

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Subjective Wellbeing : Theoretical Explanations**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Various theories and models have been given to explain what influences Subjective Wellbeing (SWB). Some theories emphasize on goals, needs, some on personality traits, some on cognitive and motivational factors and some on the process. The investigator at the end of the chapter has put forth her own model, which explains the relationship between life events, psychosocial factors and subjective wellbeing.

#### **2.2 Telic theories**

Telic or endpoint theories of SWB maintain that happiness is gained when some state, such as a goal or a need, is reached. One theoretical postulate offered by Wilson (1967) is that the “satisfaction of needs causes happiness and conversely, the persistence of unfulfilled needs causes unhappiness”. Many philosophers were concerned with questions related to telic theories. For e g: they asked whether happiness is gained by satisfying one’s desires or by suppressing them. Hedonistic philosophers have recommended fulfillment of desires whereas ascetics have recommended the annihilation of desires. Perhaps, one of the most important questions is whether happiness comes from already having one’s desires fulfilled, from having recently achieved a desire, or from the process of moving towards desired objects.

Alternative telic theories derive from different origins of the striving. In need theories, there are certain inborn or learned needs that the person seeks to fulfill. The person may or may not be aware of these needs. Nevertheless, it is postulated that happiness will follow from their fulfillment. In contrast, goal theories are based on specific desires of which the person is aware. The person is consciously seeking certain goals and happiness results when they are reached (Michalos, 1985). Goals and needs are related in the sense that underlying needs may lead to specific goals. A person may also have certain values that lead to specific goals. Needs may be universal, such as those postulated by Maslow, or they may differ markedly from individual to individual such as those proposed by Murray. There is a widespread agreement that the fulfillment of needs, goal, and desires is somehow related to happiness.

- Need Hierarchy Theory

Maslow (1954) proposed a universal hierarchy of needs that emerges in the same order in all the persons. Individuals should experience SWB if they are fulfilling the needs at their particular levels, although it is also possible that happiness might be higher for those at higher levels of the need hierarchy. However, research findings on Maslow's theory are not very encouraging. Diener, Emmons and Larsen (1984) found some evidence for the idea that people experience happiness when their particular needs are fulfilled.

- Goal Setting Theory and Values

Another line of theorizing about SWB stressed the importance of goals and values. Some theorists (Chekola, 1975) argued that happiness depends on

the continuing fulfillment of one's life's plan, the total integrated set of a person's goals. Some goals may be in conflict with others. Thus, according to the life plan approach, happiness depends on two key related factors: harmonious integration of one's own goals and fulfillment of these goals.

Similar to the life plan approach, Palys and Little (1983) hypothesized that people have personal projects or concerns and that these projects can be integrated into a total project system. They measured these projects and found that dissatisfied people were committed to goals that held the prospect of long term reward, but that had little short term reinforcement or enjoyment. More satisfied individuals had projects that were more important at that time.

The idea was that people have different goals and desires, and therefore what makes them happy will differ. If people make progress toward their particular goals, and act in accordance with their values, they are likely to be happy, according to the goal theory. For example, Emmons (1986) found that people have more positive affect if they succeed at their particular goals, have greater negative affect if their goals are in conflict, and have greater life satisfaction if they possess important goals. Similarly, Oishi, Diener, Suh, and Lucas (1999) found that what made people happy depended on their values. For students who highly valued achievement, getting good grades was predictive of their satisfaction, whereas for those who valued conformity, family harmony was more important to their life satisfaction. Similarly, people with different personalities are most satisfied with their lives if they include activities that are concordant with their temperament. Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener (2000) found that sensation-seekers were more influenced by

hedonism. Their satisfaction was more dependent on the degree of physical pleasures they experienced than was the satisfaction of low sensation-seeking respondents. Also in support of the goal approach, Diener and Fujita (1995) found that the resources that are most related to a person's SWB are those resources that help with his or her particular goals. For example, intelligence might be related to happiness for someone aspiring to be a physician, but not for someone aspiring to be a laborer. Kasser and Ryan (1996), however, suggested that certain goals will be more beneficial to happiness than other desires, and therefore they contend that not all goals are equally helpful in obtaining happiness. For example, Diener (2000) found substantial evidence that an individual placing too much value on making money is toxic to happiness within the United States.

