To appear in Journal of Happiness Studies

Understanding Satisfaction:

An Analysis of the Meaning Potential of the Word "Satisfaction" in Everyday Norwegian Language

Erik Carlquist, Hilde E. Nafstad, Rolv M. Blakar

University of Oslo[1]

Contact details:

Erik Carlquist, erik.carlquist@psykologi.uio.no, telephone +4799277290, +fax 4722845001

[1] Department of Psychology, P.O.Box 1094 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway

Abstract

Satisfaction with life is often considered to be a component of or a synonym for subjective well-being. However, the meaning of "satisfaction" is rarely discussed in the scientific literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning potential of the Norwegian term for satisfaction (*tilfredshet*). A conceptual analysis was conducted based on the qualitative responses of 276 Norwegian adults to the question "What is satisfaction for you?" Based on principles of thematic analysis, text data units were examined to develop a framework of recurrent themes and superordinate categories. The analysis demonstrated that the word "satisfaction" in everyday Norwegian language does not unequivocally point toward a unitary, clear-cut affective or evaluative phenomenon. Instead, its meaning potential was found to include material, physiological and interpersonal conditions, activities, internal psychological states, and circumstances and contexts of well-being, connected by temporal and causal assumptions. In addition to hedonic understandings, eudaimonic and processual conceptualizations of satisfaction were identified. Findings support a conceptual co-existence of satisfaction as satisficing (conditions evaluated as good enough) and as more optimal fulfilment (conditions evaluated as good). Further qualitative studies of conceptual understanding across cultural contexts and languages are recommended.

Keywords

Satisfaction, concept, meaning potential, qualitative analysis, language

Introduction

It is frequently assumed that well-being, at least in the sense of subjective experience, is conceptually equivalent to satisfaction with life. This assumption can be found in research as well as policymaking (Diener et al. 2009). From this vantage point, life satisfaction is seen as a subjective evaluation of life in general, or a composite of experienced satisfaction within various life domains such as work, family and leisure. A vast amount of empirical research has been conducted, in particular in a Western cultural context, witnessing how satisfaction with life has become located at the conceptual centerpiece of how well-being is understood. There is growing consensus that economic proxies of aggregated well-being such as gross national product are inadequate measures of the well-being of a population, and other, more subjective constructs such as life satisfaction have gained recognition globally among researchers and policymakers. In philosophy, life satisfaction theories of well-being have been proposed by among others Tatarkiewicz (1966) and Sumner (1996). In the social sciences domain, life satisfaction is commonly operationalized using versions of the Cantril ladder (Cantril 1965) or the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot and Diener 2008; Diener et al. 1985). In psychological literature, subjective well-being is frequently construed to include an affective component in addition to life satisfaction, which is usually understood as a cognitive component.

But what is meant by the term "satisfaction"? First, in English usage, this word has been noted to be semantically ambiguous, because it can refer to, among other things, the perception of something that is good, as well as something that is good *enough* (Dolan 2014; Evans 1997). The Latin root (*satis*-) of the word means precisely "enough" (Stevenson, 2010). Second, satisfaction with life is not the only understanding of satisfaction of relevance to well-being research. The theories of basic need satisfaction (Ryan and Deci 2000; Gough 2004) and desire satisfaction (Davis 1981) have employed the concept of satisfaction as well

(Griffin 1986). Whereas life satisfaction concerns satisfaction *with* a condition (e.g., life), need and desire satisfaction concerns satisfaction *of* a condition (i.e., needs and desires). Satisfaction with life necessarily entails subjective evaluation, whereas the satisfaction of desires (e.g., buying a car) and particularly of needs (e.g., having access to food and shelter) are occurrences that can be said to exist in a more objective sense. However, these two usages of "satisfaction" are related. Empirical studies suggest that need fulfilment is associated with life satisfaction (Diener et al. 2010). Desires may include satisfaction of needs, but usually encompass a broader array of preferences, wants or conscious goals, the satisfaction of which is seen in some accounts as necessary for or contributing to well-being. Desire satisfaction theory provides the implicit foundation for the idea of gross domestic product as a proxy of well-being (Dolan and Metcalfe 2012). Closely connected to desire theory is the notion of satisfaction of expectations, which is found particularly in consumer research and studies of public service provision (Oliver 2010).

Most approaches to satisfaction entail a process of comparison, in which various types of standards are involved. One distinction can be made between social comparison, which involves comparisons to other people, and life-time comparison, which entails comparing one's current life to one's past (Rojas and Veenhoven 2013). Furthermore, and not least within life satisfaction theory, satisfaction may be considered relative to goals (Suikkanen 2011) or to more general or abstract ideals. Multiple discrepancies theory (Michalos 1985) holds that self-reported satisfaction is "a function of perceived discrepancies between what one has and wants, relevant others have, the best one has had in the past, expected to have 3 years ago, expects to have after 5 years, deserves and needs" (p. 347). While these approaches stem from academic endeavors, the present study empirically examined how the general term "satisfaction" is conceptualized in everyday language.

Conceptual Studies of Psychological Constructs

Humans capture and conceptualize reality by means of language. By employing language, we negotiate and develop shared understandings of our worlds. Using the available words of everyday vocabulary, people depict their complex social, psychological, and physical realities on the basis of historically and culturally developed conceptualizations (Pennebaker et al. 2003; Vygotsky 1962). People therefore understand and develop their ways of living through concepts (Heider 1958). In this light, concepts are not more or less true or false; rather, they represent different perspectives and ways to psychologically grasp the world (Blakar 1979). Through systematic studies of language use, common-sense psychological concepts are amenable to empirical investigation. Such investigations unavoidably address the issue of culture, since language is always embedded in a particular cultural setting (Bruner 1990; Valsiner 2009).

