when the labour situation is taken into account. However, when in the last model perceived opportunities are taken into account, women appear to be less satisfied. This implies that satisfaction, first of all, cannot be solely be explained by gender: men and women who are employed are equally satisfied. However, when perceived opportunities are taken into account the results suggest that females who experience less opportunities are less satisfied with life than men are. This finding is irrespective of their labour situation, though the domain specific correlations reveal that the lower levels of satisfaction of females are especially apparent in the domain of paid work. No significant effects were found for the social groups based on sexual orientation and ethnicity, nevertheless this should not lead to the conclusion that these groups are equally satisfied. The sample sizes of these groups (holebi's and non western immigrants) are rather small which makes it difficult to detect significant relations. A closer examination of Pearson correlations furthermore reveals that in the domain of education, younger people are less satisfied compared to older people.

Finally, my results allow to examine the role of individuals social background for determining the level of life satisfaction. Results suggest that the educational background of the parents does not have an influence on the level of life

satisfaction. In contrast, the financial background of the raising family appeared to be a significant and relatively strong predictor throughout the first three models, but this effect disappeared in the last model which controlled for perceived life opportunities. The disappearance of this effect is probably caused by the high correlation between financial background of the raising family and perceived opportunities in life ( $r= 0.305$ ). When looking at the domain specific correlations, there appears to be a high correlation between satisfaction and educational background of the parents in the domains of education, paid work, material welfare and personal development. In these same domains but also in the domain of health there is a strong positive correlation with financial background as well.

#### ***Participation in the society and satisfaction***

In a second step, we can take a look at individuals' participation in society and their level of satisfaction. It appears that especially the individual labour situation has a significant influence on the level of satisfaction. Individuals who are unemployed, have no income or participate in an other labour situation are less satisfied with their lives than people who do have an income. High correlations between the individuals' labour situation and satisfaction are especially found in the domain of education and paid work. People who are pensioners do not differ significantly from people who are employed. In contrast, voluntary participation in society (engaging in voluntary work or membership of an association) did not influence the level of life satisfaction, while engagement in leisure activities did appear to be of influence. Individuals who have more available leisure time, are visiting friends more often, and are going out more often appear to be more satisfied. It should be denoted, however, that the effects are not particularly strong and that the effect of the amount leisure time is found to be only marginally significant.

#### ***Art of living and satisfaction***

Third, the variables which constitute the individuals art of living reveal their importance. People who are living together either with their partner or with their partner and children are more satisfied than people who live alone. The specific correlations showed that this applies most to the domains of relations and material welfare. People who lived solely with their children or lived in a different household composition (for instance with relatives) did not significantly differ from those who lived alone. In addition, the health situation of the individual is also of importance on his/her level of life satisfaction. People who are suffering from a disability are less satisfied with their lives, compared to people who do not suffer from a disability. This finding is consistent with the high correlations in the domain of education, paid work, health and material welfare. Furthermore, the time people invest in domestic tasks did also appear to be of importance for the level of life satisfaction, though only after adding

perceived opportunities in the model. This indicates that when solely domestic tasks are taken into consideration the effect of investment in domestic tasks is not influencing satisfaction. However, when perceived opportunities in life are taken into account the results suggest that people who perceive more opportunities and invest more time in domestic tasks are more satisfied than people who perceive fewer opportunities in life. This interaction effect is not taken into account in the domain specific correlations and therefore current results do not provide insight in which domains this interaction effect is visible.

### ***Perceived opportunities and satisfaction***

Finally, the importance of the subjective determinant, perceived life opportunities, in predicting the level of life satisfaction is examined. The results show that the opportunities people perceive in their life are of great importance in determining the level of life satisfaction. Compared to the other objective independent variables, this subjective determinant is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction. When looking at the difference in explanatory power of the different models it can be concluded that the last model which includes this subjective determinant brings along a lot of explanatory power: the model changed from 28.6 % of explained variance to 52.9% of explained variance. The importance of perceived opportunities in explaining satisfaction is apparent in every domain of life. Satisfaction and perceived opportunities correlate strongly and positively.

### **Results of analysis predicting perceived opportunities**

The next analytical step is examining *who* in the Flemish society is feeling constrained in his/her perceived opportunities and *what* social conditions are constraining perceived opportunities in life. The standardized regression coefficients of the multiple regression analysis predicting perceived opportunities in life are shown in Table 5. The analysis is built up in the same way as the previous regression model. The domain specific correlation matrices are presented in Tables 6 till 12.