There are several shortcomings of this approach:

- Individuals may desire goals that bring short term happiness but have long term consequences that are deleterious to happiness because they interfere with other goals.
- People's goals and desires may be in conflict, thus it is impossible to satisfy them fully.
- People may not be able to achieve the goals because of poor conditions or skills or because the goals are very difficult.
- Needs and goals are sometimes described in a circular way.
- Also clear measures of needs and goals are required.

### **2.3 Adaptation Model**

Another important theoretical idea is Adaptation (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999,) -- the idea that over time people get habituated to both good and bad events so that these circumstances no longer influence SWB. Brickman and Campbell (1971) first proposed the idea of a hedonic treadmill - the proposition that people would never be able to remain happy over the long-run because they would always adapt to conditions, both good and bad and thereafter return to hedonic neutrality. In support of this idea, Brickman, Coates and Janoff-Bulman (1978) found that lottery winners were not significantly happier than the comparison group (and in fact were less pleased with small, everyday pleasures), and people with severe disabilities were not as unhappy as was expected. More compelling evidence for adaptation came from Silver (1982), who found that people who were seriously disabled in an accident were at first very upset and unhappy, but over a relatively short time became happier.

However, a number of modifications had to be made to the hedonic treadmill idea as new data were collected to test it. For example, based on the temperament data, it is clear that not all people return to the same baseline (hedonic neutrality in the original theory), and that in fact most people return to a slightly happy baseline (Diener and C. Diener, 1996).

Therefore, the idea of adaptation has been combined with temperament in the dynamic equilibrium model of Headey and Wearing (1989), in which it is predicted that life events will make people happy or unhappy, depending on whether the events are good or bad, but that over time

these individuals will return to a baseline that is determined by their temperaments. The dynamic equilibrium model has not been fully supported by data, in that people do not fully adapt to some circumstances such as unemployment and living in extremely poor conditions (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). Nevertheless, the dynamic equilibrium model appears to have a degree of validity: SWB is influenced by personality and people do to some degree adapt to both good and bad events over a period of time.

One of the main puzzles of well-being research is the relatively small and short-lived effect of changes in most life circumstances on reported life satisfaction. An extreme example, is that long-term paraplegics do not report themselves as very unhappy, Nor do lottery winners report themselves as particularly happy (Brickman, Coates and Janoff-Bulman, 1978). In a more recent study using longitudinal data, Oswald and Powdthavee (2005) found that average life satisfaction drops after the onset of a moderate disability, but fully recovers to the pre-disability level after two years. For those with severe disabilities, Oswald and Powdthavee (2005) found that adaptation takes place, but is incomplete. Interestingly, Smith, Langa, Kabeto and Ubel (2005) found that the onset of a new disability causes a greater drop in life satisfaction for those in the bottom half of the wealth distribution than for those in the top half, suggesting an important buffering effect of wealth, although low-wealth individuals still recovered some of their pre-disability well-being. Life events, such as marriage and bereavement, have substantial short-run effects on happiness and life satisfaction, but these effects are mainly temporary. Research by Clark, Diener, Georgellis and Lucas (2003), illustrates this point.

The average life satisfaction was studied each year for a sample of 235 women in Germany, indexed by the year in which they were married. Life satisfaction rises in the year prior to marriage and in the first year of marriage, but returns to the previous level after a short honeymoon period.

Not everyone accepts the above conclusion. Easterlin (2003), for example, has argued that people adapt to income, but not to marriage. The economic counterpart of the hedonic treadmill is that large increases in the standard of living have almost no detectable effects on life satisfaction or happiness. Easterlin (2003), for example, found that the average self-reported happiness level did not increase in Japan between 1958 and 1987, although real income increased fivefold. Results for China, based on a sample of 15,000 individuals interviewed by the Gallup Organization substantiate the above finding. China experienced remarkably fast economic growth from 1994 to 2005, with real income per capita increasing by a factor of 2.5. This growth had substantial consequences for material well-being: ownership of color television sets rose from 40 percent of households to 82 percent, and the households with telephone jumped from 10 percent to 63 percent. Yet, data indicate no increase in reported life satisfaction from 1994 to 2005; in fact, the percentage of people who say that they are dissatisfied has increased, and the percentage who say that they are satisfied has decreased.

