



Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice: An Interview with Dr. M. Joseph Sirgy

Sirgy, M. J.

Citation: Sirgy, M. J. (2017). Views on wellbeing research, policy and practice: An interview with Dr. M. Joseph Sirgy. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), xx-xx.

Abstract: In this volume of the *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or who research aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Dr. M. Joseph Sirgy, his thoughts on consumer well-being, work well-being, residential well-being, and material well-being.

Keywords: subjective well-being; quality of life; consumer well-being; work well-being; residential well-being; material well-being

About the Author: Dr. M. Joseph Sirgy is a management psychologist and Virginia Tech Real Estate Professor of Marketing at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He spent his early years in Cairo and Beirut; his parents are of Lebanese/Syrian decent. He is well published in well-being and quality of life (QOL) research and is the author/editor of many books. In 1998, he received the Distinguished Research Fellow Award from the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies and the Distinguished QOL Researcher award for research excellence and a record of lifetime achievement in 2003. In 2012, he was awarded the EuroMed Management Research Award for outstanding contribution. His recent book includes, *The pursuit of well-being: The untold global history* (2017). For more: <https://sites.google.com/a/vt.edu/joe-sirgy-personal-website/>

Address all correspondence to: Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University; Pamplin College of Business, Department of Marketing; 880 West Campus Dr. (Office: 2025 Pamplin Hall); Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0236, USA; office tel: (540) 231-5110. E-mail: sirgy@vt.edu.

MEJPP: Can you describe your contribution to quality-of-life and well-being research?

MJS: During the last 37 years I have invested much effort trying to help develop a new field of study in the social and behavioral sciences, namely *quality-of-life studies and well-being research*. This is an interdisciplinary field of study that cuts across many of the social and behavioral sciences and focuses on the development of theory and metrics related to the construct of human well-being or quality of life. The subjective aspects of quality of life and well-being (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, positive/negative affect, and eudaimonia) constitute a major theme of positive psychology. Many disciplines are increasingly adopting the construct of well-being as a major performance criterion. For example, in the health sciences the effectiveness of many medical



interventions is judged using patient quality-of-life metrics. In human resources management, programs and policies are evaluated in terms of employee well-being. Similarly, marketing campaigns are evaluated in terms of consumer well-being. Tourist well-being is a construct that is now well-accepted in travel and tourism, and community well-being is now part of the nomenclature in urban and rural planning.

MEJPP: Can you describe your research contribution to the growing field of *positive psychology* with particular relevance to the Middle East?

MJS: Much of my research has focused on developing the theory and metrics of human well-being in several contexts, namely marketing and consumer behavior, human resources management, travel and tourism, hospitality, housing and real estate, community development, transportation, healthcare, and international studies. I have over 350 peer-reviewed publications to date and much of my research has been conducted in countries across the region (e.g., Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey). My research has focused on four areas in QOL studies, namely (1) consumer well-being, (2) work well-being, (3) residential well-being, and (4) material well-being.

MEJPP: Tell us more about your research in consumer well-being.

MJS: There is a long tradition in marketing to gauge marketing performance using consumer satisfaction metrics. What I and my colleagues have been doing is to develop consumer well-being metrics to prompt marketers to adopt these metrics to replace traditional consumer satisfaction metrics. Consumer well-being metrics focus on the extent to which the use of a product enhances subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect), examples of such products can include automobiles, mobile phones, housing, and travel and tourism. These products are increasingly the bedrock of modern living in all globalized societies. One can argue that the research on consumer well-being applies to large marketing organizations operating mostly in developed countries but, this research can easily be applied to wealthy countries in the Middle East (e.g., Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait), and perhaps to a lesser degree to less-wealthy countries (e.g., Egypt and Sudan). Yet, even in some of the less-wealthy countries such as Egypt, research on consumer well-being can be helpful in certain industry sectors such as travel and tourism. An example of this is heritage and culture tourism. Organizations in such sectors strive to enhance consumer loyalty, repeat patronage, and positive word-of-mouth communications, all of which can be achieved by enhancing consumer well-being. Examples of my recent publications capturing this stream of research include Bosnjak et al. (2011, 2016), Ekici et al. (2017), Grzeskowiak et al., (2014, 2016), Kruger et al., (2015), Lee et al., (2015), Meadow and Sirgy (2008), Sirgy (2008), Sirgy and Lee (2008), Sirgy, Lee, and Bae (2006), Sirgy et al., (2011, 2016), and Uysal et al. (2016).

MEJPP: Now let's turn to your research on *work well-being*. Would you elaborate on your research on this topic with particular relevance to the Middle East?