### ***Position in the society and perceived opportunities***

First, let us consider the variables which determine someone's position in society. The results suggest that individuals' resources, as indicated by their educational level and level of income, are influencing perceived opportunities to get a long in life. It appears that people who are better educated and earn a higher income perceive more opportunities in fulfilling their goals. The Pearson correlations are supporting this finding except for the domains of health and social relations.

Subsequently, different social groups can be compared with regard to their perceived opportunities in life. Current results suggest that older people perceive fewer opportunities than younger people. This might be related to the period in which older people grew up (i.e., period effect). However, when closely examining the correlations, the results suggest that older people experienced more opportunities in the domain of education as compared to younger people. Furthermore, differences in opportunities are also apparent between males and females. In comparison to men, women experience more opportunities in life. However, when we look at the domain specific correlation, this finding is not confirmed: in contrast, women even appear to perceive less opportunities in the domain of paid work. For the other social groups, no statistical differences are found. This might be due to the small sample size which makes it more difficult to detect statistical relations.

Taking individual social background into account reveals no significant influence of parents' educational background on perceived opportunities in life. However, when examining the field-specific correlations, we do find that the educational background is of influence for peoples' perceived opportunities in the domains of education, paid work, material welfare and personal development. In contrast, the financial background in raising one's family is of influence for perceived opportunities in life. Whereas a strong financial background is leading to more perceived life opportunities, a weaker financial background is leading to fewer perceived life opportunities. This effect is also found in the specific domains with the exemption of relations and leisure.

#### ***Participation in the society and perceived opportunities***

Second, the influence of participation in society on perceived life opportunities is examined. Interestingly, the labour situation of an individual is not influencing the extent to which people perceive opportunities. However, the correlations do reveal that people who are unemployed perceive fewer opportunities in the domains of education and paid work. There also appears to be no effect of engagement in voluntary activities neither on perceived opportunities in life, nor in the specific domains. On the other hand, leisure activities do appear to be of importance. Individuals who have more leisure time, who are going out more often and are visiting friends more regularly perceive more life opportunities than people who have less leisure time and engage in less leisure activities. Especially the effect of going out increases perceived opportunities in several domains. These results suggest that the formal side of civic engagement (i.e., voluntary work, membership) does not increase perceived opportunities, but the informal side of civic engagement (i.e., leisure activities) does have a positive effect.

***Art of living and perceived opportunities***

Finally, the results allow to examine whether the art of living influences perceived life opportunities. The results suggest that the composition of the household in fact influences perceived opportunities. People who live with their partner or with their partner and children perceive more opportunities in comparison to people living alone. This is especially visible in the domains of social relations and material welfare. Cohabiting solely with the children or living in another family situation does not differ from the situation of living alone. The health situation of the individual also is of influence for perceived life opportunities. This is supported by the domain specific correlations in the domains of education, paid work, health and material welfare. People who suffer from a disability perceive fewer opportunities than people who do not suffer from a disability. The effect of investments in domestic tasks appears to be of no influence on perceived life opportunities and neither is of influence for any of the separate domains.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study examined which factors can explain life satisfaction and perceived life opportunities in the Flemish society. At the beginning, two research questions were posed: (i) How can we explain life satisfaction in the Flemish society by making use of both objective and subjective determinants? (ii) Which social groups and social conditions are constraining individuals' perceived opportunities? In answering these research questions, additional hypotheses were stated. First, the results of both research questions will be briefly summarized in relation to the stated hypotheses. Subsequently, the strengths and weaknesses of the current study will be discussed in terms of implications for future research and policies.

**Summary of Results**

A major result of my analyses of life satisfaction was that perceived opportunities in life proved to be the most important predictor. This finding supports my initial first hypothesis stating that people need opportunities to reach satisfaction in life.

Second, in examining the influence of people's position in society on life satisfaction and perceived life opportunities, several determinants proved to be of importance. The results show that individual resources are contributing to the level of satisfaction people experience. That is to say, people who are highly educated and earn higher incomes are more satisfied. At the same time, it also appeared that these people perceive more opportunities to reach their aims in life,

thus confirming my second hypothesis postulating exactly this kind of relationship. Considering different social resp. ethnical groups, little significant results were found. As mentioned before, it was difficult to detect statistically meaningful relations because these social groups were rather small in number. However, it did appear that women perceive less opportunities and are less satisfied, especially in the domain of paid work.