Many of the findings on adaptation may be explained by the prominent role played by attention, or a cognitive focus on particular aspects of a situation. Attention plays a role both in the actual experience of life and in the exercise that people perform to answer questions about their global

satisfaction with their lives. In this view, an essential mechanism of adaptation to circumstances such as being a paraplegic or a lottery winner is that these circumstances occupy the individual's attention for a diminishing fraction of the time as they gradually lose their novelty. A duration-weighted measurement of affect will uncover that conditions such as paraplegia or marriage are not full-time states; they are experienced part-time. The answers that an individual gives to a global retrospective question are in part determined by the aspects of life that come to mind and attract that person's attention in that context.

A shift in attention is not the only possible explanation for adaptation, however substitution of activities, for example, may also play a role. For instance, a sudden drop in income may cause someone to shift from regularly playing golf at a country club to strolling in a public park, with little loss in experienced utility.

The adaptation theory, which has gained widespread acceptance in recent years, implies that individual and societal efforts to increase happiness are doomed to failure. The recent empirical work by Diener, Ed; Lucas, Richard E.; Scollon, Christie Napa; (2006) indicates five important revisions to the treadmill model which are as follows:

First, individuals' set points are not hedonically neutral.

Second, people have different set points, which are partly dependent on their temperaments.

Third, a single person may have multiple happiness set points: Different components of well-being such as pleasant emotions, unpleasant emotions, and life satisfaction can move in different directions.

Fourth and perhaps most important, well-being set points can change under some conditions.

Finally, individuals differ in their adaptation to events, with some individuals changing their set point and others not changing in reaction to some external event. These revisions offer hope for psychologists and policy-makers who aim to decrease human misery and increase happiness.

## **2.4 Judgment Theories**

There are a number of theories which postulate that happiness results from a comparison between some standard and actual. If the actual conditions exceed the standard, happiness will result. In case of satisfaction, such comparisons may be conscious. However, in the case of affect, comparison with a standard may occur in a non conscious way.

One conceptual model is based on social comparison, wherein it propagates that people will be happy if they are better off than those around them, and will be unhappy if they are worse off than people in their comparison group (Carp & Carp, 1982; Emmons et al., 1983; Michalos, 1985). However, Dermer, Cohen, Jacobsen & Anderson (1979) demonstrated that even people who are remote in time can be used as a standard of comparison. Wills (1981) showed that downward comparisons with less fortunate persons can increase SWB.

One shortcoming of social comparison theory is that they do not make clear when a person will need to make comparisons with others. As Freedman (1978) pointed out, social comparison may not be important to happiness because people have an internal standard based upon their own values or needs. However, Emmons et al. (1983) found that social comparison was the strongest predictor of satisfaction in most domains. Diener and Fujita (1997) concluded that this model is oversimplified, and that people sometimes pay little attention to social comparisons.

Further, sometimes people draw courage from upward comparisons and feel empathy and sadness when they make downward comparisons. Thus, being around others who are better or worse off does not necessarily make us feel bad or good, respectively. Furthermore, other standards such as goals may be more salient to people much of the time, and the effects of social comparison might be most powerful when they influence a person's goals.

Another model is the range- frequency theory (Parducci, 1968), in which a person's past life is used to set the standard. If the individual's current life is better-off than his past life, then the person will be happy. So according to this theory the comparison is with self. One popular form of judgment theory is the aspiration level, which maintains that happiness will depend on the discrepancy in a person's life between actual conditions and aspirations (Carp & Carp, 1982).

One question related to judgment theories is, when each type of comparisons takes precedence. For example, when will social comparison be most important and when will one's own prior conditions be more important?

Also whether comparisons occur only within domains (marriage) or generalize across domains. These are the questions that need to be addressed.

