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Geographical Variations in Job Satisfaction

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Happiness at work is a popular topic. This Research Note explores measures of job satisfaction that are available from 3 nationally representative surveys that are conducted within Britain; the Skills and Employment Surveys, the Workplace Employment Relations Survey and the British Household Panel Survey. Indices of satisfaction with work can be constructed from these sources based on both 'catch all' questions on overall job satisfaction and more detailed questions that ask respondents how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with particular aspects of their jobs, such as pay, promotion prospects and job security. Exploratory analysis reveals that, despite being characterised by low paid and low skilled work, reported levels of job satisfaction are higher in Wales than across other parts of Great Britain.

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1. Introduction¹

Since the introduction of its well-being programme in 2010, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has introduced a number of questions into its surveys in an attempt to measure the well-being of the population in the UK. The Annual Population Survey, the largest regular household survey undertaken by the ONS, now includes a suite of questions related to subjective wellbeing. These questions ask respondents about overall levels of satisfaction with life, happiness, anxiety and the extent to which respondents thought that the things that they did in life were worthwhile. Estimates produced by the ONS suggests that results for Wales overall are on a par with other countries and regions of the UK. However, there is variation within Wales. Most notably, levels of subject well-being appear to be lower than average within the South Wales Valleys across each of these measures².

Happiness at work has also become a popular topic. The Welsh economy is characterized by a high prevalence of low paid and low skilled work, a relatively low employment rate and low value added production. In terms of wellbeing, these features could give cause for concern. Nevertheless, previous research based on the Skills and Employment Surveys during 2013 suggested that workers in Wales are more satisfied with work than their colleagues elsewhere³. This Research Note provides an overview of measures of job satisfaction that are available from labour market surveys in the UK and explores whether or not the findings of higher job satisfaction in Wales derived from the Skills and Employment Survey can be corroborated from other sources.

2. Overview of Data Sources

This Research Note explores utilises data from the Skills and Employment Surveys, the Workplace Employment Relations Survey and the British Household Panel Survey. The Skills and Employment Surveys are nationally representative sample surveys of working aged adults (aged 20-60) in employment. They collect survey data on the skills and employment experiences of those working in Britain, thereby making them a key and distinctive resource for research on contemporary working life. The present analysis uses

¹ This report may be cited as: Davies R. (2016) *Measuring Job Satisfaction Across the UK* Cardiff: Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD), Cardiff University. This report, along with other titles in this series is downloadable free from WISERD at www.wiserd.ac.uk/unions

² <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dvc238/index2.html>

³ Felstead, A, Davies, R and Jones, S (2013) *Well-being, Insecurity and Attitudes to Work in Wales: Results from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012*, Cardiff: Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods, Cardiff University ([available here](#)).

data from the 2001 and 2006 Skills Surveys and the 2012 Skills and Employment Survey⁴. These surveys are conducted face to face with working adults conducted in their homes, with one eligible adult per address being selected for inclusion in the study. The 2006 and the 2012 surveys are of particular importance to understanding job satisfaction in Wales, as both surveys incorporated a Welsh booster sample. The achieved overall samples for these surveys were 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006; and 3,200 in 2012.

The Workplace Employment Relations Survey was first conducted in 1980, followed by further surveys in 1984, 1990, 1998, 2004 and most recently 2011. The present analysis utilises data from the 2004 and 2011 Surveys. The WERS surveys provide nationally representative data on the state of workplace relations and employment practices in Britain and which have been used extensively in previous studies of job satisfaction. The survey population for both studies are workplaces with at least five employees, excluding those in agriculture, hunting and forestry, fishing, mining and quarrying, private households with employed persons, and extra-territorial organizations (see Kersley et al 2006⁵ and Van Wanrooy et al 2013⁶ for details). Whilst most workplace data is collected via the main face-to-face interviews with managers, there is also a survey of employees that is conducted with up to 25 randomly selected employees at surveyed workplaces. Measures of job satisfaction are included in this survey of employees.

Finally, the BHPS was a panel survey which tracked individuals and households over time. The first wave of the survey conducted in 1991 contained information on approximately 5,500 households and interviewed 10,300 adults. A major development at Wave 9 (1999) was the recruitment of two additional samples to the BHPS in Scotland and Wales in order to facilitate independent country level analysis and comparisons with England post devolution. The BHPS has now been replaced and incorporated in to Understanding Society, the new UK Household Longitudinal Study. The transition from the BHPS towards Understanding Society has resulted in an interruption in the availability of annually updated panel data, with the BHPS sample first being interviewed in 2010/2011 (Wave 2) of Understanding Society. The introduction of Understanding Society also resulted in changes to the questions on job satisfaction. The present analysis therefore uses BHPS data covering the period 2001-2008.

⁴ Further details of the Skills and Employment Survey series are available from

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/projects/view/117804-skills-and-employment-survey-2012>

⁵ Kersley, B., Alpin, C., Forth, J., Bryson, A., Bewley, H., Dix, G. and Oxenbridge, S. (2006), *Inside the Workplace: Findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, London: Routledge.