By "term", we will refer to the actual words found in language. By "concept", we refer to word meanings understood as culturally shared understandings, which is tantamount to cognitively (yet shared) representations of phenomena existing in the world. Terms are thus vehicles for expressing and conveying concepts. However, the relationship between terms and concepts is complex, in part because words do not have entirely fixed meanings (Evans 2006). Moreover, not all concepts can be expressed by single words (Jackendoff 1989).

Scientific and philosophical concepts do not exist in isolation from everyday understandings but rather in a dynamic interplay with them. The study of common-sense conceptualizations of psychological constructs can make substantial contributions to research (Smedslund 2009), and the everyday understanding of well-being terms is indeed considered one of the cornerstones of the philosophy of well-being (Bishop 2015). Conversely, and of no less importance, everyday understandings often adopt and sometimes reshape constructs as developed in science (Wagner 2007; Moscovici 2000), necessitating psychological research to

investigate the relationship between academic and everyday discourse in a given culture. However, in psychological research, conceptual analysis appears to have fallen out of favor (Machado and Silva 2007; Reisenzein and Rudolph 2008; Nafstad et al. 2012). Within the field of well-being, several scholars have nevertheless called for the development of a more precise scientific vocabulary, not least in positive psychology (Kashdan et al. 2008).

Studies of Everyday Understandings of Satisfaction

There is a notable lack of psychological research empirically investigating common-sense conceptualizations of satisfaction. However, a qualitative study within developmental psychology found that children in South Australia conceived of the term "satisfaction" as comparisons (with previous experiences or expectations of the self or others), as evaluations of subjective emotions, or as a condition relying on positive external feedback (Taylor et al. 2010). A study conducted among adult participants from the United States, India and other countries found that satisfaction was associated with general aspects of well-being (including contentment and pleasure), as well as with gratification and fulfilment, external need satisfaction, and achievement- and self-oriented themes (Kjell et al. 2016). Findings supported a conceptual distinction between satisfaction and harmony, interpreted in terms of primary and secondary control (Morling and Evered 2006; Rothbaum et al. 1982). Satisfaction was associated with primary control (changing the environment in accordance with the individual's wishes) whereas harmony was more associated with secondary control (accepting the environment and adjusting the self). A Norwegian study of everyday understandings of well-being terms found that "satisfaction" was understood as a more psychological, less contextual concept than "happiness" (Carlquist et al 2016b).

With regard to life satisfaction, a study applied item response modeling across two different cultures to investigate how participants from Greenland and Norway understood the

conceptual meaning of the items included in the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Vittersø et al. 2005). Rather than studying everyday understanding of the life satisfaction term, this study addressed lay understandings of questionnaire items assumed to capture life satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is of interest that differences were found between the two countries and furthermore across latent classes of participants within each country. For instance, some participants tended to agree with the item "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing", despite considering their life conditions to be less than excellent. While relatively few Greenlanders belonged to this class, they reported higher satisfaction with life, compared to the greater proportion of Norwegians in the same class.

Although there has been a scarcity of research examining conceptual usage or understanding of the general term "satisfaction", some studies have been conducted within more specific domains such as patient or customer satisfaction. For example, a qualitative interview study of British patients' accounts of satisfaction with health care found that the descriptions were fluid and dynamic, in the sense that the meaning that participants ascribed to the satisfaction term could change and develop during interviews (Collins and Nicolson 2002). Making use of thematic analysis, a qualitative study of North American health service consumers challenged the prevailing scientific view of satisfaction as a singular, stable construct, based on the finding that customers could define themselves as simultaneously satisfied and dissatisfied with delivered services (Turner and Krizek 2006). A recommendation drawn from this study was that future research should explore in greater detail the kinds of meaning that service users hold relative to various potential satisfiers and dissatisfiers, rather than simply quantifying levels of satisfaction based on the pre-established assumptions of researchers.

Furthermore, a conceptual analysis of the term "contentment" (Carson 1981) has suggested that it can refer to a) satisfaction in a negative sense, indicating that one is not

dissatisfied with something, thus finding it acceptable, tolerable or satisfactory; or b) satisfaction in a positive sense, indicating being positively pleased about something. Thus, the terms "contentment" and "satisfaction" share conceptual meaning, including the two separate senses of perceiving something as good per se, and as good enough.

Etymological Notes on the Norwegian Term

The Norwegian word *tilfreds* is a compound of the preposition *til* and the noun *fred*, and literally denotes "to (or at) peace". It closely resembles the contemporary German word *zufrieden*, and it is also etymologically connected to the Low German *tovrede*, which also approximately means "to peace" (Wangensteen 2005). In German, *frieden* refers to a condition of calmness, harmony and lack of war or conflict (Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften 2015). This aspect of meaning is not present in the English word or equivalent terms in Romance languages, which stem from Latin *satis* (enough) *and facere* (to make) (Stevenson 2010). The Norwegian language further differentiates between *tilfredshet* (to be satisfied *with* something, or a more general state) and *tilfredsstillelse* (to be satisfied *by* something). Accordingly, the Norwegian word for life satisfaction is *livstilfredshet*, whereas the word for need satisfaction is *behovstilfredsstillelse*. It should also be noted that the word *fornøyd* overlaps considerably with *tilfreds* in everyday Norwegian vocabulary, and is similar to the English word "content". The *-nøyd* of *fornøyd* is etymologically related to the Norwegian *nøye*, which historically refers to sufficing or making do. Via this word it is further related to the word *nok*, or the German *genug*, both meaning enough (de Caprona 2013; Wangensteen 2005). A recent study of word usage trends in Norwegian newspapers (Carlquist et al 2016a) suggested that the usage of the terms *tilfreds* and *tilfredshet* declined significantly between 1992 and 2014.