MJS: Traditional research in organizational behavior has focused on job satisfaction, but positive organizational psychologists such as myself have gone beyond this to focus on life satisfaction or employee well-being. In other words, corporate performance of human resource management can be captured using work well-being metrics, and not simply job satisfaction metrics. A good way to construe work well-being and its metrics is the extent to which the organization has programs and amenities catering to employee basic needs (economic subsistence and family needs, health and



safety needs, etc.) as well as growth needs (e.g., social needs, esteem needs, autonomy needs, self-actualization needs, needs for knowledge and aesthetics, and self-transcendence needs). Of course, these work well-being metrics are likely to be more appealing to large business and non-profit organizations in the Middle East than the multitudes of “mom-and-pop” business operations. This is a growing trend in the workplace and research shows that corporate financial performances and reputations are associated with work well-being. There are many good examples of this happening in regional organizations already. Examples of our research capturing this stream of research include Kara et al. (2013), Lee and Sirgy (2017), Sirgy and Jackson (2015), Sirgy and Lee (2016, 2017), Sirgy and Wu (2009), Sirgy et al. (2008).

MEJPP: Tell us more about your research on residential well-being.

MJS: Much of the traditional research in residential well-being involves the development of metrics to rate quality of housing, neighborhoods, and communities. As such the traditional metrics do not take into account the relationship between quality characteristics of the residential construct and measures of well-being (e.g., subjective well-being, personal happiness). Our research attempts to identify residential characteristics that correlate with measures of well-being and so far, we have developed several metrics that capture housing well-being (e.g., Grzeskowiak et al., 2006), neighborhood well-being (e.g., Sirgy & Cornwell, 2002), city well-being (e.g., Grzeskowiak, Sirgy, & Widgery, 2003; Sirgy, Gao, & Young, 2008; Sirgy et al., 2010), the well-being of tourist communities (e.g., Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Woo, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2017), and the well-being of students in college campuses (e.g., Sirgy, Grzeskowiak, & Rahtz, 2007; Sirgy et al., 2010). The metrics that I and my colleagues have developed can be used by organizations in the Middle East, such as real estate development companies, city planning commissions and councils, officials involved in various communities hosting tourists, and colleges and universities. A good initiative in the region has been the development of well-being of students in college campuses in which we used the American University in Beirut as a case in point.

MEJPP: Would you elaborate on your research on material well-being?

MJS: Material well-being focuses on satisfaction with material life (standard of living, income, wealth, material possessions, etc.) and the extent to which satisfaction with material life contributes to personal happiness. Much of our research in this area tried to tackle the relationship between materialism and material well-being. Traditional research in this area has highlighted the evils of materialism by providing much evidence of the negative correlation between materialism and happiness—those who are highly materialistic tend to report lower levels of personal happiness, while those who are less materialistic seem to report higher levels of happiness. Our research attempts to explain how and when materialism enhances versus detracts from subjective well-being. Our studies show that materialism does cultivate two sets of standard-of-living expectations, namely ideal and ability-based expectations. People who use ideal-based expectations in evaluating their standard of living tend to feel dissatisfied with material life, which spills over to feelings of unhappiness. Ideal-based expectations tend to reflect a political economy heavily influenced by nepotism, oligarchy, and corruption. That is, if an individual holds these expectations they are more likely to believe that success in life is all about connections with people in positions of authority. Hence, to be successful in life, one has to make connections with such people. However, people who use ability-based



expectations tend to feel economically motivated and optimistic about social mobility concerns, which in turn serve to enhance feelings of happiness. Ability-based expectations tend to reflect a political economy heavily influenced by a system of meritocracy. That is, if an individual holds these expectations they are more likely to believe that success in life is all about achievement, hard work, and the rule of law. As such, these beliefs may motivate them to become highly educated and to excel through achievements in the workplace.

I believe that this research has relevance in the Middle East as it is likely that a segment of people in the region feel disenchanting with the economy and their own financial situation. These negative feelings contribute to civil unrest in many forms. To reduce civil unrest, educational programs could be developed and strengthened to increase the likelihood of making standard-of-living evaluations based on ability expectations. That is, those programs should strengthen people's belief and faith in meritocracy and diminish people's belief that success in life can only be achieved through nepotism, oligarchy, and corruption. Example publications capturing this stream of research include Larsen, Sirgy, and Wright (1999), Rahtz, Sirgy, and Meadow (1989), Sirgy (1998), and Sirgy et al. (2012, 2013).

MEJPP: Before we end, what research questions would be of most value to pursue in the region?

MJS: The answer is simple and straightforward. Adopt the metrics of well-being to gauge performance at various levels of analysis: the *individual* level with particular emphasis on certain population segments such as consumers, tourists, employees, and community residents; the *community* level to capture the well-being of neighborhoods, towns, cities, and other geographic regions; and the *societal* level to capture the well-being of countries overall and specific clusters of countries. Well-being metrics can provide policy makers with better tools to help formulate policies that can enhance human well-being in the Middle East and beyond.

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