## **2.5 Evaluation Theory**

In Evaluation Theory (2000), Diener and Lucas proposed that a person's SWB can be influenced by several judgment standards. Which standards are most relevant will depend in part on a person's temperament, culture, and values. Highly relevant standards are likely to be chronically salient to the person, and therefore to influence his or her SWB much of the time. However, situational variables can intervene to make a particular standard, for instance social comparison, salient at a particular moment. Thus, even standards that are not normally salient to the person can influence his or her judgments of happiness at particular moments in time, depending on whether the situation draws attention to them. For instance, we may not normally think of our physical mobility when we judge our life satisfaction. But Schwarz and Strack (1999) found that when a person in a wheelchair was in view during the satisfaction survey, people were more satisfied with their lives than when a person with physical disability was not present. Thus, the situation of seeing a person with a disability made a health well-being factor salient that often might not be salient in the young subjects' judgment of their satisfaction. Other standards may be more chronically salient and not depend so heavily on the situation. For instance, according to Diener and Lucas, goals are usually related to people's SWB because goals represent a standard that is usually very salient to the person (because it is what he or she is working and

planning to obtain) and therefore is likely to be a standard that is used much of the time.

## **2.6 Activity Theories**

Activity theories maintain that happiness is a by-product of human activity. Aristotle was a major proponent of one of the earliest and most important activity theories. He maintained that happiness comes about through virtuous activity, that is, activity that is performed well. One of the main themes in activity theories is that self awareness will decrease happiness, and there is evidence for this (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982). This is consonant with the popular idea that concentrating on gaining happiness may be self-defeating. According to this approach, one should concentrate on important activities and goals, and happiness will come as unintended by-product.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of flow emphasizes engagement in interesting activities as a key to a happy life. In this theory the positive interest value of an activity depends on a balance between challenge and skill. Whether an activity is congruent with the person's values, is also a necessary element for obtaining long-lasting pleasure from the activity. According to Csikszentmihalyi's model, a person should be happy if he or she is usually involved in interesting activities that present challenges which the person can meet. People's lives will be happier to the extent that they are involved in interesting and involving activities. According to this theory, happiness arises from behaviour rather than from achieving end points.

## **2.7 Top- Down vs Bottom-Up Theory**

Two main theoretical approaches have been put forward to explain individual differences in life satisfaction: top-down (i.e., personological) and bottom-up (i.e., situational). The bottom –up theories state that happiness is simply the sum of many small pleasures. According to this view, when a person judges whether his life is happy, some mental calculation is used to sum the momentary pleasures and pains.

In contrast, the top-down approach assumes that there is a global propensity to experience things in a positive way, and this propensity influences the momentary interactions an individual has with the world. In the top-down approach to happiness, global features of personality are thought to influence the way a person reacts to the events. Philosophers like Aristotle and Democritus have given importance to attitudes, thus suggesting a top- down approach. Andrews and Withey (1974) reported data that supports a top-down approach. In predicting life satisfaction, they found that the type of domain satisfactions that were used as predictors did not matter. In the bottom-up approach, a person should develop a sanguine disposition as positive experiences accumulate in the person's life. These findings suggest that satisfaction with the domains may result from rather than cause global life satisfaction.

The top-down and bottom-up theories are extremely useful in generating research ideas. Heller et al (2004) examined the relative merit of these two approaches and the psychological processes underlying top-down models. Consistent with a top-down approach, meta-analytic findings indicate

that Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness are related to both various domain satisfactions and life satisfaction; however, consistent with a bottom-up approach, domain satisfactions are strongly linked to life satisfaction but only weakly linked to each other. Path analyses based on meta-analytic estimates did not support a simple "direct-effects" top-down model but supported both (a) a temperament-based top-down model and (b) an integrative model that incorporates the direct influence of domain satisfactions on life satisfaction.



## 2.8 Associationistic Theories

Associationistic theories seek to explain why some individuals have a temperament that is predisposed to happiness. Many of these models are based on memory, conditioning, or cognitive principles.

- Cognitive approaches-One cognitive approach rests on the attributions people make about the events happening to them (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). When people attribute the good events to internal-stable factors, it can result in happiness. Another possibility is that events that are perceived as good leads to happiness, regardless of attributions.