The third hypothesis stated that an individual's social background might influence the opportunities people perceive and consequently the level of satisfaction they attain. This hypothesis partly found support in my results. On the one hand, the results suggest that parental educational background and the financial situation of the raising family is influencing perceived opportunities. However, on the other hand, the results do not support that social background characteristics assert an additional direct influence on peoples' satisfaction.

Subsequently, several conclusions can be drawn with regard to individual participation in social activities. The fourth hypothesis which stated that civic engagement (i.e., participation in the society) is resulting in more perceived opportunities and higher levels of satisfaction, was partly supported by the results. It appeared that participation in paid labor is resulting in higher levels of life satisfaction compared to the situation of unemployment. These effects are most noticeable in the domains of education and paid work. Doing voluntary work or being a member of an association appears to be of no influence on either the satisfaction or the opportunities people experience, neither at the aggregate level nor in the separate domains. On the other hand, engagement in leisure activities does appear to enhance life satisfaction and opportunities in life. People who have more leisure time, are going out more often and visit friends more regularly report higher levels of life satisfaction and perceive more opportunities in life. Especially, going out appeared to increase the level of satisfaction and perceived opportunities in many domains of life. These results suggest that the benefits of social capital are particularly visible when people engage in private (informal) activities. In contrast, participation in more formal activities (e.g., voluntary work) does not seem to enhance life satisfaction nor does it affect perceived opportunities in life.

Finally, my results suggest that an individuals' art of living is of influence on his/her perceived opportunities and life satisfaction. With regard to physical well-being, it appears that healthy people perceive more opportunities and are more satisfied in life, compared to people who suffer from a disability. This is in accordance with hypothesis five. Furthermore, people who live either with their partner or with their partner and children are more satisfied and perceive more opportunities than people who live alone, in line with the expectations of my sixth hypothesis. However, it should be denoted that these results are solely visible in the domains of relations and material welfare. Finally, with respect to the last hypothesis, it appeared that although investment in domestic tasks does not influence peoples' perceived opportunities, the results do suggest that if people are doing a lot of domestic tasks, but perceive only few opportunities in

life they are less satisfied, compared to the situation in which people are doing a lot of domestic tasks, but perceive more opportunities in life.

### **Discussion**

My study allows to draw some first tentative conclusions about how objective determinants together with perceived opportunities are influencing individual life satisfaction. In examining life satisfaction, perceived opportunities appeared to be of great importance. This determinant of satisfaction almost explained as much of the explained variance as all objective determinants together. Therefore, future satisfaction research should not disregard the subjective determinant, perceived opportunities, since it appears to be a very important predictor of satisfaction as a whole. With respect to policy interventions, it is important to know who experiences less opportunities (e.g., women in the domain of paid work) or what social conditions are resulting in less perceived opportunities (e.g., being a single-parent, engaging in less leisure activities). The current results provided insight into these issues. Policy interventions should focus on these factors to enhance equal opportunities. Unfortunately, the current study was not capable to examine in all necessary detail which different social groups are facing structural constraints in achieving satisfaction. This is due to the fact that for some groups (e.g. holebis and immigrants), the sample size of the different social groups was too small to detect statistical relations. To discover whether the other social groups are confronted with structural constraints, future research should try to oversample these social groups (i.e., holebi's and non-western immigrants). However, the results do indicate that women in the domain of paid work are not completely free from structural constraints. This suggests that, although formal opportunities between men and women are the same, their outcomes in society can be experienced differently. As Veenhoven (2000:4) stresses: "This is the difference between potentiality and actuality. I refer to this as 'life chances' and 'life results'. Opportunities and outcomes are related, but are certainly not the same".

As a central issue, future research also should attempt to use longitudinal data. The use of cross-sectional data does not allow drawing firm conclusions about the causality of the relations. For instance, it might be the case that satisfaction is influencing perceived opportunities, instead of the other way around. Only longitudinal data can give deeper insights into this matter of causality. In addition, additional path analyses might reveal the precise interplay between the objective and subjective determinants of satisfaction.

An important asset of the current study is that it uses both aggregate as well as domain-specific measures. Some results are not apparent at the aggregate level, but are on the domain specific level (or vice versa). Using two measures (aggregate and domain specific) provides a more complete picture of satisfaction and perceived opportunities in the Flemish society and at the same times it also provides detailed information about the domains to which interventions have to

be directed. Future research should also attempt to combine these two measures for these reasons.