Aims of the Study

The objective of the present study was to examine the meaning potential (Blakar 1979; Rommetveit 1968, 2003) of the term "satisfaction" in a Norwegian context, taking its understanding in everyday language as the point of departure. Compared to happiness, the satisfaction concept is under-theorized, and studies of everyday understandings of satisfaction have been scarce (Carlquist et al. 2016b). The current study provides a qualitative elaboration of a previous quantitative study of the term "satisfaction", as compared to "happiness" and "good life", which made use of data from the same survey [Anonymized for peer review, 2016]. As presented above, the concept of satisfaction contains theoretical ambiguity regarding both the satisficing/fully satisfactory axis, and the different meanings of satisfaction *with* vs. satisfaction *of*. The objective of the present study was to identify the range of existing everyday conceptualizations of the term "satisfaction" emerging from analyses of qualitative data. The purpose of the current study was therefore not to make any truth claims regarding what satisfaction as a phenomenon "*is*", but rather to identify what satisfaction *can mean* in everyday language. In other words, we sought to provide an empirically grounded conceptual analysis of the Norwegian term for satisfaction (*tilfredshet*), based on qualitative data.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 276 Norwegian-speaking adults (mean age 44.9 [*SD* = 15.8], age range 17-81, 59% were female, 41% male, 75% were working, 31% held postgraduate level education while an additional 29% reported having education beyond secondary school). Of the participants, 80% lived in South Eastern Norway, which is the most densely populated and urbanized part of the country, whereas 20% came from other regions of the country. To ensure acceptable representativeness, a minimum quota of nine participants was recruited for

every combination of gender, age level (young, middle-aged, older), and education (secondary or higher).

Materials

Participants were asked to respond to the following question: "What is satisfaction for you? Take your time and provide your definition." (In Norwegian: "Hva er tilfredshet for deg (hva vil det si for deg å være tilfreds)? Ta den tiden du trenger og skriv ned din forståelse." This question was administered in addition to the Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation (EHHI; Delle Fave et al. 2011; Delle Fave et al. 2013a; Delle Fave et al. 2013b; Delle Fave et al. 2016), which is a broader multinational comparative paper-and-pencil survey. The question was deliberately phrased to invite participants to present their own conceptualizations, thereby enabling us to identify elements of their personal meaning systems.

Procedure

Data collection occurred as a separate extension of the second wave of the EHHI project (Delle Fave et al. 2016). Participants were recruited by direct requests in a variety of venues including workplaces, stations, shopping centers, and car license renewal offices. The information page included a Web address referring to an optional online version, which was used by 5.4 % of the sample. Participants were not offered any type of compensation for contributing. Informed consent from each participant was obtained. Approval was obtained from Norwegian Social Service Data Services to ensure the anonymity of both paper and electronic data. Information that could potentially identify persons was deleted before coding and analysis were performed.

Analytical Framework

The study consisted of a qualitative investigation involving thematic analysis of the satisfaction concept, as defined by Norwegian participants. Thematic analysis refers to several related approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006; Attride-Stirling 2001; Guest et al. 2012; Ryan and Bernard 2003), and qualitative research traditions use different methodological nomenclatures. In the present study, we distinguished among: a) text data units (parts of definitions as presented by participants); b) themes (recurring topics); c) categories (overarching themes, or meanings); and d) concepts (here: concepts of satisfaction). A statement could consist of several text data units, and a full answer from a given participant could include several statements. The analytical entity we have called "theme" is akin to the "basic themes" of Attride-Stirling (2001), whereas "categories" correspond to organizing or global themes in the framework of Attride-Stirling, axial codes (Flick 2014) or meaning units (Malterud 2012).

A process of tagging (Guest et al. 2012) was initially applied to identify potential themes. To develop categories based on emergent themes at gradually higher levels of abstraction, the principles of constant comparison (Glaser 2002) and winnowing (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Guest et al. 2012) were used. The comparison approach involves the repeated consideration of how text data units fit within a gradually emerging framework of themes and categories, and revising the framework accordingly. Initially, recurrent topics were tagged and eventually coded as preliminary themes. These codes were assigned short names such as "togetherness" or "pleasant feelings". After repeated comparisons between data and evolving themes based on coded tags, two of the authors compared the theme set and, in cooperation with a third author, developed a preliminary structure of categories.

Winnowing involved selecting themes to be retained in the final framework. We opted for an inclusive approach, discarding only themes that both infrequently occurred and were

deemed by the authors to be of marginal relevance. Occasionally, certain specific topics were particularly evident as frequently occurring codes within the themes, warranting a specific classification of these topics as subthemes. Thus, some themes contained one or more subthemes. Finally, the full framework of categories and themes was again examined against a subset of data, and further refinements were made. Although themes and categories can be said to emerge from data, the determination of such entities inevitably involves constructive efforts of researchers (Polkinghorne 2005; Charmaz 2003), based on the constructions made by participants in response to the question posed.

In total, 1,322 text data units were coded. Answers from two participants were clearly incomplete and were discarded from further analysis.

Reliability and Validity

In the context of qualitative research, reliability can be said to concern the rigor and transparency of the research process (Guest et al. 2012; Lewis et al. 2003). The determination of themes was subject to comparisons between several researchers and therefore amenable to replication. Because the determination of categories is necessarily a constructive act of interpretation, and other categorizations are possible, reliability resides primarily in the transparency of the above-described categorization process. A particular challenge to reliability was posed by what is known as the lumper-splitter problem (Guest et al. 2012), which emerges because some coders aggregate data into larger thematic entities, while others partition data into smaller ones. We chose to partition the statements initially into small themes of some detail and to merge themes at a later stage to avoid too many and potentially overlapping resulting themes.