One general cognitive approach to happiness has to do with associative networks in memory. Bower (1981) has shown that people will recall memories that are affectively congruent with their current emotional state. Research on memory networks suggest that persons could develop a rich network of positive associations and a more limited and isolated networks of

negative ones. Thus, a person with such a predominantly positive network would be predisposed to react to more events in a positive way.

- Conditioning theory-Research has shown that affective conditioning can be extremely resistant to extinction. Thus, happy persons might be those who have had positive affective experiences associated with a large number of frequent everyday stimuli. Zajonc's (1980) contention that affective reactions occur independently of and more rapidly than cognitive evaluation of stimuli is compatible with a conditioning approach to happiness. Certain individuals may have built up a strong network of positive associations and learnt to react habitually in positive ways. A person with a Pollyanna approach to life is perhaps the prototype of a person who has formed positive associations to the world.

Conditioning and memory networks may function without explicit conscious intervention. However, there is evidence that a person can give conscious direction to the affective associations in his or her life. A conscious attempt to reduce negative thoughts can increase happiness (Fordyce, 1977) and reciting positive statements in the morning leads to a happier day (Kammann,1982). Thus, explicit conscious attempts to avoid unhappy thoughts and to think of happy ones may increase happiness.

On the similar lines, Construal theory of happiness was proposed by Lyubomirsky, Sonja (2001). The researcher proposed that multiple cognitive and motivational processes moderate the impact of the objective environment on well-being. Thus, to understand why some people are happier than others, one must understand the cognitive and motivational processes that serve to

maintain, and even enhance, enduring happiness and transient mood. This theory emphasizes on hedonically relevant psychological processes, such as social comparison, dissonance reduction, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and person perception, in chronically happy and unhappy individuals. In support of a construal framework, self-rated happy and unhappy people have been shown to differ systematically in the particular cognitive and motivational strategies they use.

## **2.9 Broaden and Build Model of Affect**

Barbara Fredrickson (2001) has developed a new theoretical framework, the 'broaden and build model' that may provide some explanations for the robust social and cognitive effects of positive emotional experiences. The broaden and build model of positive emotions explains how positive affective experiences not only signal personal well-being but also contribute to personal growth and development. She found that responses to positive emotions have not been studied extensively and that when researched they were examined in vague and underspecified manner. Furthermore, action tendencies generally have been associated with physical reactions to negative emotions, whereas human reactions to positive emotions often are more cognitive than physical. She proposes discarding the specific action tendency concept (which suggests a restricted range of possible behavioural options in favor of newer, momentary thought action repertoires. This broadening of momentary thought-action repertoires offers opportunities for personal growth and transformation by creating positive or adaptive spirals of emotions,

cognition and action. In testing her model of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) demonstrated that the experience of joy expands the realm of what a person feels like doing at the time; this is referred to as the broadening of an individual's momentary thought action-repertoire. It also appears that through the effects of broadening processes, positive emotions can also help in build resources contributing to personal transformation and development. Empirical evidence from clinical and laboratory studies offer substantial support for the broaden and build model of positive emotions (Fredrickson,2002).Laboratory studies of induced positive mood show that such induced mood states lead to more creative and flexible thoughts and behaviour.