The current study made an important first step in examining who is feeling constrained and what social conditions are constraining people in their opportunities and satisfaction. Future research can build upon this first impetus and in addition, should try to disentangle social mechanisms which explain *why* people are feeling constrained in their opportunities and satisfaction. As Armstrong (2006: 294) puts it: “While identifying aggregate differences in social location between different groups is a beginning, then, it is not the end. It directs us towards injustice, but we still need to tell a ‘plausible structural story’ about why these inequalities arise, and how they constrict individual opportunities (..)”

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Descriptives of satisfaction, opportunity and importance**

Domain	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std.dev
Education	Satisfaction	2644	1	10	6.35	2.099
	Opportunity	2646	1	10	5.92	2.099
Paid work	Satisfaction	2587	1	10	6.90	2.145
	Opportunity	2595	1	10	5.96	1.885
Relations	Satisfaction	2630	1	10	7.71	2.244
	Opportunity	2608	1	10	6.45	1.974
Leisure time	Satisfaction	2638	1	10	6.43	2.126
	Opportunity	2632	1	10	5.91	1.978
Health	Satisfaction	2634	1	10	8.18	1.527
	Opportunity	2622	1	10	7.06	1.771
Material Welfare	Satisfaction	2634	1	10	6.93	1.868
	Opportunity	2626	1	10	6.15	1.897
Personal development	Satisfaction	2619	1	10	6.95	1.586
	Opportunity	2615	1	10	6.17	1.730
Overall life	Satisfaction	2510	1	10	7.09	1.236
	Opportunities	2497	1	10	6.24	1.289

**Table 2a: descriptive statistics all variables**

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev
Age	2655	25	78	55.89	11.266
Educational attainment	2639	1	3	2.01	0.778
Income	2519	1	3	1.86	0.739
Education mother	2608	1	5	2.32	1.243
Education father	2541	1	5	2.63	1.348
Financial background	2640	1	6	3.77	1.176
Leisure time	2408	0	70	19.99	14.99
Going out	2649	1	5	3.48	1.296
Visiting friends	2641	1	5	3.09	0.954
Voluntary work	2532	0	1	0.20	0.403
Member of association	2629	0	1	0.48	0.499
Health	2640	0	1	0.22	0.414
Domestic work	2555	0	98	20.34	16.261

**Table 2b: household composition**

Composition	N
Living alone	265
Cohabiting with partner	836
Cohabiting with children	130
Cohabiting with children and partner	1283
Other family situation	132
Total	2646

**Table 3: Representation of different population /social groups**

<i>Social group defined by:</i>	<i>Consists of:</i>	<i>N</i>
Sex	Female	1430
	Male	1225
	Missing	0
	Total	2655
Ethnicity	Native	2345
	Non-native Western	170
	Non-native non-western	128
	Missing	12
Total	2643	
Sexual orientation	Holebi's	88
	Hetero	2345
	Missing	222
	Total	2433

**Table 4: Results multiple regression analysis on satisfaction with life**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Income = low	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Income = moderate	0.214***	0.181***	0.104***	0.057**
Income= high	0.280***	0.254***	0.157***	0.081***
Educational level = low	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Educational level = moderate	0.198***	0.183***	0.178***	0.075**
Educational level = high	0.251***	0.216***	0.227***	0.099***
Age	-0.114***	-0.095**	-0.099***	-0.035
Gender = male	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Gender =female	-0.081***	-0.024	-0.020	-0.054**
Sexual orientation = hetero	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Sexual orientation = holebi	-0.001	0.001	0.016	0.007
Natives and Western non-natives	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Non Western non- natives	-0.036*	-0.026	-0.023	-0.010
Educational level mother	0.004	-0.012	-0.015	-0.027
Educational level father	0.000	-0.007	-0.001	-0.020
Financial background raising family	0.165***	0.153***	0.150***	0.021
Labor situation = income		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Labor situation = no income		-0.091***	-0.139***	-0.126***
Labor situation = unemployed		-0.097***	-0.082***	-0.079***
Labor situation = pensioned		0.021	0.012	0.008
Labor situation = other		-0.083***	-0.075***	-0.062***
No voluntary work		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Voluntary work		0.000	0.007	0.004
No member of association		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Member of association		0.032	0.023	0.019
Leisure time		0.050**	0.073***	0.031*
Going out		0.079***	0.084***	0.036**
Meeting friends		0.107***	0.112***	0.071***
Household =Living alone			0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Household =Cohabiting w/partner			0.296***	0.210***
Household = Cohabiting w/children			0.004	0.008
Household = Cohabiting with partner and children			0.293***	0.196***
Household =Other family situation			0.014	0.005
Health situation = no disability			0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Health situation = disability			-0.095***	-0.036**
Time domestic work			0.029	0.040**
Perceived opportunities in life				0.564***
Explained variance (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	18.6%	23.3%	28.6%	52.9%
N	1932	1932	1932	1932

\* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.001

0<sup>a</sup> =reference category

**Table 5: Results multiple regression analysis on perceived opportunities in life**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Income = low	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Income = moderate	0.140***	0.124***	0.082**
Income = high	0.200***	0.187***	0.133***
Educational level = low	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Educational level = moderate	0.197***	0.187***	0.180***
Educational level = high	0.243***	0.226***	0.227***
Age	-0.120***	-0.109***	-0.115***
Gender = male	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Gender = female	0.011	0.040*	0.060**
Sexual orientation = hetero	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Sexual orientation = holebi	0.006	0.005	0.016
Natives and Western non-natives	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Non Western non- natives	-0.023	-0.026	-0.023
Educational level mother	0.033	0.024	0.022
Educational level father	0.038	0.031	0.033
Financial background raising family	0.242***	0.233***	0.229***
Labor situation = income		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Labor situation = no income		-0.011	-0.024
Labor situation = unemployed		-0.021	-0.004
Labor situation = pensioned		-0.002	0.006
Labor situation = other		-0.043*	-0.022
No voluntary work		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Voluntary work		-0.003	0.004
No member of association		0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Member of association		0.015	0.008
Leisure time		0.060**	0.074**
Going out		0.087***	0.086***
Meeting friends		0.071**	0.071**
Household = Living alone			0 <sup>a</sup>
Household = Cohabiting with partner			0.154***
Household = Cohabiting with children			-0.008
Household = Cohabiting with partner and children			0.174***
Household = Other family situation			0.016
Health situation = no disability			0 <sup>a</sup>
Health situation = disability			-0.106***
Time domestic work			-0.021
Explained variance (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	19.1%	21.1%	23.4%
N	1939	1939	1939

\* p&lt;0.1; \*\* p&lt;0.05, \*\*\* p&lt;0.001

0<sup>a</sup> =reference category

**Table 6: Pearson correlations for the domain of education**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	0.616
Perceived opportunities	.616	1
Educational level	.548	.466
Income	.347	.310
Age	.178	.191
Educational level mother	.364	.381
Educational level father	.366	.389
Financial background	.219	.331
Labour situation	-.252	-.210
Going out	.213	.205
Health	-.152	-.180

**Table 7: Pearson correlations for the domain of paid work**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.634
Perceived opportunities	.634	1
Educational level	.278	.268
Income	.286	.242
Sex	-.212	-.115
Educational level mother	.160	.182
Educational level father	.156	.183
Financial background	.150	.205
Labour situation	-.412	-.266
Going out	.158	.167
Health	-.157	-.161
Domestic work	-.210	-.137

**Table 8: Pearson correlations for the domain of relations**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.523
Perceived opportunities	.523	1
Income	.208	.110
Household composition	-.511	-.268

**Table 9: Pearson correlations for the domain of leisure**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.668
Perceived opportunities	.668	1
Going out	.213	.195
Visiting friends	.173	.146

**Table 10: Pearson correlations for the domain of health**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.564
Perceived opportunities	.564	1
Financial background	.154	.178
Health	-.159	-.119

**Table 11: Pearson correlations for the domain of material welfare**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.656
Perceived opportunities	.656	1
Educational level	.231	.276
Income	.327	.316
Educational level mother	.139	.194
Educational level father	.152	.206
Financial background	.180	.268
Health	-.140	-.157
Household composition	-.212	-.179

**Table 12: Pearson correlations for the domain of personal development**

	Satisfaction	Perceived opportunities
Satisfaction education	1	.595
Perceived opportunities	.595	1
Educational level	.213	.274
Income	.173	.201
Educational level mother	.158	.210
Educational level father	.152	.219
Financial background	.163	.228
Going out	.158	.156