Validity in qualitative research concerns the legitimacy and credibility of findings, and involves verification strategies such as applying coherent analytical procedures, using an

adequate sample, and collecting data until a saturation of meaning has been achieved (Flick 2014; Morse et al. 2002). In the present study, external validity, in the sense of generalizability, was an aim. An adequate level of external validity was considered to have been achieved because the data were collected from everyday language descriptions, and considerable steps were undertaken to ensure socio-demographic inclusiveness through the recruitment process described above. However, additional types of linguistic data (conversation transcripts, media reports) could have further enhanced validity.

The questionnaire was presented in the context of a study on well-being. The findings of this study might therefore be of particular relevance for the interpretation and conceptual development of satisfaction within well-being research.

Results

Following the aforementioned procedure, the qualitative analysis of everyday language descriptions of satisfaction led to the development of five categories, each containing a number of identified themes. The categories included the following: a) physiological and material conditions; b) interpersonal aspects; c) activities; d) internal states; and e) circumstances and contexts. Some themes or subthemes were labeled “negating themes”, as they referred to participants’ descriptions of what satisfaction was not (e.g., satisfaction is to not strive for more), or otherwise describing satisfaction in negative terms. Furthermore, certain other themes were labeled “demarcative themes”, because they explicitly emphasized conceptual boundaries between satisfaction and other well-being terms such as happiness. As will be shown, a few themes spanned several categories.

In the following paragraphs, each category will be presented with associated themes. Selected quotes, presented in tables, exemplify and document data and interpretation (Guest et al. 2012). Most of these quotes were parts of longer answers. In a later section, we address

how participants combined text data units into more complex descriptions. For this purpose, we will present illustrative full statements.

Within the text data units, certain adjectives and adverbs concerning evaluative appraisal were recurrent. Such words were used in combination with all of the aforementioned categories, although particularly with circumstances and contexts. We did not consider evaluative words as a category per se; rather, they provided an evaluative dimension to the presented themes. In total, 39.5% of participants reported positive evaluations. "Good" (*god*), "well" (*bra*), and "nice" (*fin*) were the most prominent positive evaluative words, while "ok" (*greit*), "acceptable" (*greit nok*), and "enough" (*nok*) indicated evaluations of sufficiency or acceptability (8.7% of participants). Normative words or expressions referring to good functioning or conditions were also considered to be evaluative, e.g., "as it should".

Physiological and Material Conditions

As shown in Table 1, five themes were discerned within this category. *Financial aspects* was the most prevalent theme, referring to money and income. *Health* and *nourishment* were further prominent themes. *Material aspects* was a smaller group, comprising housing as the major subtheme. *Other physiological conditions* referred to feeling warm, as well as sexual aspects. Some text data units within both the physiological and material themes encompassed desires to obtain more than bare necessities. Gastronomical experiences, comfortable housing and surplus money to spend exemplified desired objects that clearly exceeded basic survival needs, as included in the statement "a Friday night at home with a glass of red wine" (man, 31). As an example of the nourishment and financial aspects themes, one participant stated "to have enough food on the table, and to be able to pay bills without returning to square one every month" (woman, age 52). This statement connotes a degree of surplus or margin, but

not luxurious excess. In total, 33.6% of participants included one or more text items belonging to the physiological and material conditions category.

--PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

Interpersonal Aspects

A number of answers included references to interpersonal relationships. This category included six themes (see Table 2). The theme *relationships* contained items referring to having relationships in general. Additional themes denoted more specific functions of relationships, comprising *recognition*, *togetherness*, *love*, *belonging* and *being useful to others*. The statement "being with people I love" (man, 32) is an example of such functions. Within the belonging theme, being cared for by others was noted as a subtheme. In total, 27.7% of participants included one or more interpersonal themes in their statements.

--TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE--

Activities

Many participants provided statements referring to various forms of activity. Six themes were determined within this category (see Table 3, including examples). A major group of text data units concerned the processes or outcomes of attaining intrinsic or extrinsic goals. Such text items were considered instances of successful completion of planned activity, and were labelled *achievement*. A further theme within the activity category was named *activity in general*, including action unrelated to the attainment of a specific, formulated goal. *Restitution* indicated non-activity, such as rest, or the active effort to return to a calmer condition or equilibrium. *Effort* referred to the exertion of energy, including the subtheme of doing one's

best. Furthermore, the theme *restraint* encompassed subthemes of making do and not striving for more. The latter was a negating subtheme, reflecting views of satisfaction as the relinquishing or absence of desire for more. The theme *having a job* was also subsumed under this category. In total, 39.1% of participants referred to themes within the activities category.

--TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE--

Internal States

A number of statements referred to psychological states of cognition or emotion. Most of the statements referred to clearly positive affects or experiences. As presented in Table 4, fourteen themes were established within the internal state category. This category included the themes *contentment, harmony* (with balance and calmness as common subthemes), *freedom, sense of well-being, pleasant feelings* (including enjoyment as a subtheme), *awareness* (with acceptance as a subtheme), *mastery, future outlook, safety, meaning, happiness,* and *challenge*. Furthermore, *no negative affect* emerged as a prominent negating theme, particularly containing the absence of stress and worries. Additionally, a demarcative theme named *neutral / okay state* was included, encompassing the subtheme "less than happiness".

The demarcative descriptions typically juxtaposed the concept of satisfaction to similar concepts, as shown in the following quote: "To be satisfied is, for me, the condition between contented (fornøyd) and happy (lykkelig)" (man, 26). Here, a "middle ground" emotional condition is suggested, located between contentment and happiness. This statement was therefore an instance of the "less than happiness" subtheme. The answer "I think what other people mean by happiness, I would call to be satisfied" (woman, 39) provided an instance of the happiness theme, but at the same time it included a demarcation. This participant equated common representations of happiness with her conception of satisfaction,

although at the same time indicated that her own idea of happiness might be something else. Overall, 73.4% of participants made reference to a theme within the internal states category.

--TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE--

Circumstances and Contexts

This category contained recurring contextual themes of a more abstract nature. Circumstances and contexts were typically described in terms of something participants were satisfied *with,* and were often identified by the proximity of evaluative words, such as *good*. General circumstantial themes (see Table 5 for examples) included *situation* (subthemes opportunity, "everything", "things", what one has), *existence* (including subthemes of life, everyday life, here-and-now), and *quality* (subthemes of coherence, functioning, order, predictability). We additionally included the more specific contextual themes *others' well-being, self*, and *body* (non-physiological aspects) in this category, since they were not considered sufficiently superordinate to justify separate categories. *Nothing missing* was the prominent negating theme. No purely demarcative themes were identified. However, in some cases participants performed demarcations by using evaluative words connoting less positive assessments, such as *okay* or *good enough*. Across participants, 57.3 % mentioned at least one theme belonging to the circumstances and contexts category.

--TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE--

Category-Spanning Themes

Certain text data units could not be readily assigned to one of the above presented categories. First, in some instances the text data units referred simultaneously to the interpersonal and

activities categories. The two themes simultaneously belonging to these two categories were labeled *contribution to others* (including subthemes caring and societal orientation), and *sharing* (joint activity of several people). Examples include "To offer a hand to people who are less fortunate (woman, age 58, contribution theme) and "Sharing a tasty dinner" (man, age 71, sharing theme). Second, some statements contained text data units referring to fulfilments in an abstract, general fashion, such as "to […] have what I need" (man, age 57). It was impossible to discern from this statement whether the expressed needs related to material or physiological conditions, relationships, activities, internal states or evaluated circumstances and contexts. The category-spanning theme was accordingly named *fulfilment*. Proportions of participants including these themes, with examples, are presented in Table 6. In total, 21.2% of participants mentioned one or more category-spanning themes.

--TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE--

Combinations of Categories

Participants commonly presented longer strings of text data units, thus combining several themes into complex statements describing satisfaction. Themes within the circumstances and contexts category frequently occurred in combination with other categories, particularly internal states. The following quote exemplifies this connection:

> To be satisfied to me means that one is content (*fornøyd*) with life as it is. That one feels mastery and that the pieces fall into place. One doesn't feel that one misses anything of importance, but there is still space for development (woman, age 30, full answer).

This statement explicitly refers to life satisfaction, with life "as it is" being the evaluated object and thus the source of contentment (internal state theme: contentment;

circumstances and contexts theme: existence, subtheme: life). A sense of mastery is semantically connected to the abstract quality of pieces falling into place (internal state theme: mastery; circumstances theme: quality, subtheme: coherence). A further evaluated circumstance, again framed as feeling or perception, is that nothing important is lacking (theme: nothing missing). Instead, the situation is constructed as a space for further development (theme: situation, subtheme: opportunity).

In other cases, participants referred to activities, contexts and relationships, but made no reference to their own internal states, such as in the following quote:

> To make a good effort at work, and at the same time receive deserved praise. To make other people happy [joyful]. Either by giving them a gift, or visiting them. To do a good piece of work at home, for example restoration, or collecting firewood for a cold winter (man, age 60, full answer).

At the outset of this statement, satisfaction is associated with effort, in the particular context of work. Furthermore, relations are integral to this definition, which includes interpersonal recognition as well as contribution. Further reference to achievements in a home context underscores the activity-focused quality of this account.

Some participants made use of self-oriented, somewhat hedonistic accounts, in combination with relational aspects:

> Satisfaction for me is, among other things, to be able to be a bit egoistical with no negative consequences for anyone, and to live a life that is not too complicated and difficult. To have a good time with friends and family, and not exhaust myself to death to keep the wheels turning (man, undisclosed age, full answer).

Of note, this statement contains implicit reference to notions of balance. The alleged egotism is moderated by the avoidance of negative effects on others. Furthermore, life should

not be too complex and the level of exhaustion kept acceptable, according to this participant's understanding of satisfaction.

Conversely, a number of participants referred to balance by means of more eudaimonic understandings, including acceptance and meaning, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> To be content with life the way it is, accept that it is what it is, for better or worse. To feel safe, and be a part of a meaningful existence. A [form of] peace, harmony, the belief that all will work out (woman, age 25, full answer).

Accounts of satisfaction as «good enough» were in some cases connected to activity, or in the following case, to the deliberate choice diverting action to other tasks evaluated as less satisfying. Here, the participant defined satisfaction as "When things are quite okay, but actually could have been a bit better. One chooses not do anything about it because there are other things one is less satisfied with that are given priority" (woman, 26, full answer).

In some cases, participants described causal connections among themes, as in the text item "Joy from having good health" (woman, 36). Here, health is framed as a physiological state that, when perceived as good, gives rise to the internal state of joy. Notably, some participants described temporal chains of events or conditions. In the statement "To be active and to be able to rest after having become exhausted and tired" (man, 64), temporal order is clearly presented: Being active is followed by exhaustion and tiredness and thereafter rest. In such combinations, participants spelled out how categories and themes might be conceptually, as well as temporally, related, as further demonstrated in the following answer: "When I have done my best, and received good feedback. [I] can sit down with my cup of coffee with a good conscience" (woman, 53). Effort, here accompanied by the recognition of others, is followed by restitution (sitting down) and a sense or feeling of a good conscience.

Although feelings and evaluations of circumstances were more commonly described as outcomes of desire fulfilment or activity, the described causal chains in some cases pointed in the opposite direction. One participant (man, 46) stated that satisfaction is "largely that the everyday tasks feel meaningful and give me the energy to experience what I really want". In this case, the evaluation of everyday life activities was perceived as a source of energy to achieve autonomous desire fulfilment.