#### **2.10 Lyubomirsky ,Sheldon and Schkade(2005) model for happiness**

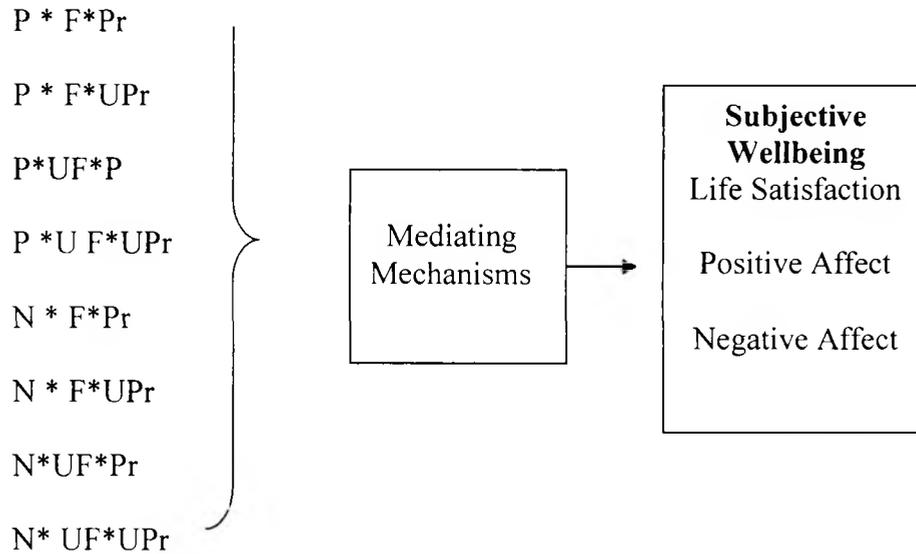
Lyubomirsky ,Sheldon and Schkade(2005) propose that “(a) person's chronic level of happiness is governed by three major factors : a genetically determined set point for happiness, happiness- relevant circumstantial factors and happiness relevant activities and practices”. Based on the past research they propose that genetics accounts for 50% of population variance for happiness, both good and bad life circumstances 10% whereas attempts at healthy living and positive change account for 40% population variance. So this model of happiness acknowledges the components of happiness that can't be changed, but also leaves room for volition and self generated goals that can lead to attainment of pleasure, meaning and good health.

## **2.11 Proposed Integrative-Predictive Model of Subjective Wellbeing**

The investigator proposes an integrative-predictive model which will help in understanding the importance of various psychosocial variables contributing to Subjective Wellbeing. The model is not deterministic or a pessimistic one, but rather optimistic.

In this world, human beings are faced by a number of events or situations. According to the investigator there are three important aspects of an event or a situation. A situation or an event can be positive or negative. Positivity (P) or negativity (N) of the events is determined by the culture or society. However, a positive event may not be positive or favourable from that individual's perspective, for example, birth of a child in a typical Indian culture is considered very positive, but for an individual X it could be unfavourable as it would mean added responsibilities or barrier in career growth etc. Like wise, going in jail could be seen as extremely negative in a particular culture but for an individual, who lives in utter poverty, it could mean as a way of ensuring basic needs. Another way of distinguishing an event is by favorableness (F) and unfavourableness (UF). This dimension is totally subjective: it is how an individual perceives an event. A third way of defining an event is on the basis of predictability (Pr) and unpredictability (UPr), that is whether the event can be predicted or it was an occurrence of unpredictable event. For example the birth of a child is predictable, but sudden death in an accident is unpredictable. These are the three dimensions to an event or a situation.