⁶ Van Wanrooy, B., Bewley, H., Bryson, A., Freeth, S. Forth, J., Stokes, L. and Wood, S. (2013) *The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study: First Findings*, London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.



3. Measuring Job Satisfaction

In terms of measuring job satisfaction, the Skills and Employment Surveys contain both a simple 'catch all' question related to overall levels of satisfaction with work (All in all, how satisfied are you with your job?) and more detailed questions that ask respondents how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with particular aspects of their jobs. The 2001 Survey only contains the 'catch all' question, whilst the 2006 and the 2012 surveys both ask respondents about 14 detailed job aspects related to pay, promotion prospects, relations with the boss, job security, opportunity to use abilities, ability to use initiative, quality of management, hours, fringe benefits, the work itself, the amount of work, variety in the work, training and the friendliness of co-workers. Respondents were asked to rate each of these on a 7 point scale ranging from 'completely satisfied' to 'completely dis-satisfied'. For the purposes of the present analysis, responses to these questions have been combined and averaged to form a 14 item index ranging from -3 ('completely dissatisfied') to +3 ('completely satisfied').

Within the Employee Questionnaire of WERS, respondents are not asked a 'catch all' question on overall levels of job satisfaction. However, respondents are asked detailed questions regarding how satisfied they are with 10 aspects of their jobs related to achievement, initiative, influence, training, opportunity to develop skills, pay, security, the work itself and involvement in decision making. Respondents were asked to rate each of these on a 5 point scale, ranging from very satisfied to very dis-satisfied. Most of these responses are captured via a single block of questions introduced by the leading question 'How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your job?' However, the question related to decision making is covered by a single question within a different section of the questionnaire. The question asks 'Overall, how satisfied are you with the amount of involvement you have in decision making at this workplace?', with respondents having previously been asked to rate how good their managers are at keeping employees informed about different aspects of work and how good they were at seeking the views of employees, responding to suggestions and allowing employees (or their representative) to influence decisions. The job aspect related to 'the opportunity to develop your skills in your job' was not included in the 2004 Survey and so for comparability is excluded from the analysis. For the purposes of the present analysis, responses to the remaining 8 questions have been re-ordered, combined and averaged to form an 8 item index ranging from -2 ('very dis-satisfied') to +2 ('very satisfied').

Finally, within the BHPS the level of detail used in questions related to job satisfaction have diminished over time. Like the SES, the BHPS did include a 'catch all' question on overall job satisfaction where respondents were asked 'All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your present job overall'. Respondents were asked to rate their job satisfaction on a 7 point scale, ranging from 'not satisfied at all' to 'completely satisfied'. At

the introduction of the BHPS, respondents were also asked to rate how satisfied they were with 7 aspects of their jobs including promotion prospects, pay, relations with managers/supervisors, job security, initiative, the work itself and hours worked using the same 7 point scale. From Wave 8 onwards, respondents were only asked to rate how satisfied they were with their pay, job security, the work itself and their hours. For the purposes of the present analysis, responses to these 4 questions have been combined and averaged to form a 4 item index ranging from -3 ('not at all satisfied') to +3 ('completely satisfied').

Table 1 shows how the derived indices of job satisfaction vary across Britain. The analysis is restricted to employees. As the summative index of job satisfaction derived from WERS is on a different scale to those derived from the BHPS and SES (a 5 as opposed to a 7 point scale), the average values of each index have been re-based to 100 so that comparisons between regions can be more easily made. The analysis demonstrates that for four of the five indices of job satisfaction derived from the three survey sources, reported levels of job satisfaction are higher in Wales than across other parts of Great Britain. There is no consistent ordering across the remaining areas in terms of their reported levels of job satisfaction. Within the SES, employees in the South exhibit the lowest levels of satisfaction. With both WERS and the BHPS, employees in the North exhibit the lowest levels of job satisfaction.

There may be a number of reasons for the higher levels of job satisfaction in Wales. The scarcity of work in Wales may contribute to a higher perceived cost of job loss and increased levels of satisfaction among those in employment. Regional differences in personality traits or otherwise unexplained cultural factors could also influence how people respond to such questions. In the context of high levels to trade union membership, the existence of arguably a better climate of industrial relations in Wales may also contribute to higher job satisfaction – particularly among union members who tend to express lower levels of satisfaction with work.

Table 1: Regional Variations in Job Satisfaction

	Skills and Employment Survey		WERS	British Household Panel Survey	
	14 Item Index (2006, 2011)	Overall Satisfaction (2001, 2006, 2011)	8 Item Index (2004, 2011)	4 Item Index (2001-8)	Overall Satisfaction (2001-8)
North	101	100	95	98	97
Midlands	102	105	102	102	101
South	97	97	102	99	101
Wales	114	109	108	101	106
Scotland	101	100	98	105	101
All (Index)	100 (1.131)	100 (1.281)	100 (0.522)	100 (1.279)	100 (1.359)