Discussion

The aim of this mainly qualitative study was to examine the meaning potential of the Norwegian term for satisfaction (*tilfredshet*). While the majority of previous research has studied conceptualizations of satisfaction in specific contexts or domains such as health care or commodity consumption, the present investigation was based upon a survey of well-being in general. A primary contribution of the present research is that it has empirically demonstrated complex and multifaceted everyday conceptualizations of this central psychological term, whose meaning is often taken for granted in well-being research. The thematic analysis of statements discerned five major categories of semantic components of the meaning potential of this word. Satisfaction was understood in terms of material and physiological conditions, interpersonal aspects, activities, internal (psychological) states, and circumstances and contexts. In many accounts, these components were combined, in some cases to describe chains of desired situations or objects, activities involved in the fulfilment of such desires, the resulting internal states and related assessed circumstances. Circumstances and contexts, and sometimes internal states, were framed as positive or optimal, or only partially so in terms of being "good enough" or representing "less than happiness". A key message emerging from these findings is therefore that the word "satisfaction" does not unequivocally delineate an evaluative or affective psychological condition.

Satisfaction was nevertheless most frequently understood as denoting an experienced internal state (e.g., "satisfaction is enjoyment"), often in combination with circumstances and contexts. The considerable combined occurrence (approx. 55%) of internal states with physical/material conditions, interpersonal aspects or circumstances and contexts, as well as the prevalence of evaluative words, suggest that the predominant scientific conceptualization of satisfaction as evaluations of life or domains reflects common, everyday understandings to a considerable extent.

However, not all accounts referred to internal psychological states. Satisfaction was also understood as fulfilment of an external condition, either specified in terms of, e.g., relationships or health, or more generally as desire fulfilment ("satisfaction is to have what I need"). Whereas being satisfied *with* something is a state of the mind, as cognition or affect, the satisfaction *of* something is an objectively occurring event or state-of-the-world (Sumner 1996). In English, one might say that subjective satisfaction (satisfaction-*with*) amounts to the psychological manifestation or effect of a desired condition objectively being fulfilled (satisfaction-*of*). The analysis suggests that participants drew on both approaches when accounting for the satisfaction term. Subjective satisfaction was frequently mentioned in terms of internal states, most clearly as contentment, and often associated with a particular domain such as family, or with more abstract conditions such as life as it is. Satisfaction in an objective sense was evident in text data items such as "that the primary needs are satisfied".

As previously mentioned, the Norwegian vocabulary contains a separate, but etymologically related, word for desire-satisfaction (*tilfredsstillelse)*. It is therefore notable that some participants nevertheless clearly referred to the fulfilment of desires when defining *tilfredshet*. However, when participants stated conditions such as "being with people I love" or "beer in the fridge", the accounts did not reveal whether the participant had in mind a condition being objectively satisfied or a state of the world experienced as positive, and

therefore as emotionally or cognitively satisfying. Interpreting stated conditions such as “beer in the fridge” as signifying an internal state or evaluation is a speculative, although plausible inference.

Another way of interpreting this finding is that participants viewed objective events of desire fulfilment as antecedents of an internal state of satisfaction as a feeling or as an evaluation of circumstances and contexts. In this case, both the internal states and their antecedents would be encompassed by the meaning potential of satisfaction. However, some authors have warned against “bracket creep”, meaning that people, in their descriptions, conflate causes or correlates of well-being with the experience per se (Kashdan and Steger 2011). When participants define satisfaction e.g. by “enough money in the bank account”, might they not mean that possessing money is a cause of their well-being, rather than a feature of it? Consequently, it appears reasonable to make a primary scientific distinction between internal experience (“satisfaction proper”) and its external conditions (including causes). Adhering to this distinction, contextual descriptions can be seen as exemplifying instances of causes, of which some might be more prototypical than others. Many of the cited examples, e.g., “being with people I love”, could thus be interpreted as factors leading to satisfaction proper (e.g., a pleasant inner state). Due to individual and socio-demographic differences, it is reasonable to expect a considerable variety of such satisfaction-producing factors.

However, while such a separation between causal and core features might make intuitive sense, it is striking that participants’ understandings of the term included such a high rate of contextual components. If the semantic core of a term amounts to psychological experience, why would participants quote contextual factors, which accordingly should belong to the conceptual periphery, to this large extent? In this regard, it is of significance that several theoretical accounts of well-being have included contextual features in their definitions of well-being, particularly among the eudaimonic perspectives. The six-factor

model of psychological well-being (Ryff and Singer 2008) includes positive relationships as a core dimension of well-being, rather than simply an antecedent. It can also be noted that cognitive psychologists as well as linguists have argued that the sharp distinction between core and peripheral meaning is tenuous (Casasanto and Lupyan 2015). The considerable prevalence of contextual definitions of satisfaction in our data tentatively suggests that subjective experiences of satisfaction might not exist independently from the particular, domain-specific experiences that produced them. This speculation resembles a suggestion by Griffin (1986) that the concept of enjoyment, or finding things fulfilling or satisfying, refers to a condition that falls between a mental state and factual desire fulfilment occurring in-the-world. Somewhat in parallel, Feldman (2010) has challenged the idea that emotional states can be objectless. According to such lines of argument, psychological states require objects in order to be perceived as meaningful for the experiencing person. In the context of the present study, experiencing satisfaction necessitates a circumstance with, or by, which the person is satisfied.