**Life Event (combinations)**



**Figure 2.1 Life events, Mediating mechanisms and Subjective wellbeing**

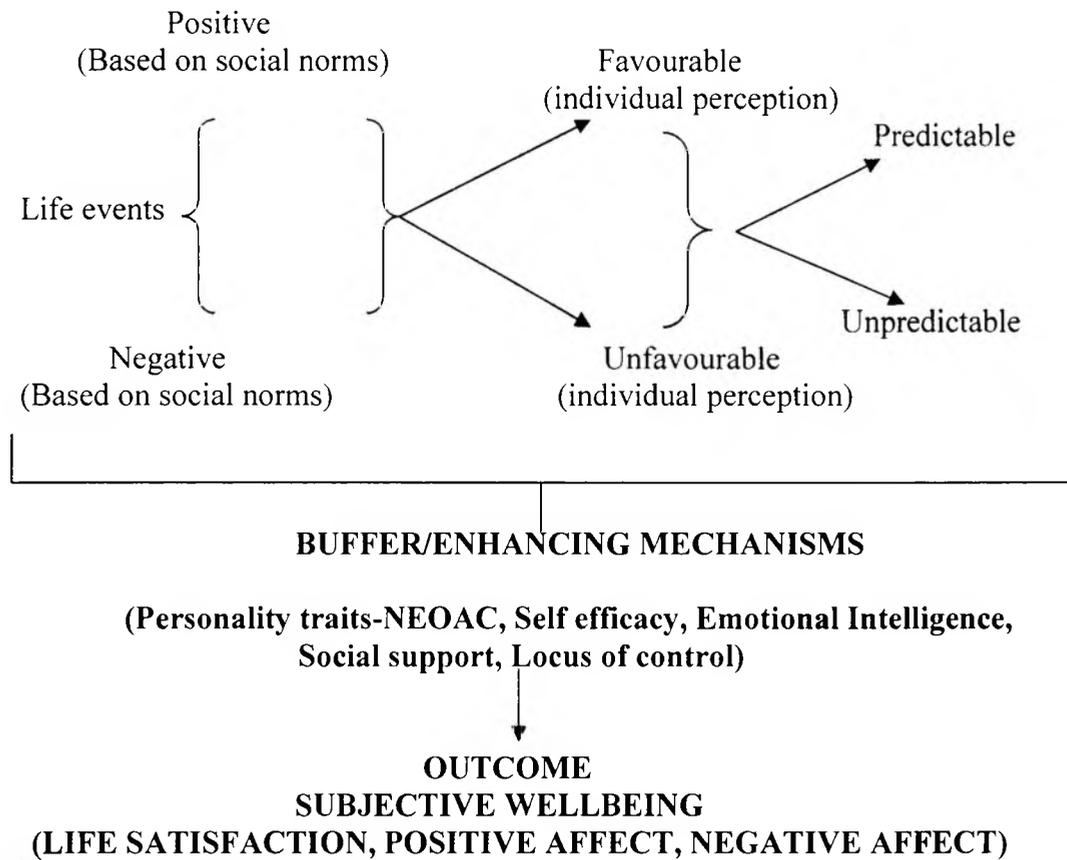
The model hypothesizes that Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) is determined by the interaction of these three aspects of the event and the mediating mechanisms. Personality traits like neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and other variables like emotional intelligence, self efficacy, social support and locus of control are assumed to act as mediators (or sometimes moderators) between the events and the outcomes like life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect. These factors will act as buffers when conditions/ situations are worse and the same would act as enhancers when conditions/situations are good. The model is based on important assumptions like:

1. Changes in personality are possible: A person who is essentially high on neuroticism can learn to become emotionally stable.

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- Life satisfaction set points can change depending on the coping mechanisms which in turn are determined by psychosocial variables.

The model is diagrammatically explained as follows:



**Figure 2.2 Integrative-Predictive Model of Subjective Wellbeing**

The model proposes that subjective wellbeing is largely determined by the buffer or enhancing mechanisms, which are nothing but various psychosocial variables like the personality traits, emotional intelligence, social support, locus of control, self efficacy that help in coping with the demands of life. When a person is faced with positive or negative, unfavourable and predictable event, psychosocial variables would act as buffer mechanisms

resulting in lower levels of negative affect and maintaining the life satisfaction set point. The same would be the case when a person faces positive or negative, unfavourable and unpredictable event. When faced with favourable, predictable/ unpredictable events, which could be either positive or negative, the above mentioned factors would act as enhancers, resulting in greater SWB and overall functioning. The model emphasizes the importance of individual's perception of the event (favourable/unfavourable) and role of psychosocial variables as mediators influencing SWB.

The model is a hypothetical one which requires more refinement and also testing for validity. The study, therefore, is undertaken by the investigator to identify the psychosocial variables predominantly correlating with Subjective Wellbeing and contributing to enhancing it. The findings have many implications. The knowledge of important correlates of subjective wellbeing could be helpful for mental health professionals working in this field and also to people at large. A conscious effort can be made by parents to develop such kind of traits, characteristics and related behaviours from early childhood, long before conditioning takes place and personality traits and the related behaviours become less prone to change.

The formation of these traits and other characteristics would result in rich Psychological Capital (PsyCap) defined as an individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by:1) having confidence(self efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks;2)making a positive attribution(optimism) about succeeding now and in future;3) persevering towards goals and when

necessary redirecting goals in order to succeed and 4) when beset by problems and diversity ,sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success(Luthans, Youssef, Avolio,2007). This rich Psych Cap would help in achieving an enriched and a satisfying life, leading to greater Subjective Wellbeing.

The above theoretical frameworks serve as a basis of discussing and explaining the results of the study.