The qualitative descriptions provided in our study exemplify this interface between internal experience and its objects. While one participant stated that to her, satisfaction is "to be content with life the way it is, accept that it is what it is", while another participant stated that satisfaction to him is "beer in the fridge". Despite providing their description of the same term, it is reasonable to assume that the two participants have referred to highly different subjective experiences of satisfaction. The first participant appears to indicate a contented acceptance of life, whereas the second arguably refers to a more immediate form of gratification. In this interpretation, lexical concepts (meanings of "satisfaction") arise through language use (Evans 2006) rather than being pre-given. Our findings resonate with those reported by Turner and Krizek (2006), illustrating how everyday understandings of satisfaction may contain multiple and contradictory meanings, in contrast to the scientific

understandings reified by research practices. One intriguing avenue of research following from such observations would therefore be to investigate how psychological constructs typically portrayed by the scientific literature as unitary (e.g., satisfaction or meaning) might in fact signify several experientially distinct phenomena.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that some descriptions conceptualized satisfaction as a dynamic process rather than a static entity. Our study adds further nuance and generalizability to the observations of dynamic understandings of satisfaction found in somatic health care (Collins and Nicolson 2002). In the present study, process understandings were seen in their simplest form when satisfaction was understood as activity. In more complex accounts, satisfaction was described as an outcome of a process, which again enabled further positive outcomes. As an illustration, one participant stated that for him, satisfaction was "Good and harmonic. Have finished things I have to do, and can relax" (man, 45). Here, to have completed activities is clearly described in the past perfect tense, whereas "can relax" is framed as an opportunity or possibility. The meaning potential could thus be interpreted as including a conceptual core (here, the internal state of harmony and well-being) and its antecedents and further consequences. Dynamic representations were particularly evident in descriptions including temporal and causal chains. Conditions following activity, achievement or desire fulfilment were sometimes referred to as instances of return to equilibrium, e.g., as rest or psychological relief. Such conditions can be understood as representing a physiological or psychological homeostasis (cf. Kim and Diamond 2002). Including the combined categories, approximately 45% of participants referred to activity in their understandings, particularly emphasizing achievements and contributions to others. The considerable role played by such semantic components suggests that the satisfaction concept cannot be entirely reduced to a static attitude or experience of liking (cf. Veenhoven 1996). Rather, the meaning

potential of "satisfaction" appears also to encompass particular types of processes, in combination with their psychological outcomes.

The findings are also clearly relevant for the theoretical dimensions of hedonia and eudaimonia (Kashdan et al. 2008; Tiberius and Hall 2010). Descriptions of internal states were often articulated as positive affect, or the absence of negative affect. Moreover, the evaluations of circumstances were typically positive. This pattern was unsurprising and largely in agreement with the current practice in psychological research of labeling satisfaction as hedonic (Huta and Waterman 2014). Furthermore, the common view in the psychological literature of satisfaction as a state or evaluation arising after some state of affairs has occurred was paralleled by a number of statements in the present study. However, as mentioned, many descriptions emphasized that satisfaction was understood as effort or activity as such. Satisfaction is thus associated with eudaimonic actualizations of personal potentials (Ryan et al. 2008). In the vocabulary of multiple discrepancy theory (Michalos 1985), satisfaction might therefore also be understood as inherent in the active process of reducing discrepancies between what one has and wants.

In addition, our analysis demonstrated that participants regularly conceptualized the psychological state of satisfaction in terms of harmony and balance, not only positive hedonic affect. Similar findings have been reported in cross-cultural studies of happiness definitions (Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016). Conceptualizations of satisfaction as harmony furthermore correspond to the Germanic etymological meaning aspect of "peace" present in the Norwegian term. Hence, in contrast to the argument of Kjell et al. (2016), satisfaction need not be framed as antonymous to harmony, at least in the Norwegian language. The everyday understandings of satisfaction as activity and harmony documented in the present study suggest that a purely hedonic conceptualization of satisfaction might not be sufficient. Consequently, the satisfaction concept could be associated with secondary control, as well as

primary control (Morling and Evered 2006; Rothbaum et al. 1982). Whereas desire satisfaction clearly parallels primary control (obtaining what one wants from the environment), accounts emphasizing "deeper" satisfaction appear to describe approaches more akin to secondary control, in terms of, e.g., gratefulness for existence as it is. The scientific literature might therefore benefit from recognizing the existence of more eudaimonic understandings of satisfaction in some languages.

A further aspect emerging from the analysis was that satisfaction can refer to an evaluation of something as good or something as good *enough*, in accordance with previous observations (Dolan 2014; Evans 1997; Carson 1981). Whether this apparently double meaning is a case of conceptual ambiguity (a word having two or more separate meanings) or conceptual broadness (Feldman 2010; Quine 1960) is open for discussion. An ambiguous word is similar to a homonym in that it signifies similar, but ultimately different concepts. In contrast to ambiguous terms, a broad term can suffer from vagueness, but its different manifestations share a common core of meaning. Both the satisficing ("good enough") and the more optimal fulfilment ("good") understandings of satisfaction share notions of physiological or psychological processes reaching a certain level or condition. This observation indicates that satisfaction might be better viewed as a broad (and vague) term rather than a truly ambiguous term. Importantly, this broadness of the general term "satisfaction" raises questions about its scientific usage, including the conceptual precision of the construct "satisfaction with life". For some people, this expression might connote a "good enough" life, for others it might connote a more optimal life.

Limitations and Recommendations

The conceptual as well as the terminological worlds are ambiguous and untidy. Word meanings do not come in readily separated bundles. Therefore, any categorization of everyday

language usage will have redundancies, overlaps and blank areas. In the current work, particular difficulties were posed by text data units that overlapped or that could not clearly be placed in the material/physiological or relational conditions vs. circumstances and contexts categories. Pragmatically, we resolved these issues by double-coding the relatively few statements for which this problem emerged. It is also worth noting that the sample was biased toward participants agreeing to participate in a rather time-consuming survey. Additionally, because participants in the present study were likely to interpret the satisfaction question within the context of well-being, it is reasonable to believe that they were cognitively primed somewhat more toward "life satisfaction" approaches to the concept, rather than toward more spontaneous desire (need or expectation) satisfaction. In addition, we cannot rule out question order effects. Therefore, findings might not be fully representative of the total meaning potential of the word "satisfaction". In particular, further research is required to disentangle the specific meaning potential of "satisfaction with life" as compared to the general term "satisfaction".

It should also be noted that the cross-cultural validity of the findings is limited, first, because the study relies on language usage from one national context only; second, because few studies have explored the meaning of this concept; and third, because the distinction between similar concepts of satisfaction and contentment might differ between languages.

One might question whether elements such as "food on the table" at all can be interpreted as definitions of satisfaction. They can instead be conceived of as instances or exemplifications. An alternative approach would therefore have been to include only those items including strictly definitional statements, stating a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as satisfaction for the participant. However, such an approach would stand at risk of discarding the richness of everyday language. For future research,

interviews could provide fuller accounts of the experiential qualities of satisfaction, in contrast to the limited information offered through short written statements.

Relatedly, research is recommended with regard to how well-being terms such as "happiness" and "satisfaction" diverge with regard to their conceptual meanings, including the investigation of cross-cultural and socio-demographic patterns of such divergences (see also Carlquist et al 2016b). Although the broad meaning potential detected in our study might suggest that the term "satisfaction" is semantically similar to the generic term "well-being", a possible hypothesis is that the effort-and-release dynamics observed among the statements specifically capture aspects of satisfaction. A further issue is how co-existing, but different conceptualizations of satisfaction in everyday life might have implications for survey research utilizing the concept of satisfaction. A possible implication for measurement is that Likert-style scales with verbal labels (e.g., somewhat satisfied, very satisfied) might carry less ambiguous meaning than purely numerical response formats.

Concluding Remarks

Everyday language provides participants in a culture with conceptual information organized within broader meaning systems (Geertz 1973; Semin 2011). To make sense of their well-being, people need to draw on prevailing conceptualizations of well-being terms. The present study indicated that, among Norwegian language users, the word "satisfaction" evokes a wide meaning potential, including material, physiological and interpersonal conditions, activities, internal affective states, and circumstances and contexts of well-being, as well as dynamic and temporal relationships between these categories.

Many participants described satisfaction in terms of dynamic processes, often involving activity and contributions to other people in combination with psychological outcomes. In addition, findings suggest that in Norwegian, satisfaction can be understood both

in hedonic and eudaimonic terms. Findings also empirically supported previous literature suggesting that the word "satisfaction" refers to at least two partially different conceptualizations: first, one of satisficing; and second and more commonly, one of more positive, ideal or optimal fulfilment.

By demonstrating unclear conceptual demarcations and broad everyday meaning potentials of this scientifically important term, the present study challenges the view that "satisfaction" unequivocally refers to a precisely bounded psychological entity. Therefore, caution should be exerted before assuming that experiences of satisfaction can be straightforwardly measured and compared across people.

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Table 1
Physiological and material conditions. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Financial aspects	16.4	Enough money in the bank account	77, M
Health	14.2	Good health	81, F
Nourishment	10.2	To have enough food on the table	52, F
Material aspects	3.3	Material goods so one can live comfortably	30, M
Other physiological conditions	2.6	[Being] warm	62, F

Table 2
Interpersonal aspects. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Relationships	9.5	A good relationship with friends	66, F
Recognition	7.7	When I am seen as a person	64, F
Togetherness	5.8	Being with friends / family	57, M
Love	2.9	Have someone to love	63, F
Belonging	2.6	Social belonging	57, M
Being useful to others	2.6	To be of use for someone or something	57, M

Table 3
Activities. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Achievement	18.2	To complete a large and difficult task	77, M
Activity in general	13.1	To do everyday activities	61, F
Restitution	6.2	When I can relax	56, F
Effort	4.7	To use my physical strengths	48, F
Restraint	3.6	To make do with what I have	58, M
Having a job	2.6	A job to go to	42, M

Table 4
Internal states. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Contentment	17.2	I am content with…	33, F
Nothing negative	15.7	No great worries	63, F
Harmony	11.7	To feel an inner peace	65, F
Freedom	10.2	When I have time off and can do what I want	
Sense of well-being	9.9	Well-being	51, F
Pleasant feelings	8.4	When I feel joy	70, F
Awareness	7.3	To be present in one's own life	38, F
Mastery	7.3	To master situations or tasks	57, M
Future outlook	6.9	Have something for me to look forward to	29, F
Safety	6.6	Feeling safe	25, F
Neutral/okay state	4.7	To be okay, but things could have been better, at the same time they could have been worse	29, F
Meaning	3.6	That [everyday tasks] feel meaningful	46, M
Happiness	2.9	A feeling of happiness	40, F
Challenge	2.2	To push one's own limits	30, M

Table 5
Circumstances and contexts. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Situation	19.0	[Content with] the total situation of life	26, M
Others' well-being	17.2	That the people around me are doing well	63, M
Existence	15.3	Life as it is now	67, F
Quality	10.6	Everything is in order	41, F
Self	4.7	[Content] with oneself	40, F
Body	4.4	Listen to the signals of the body	38, F
Nothing missing	2.2	One has no pressing needs	22, M

Table 6
Category-spanning themes. Thematic occurrence and text examples

	Mentioned (%)	Text data unit example	Age, gender
Interpersonal activity:			
Contribution to others	9.5	Done something that can please someone else	65, F
Sharing	4.7	Sharing [a tasty dinner]	71, M
Fulfilment	8.0	That the primary needs are satisfied	77, M

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Hilde Breck, André de Brisis and Agnete Falck Revdal for their invaluable help in collecting and registering data for this study.