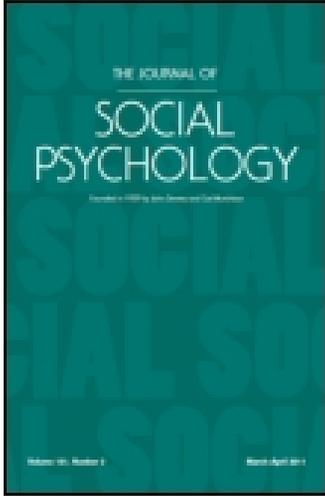


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The Relationship Between Subjective Well-Being and Psychosocial Variables in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT. Psychosocial factors that may influence subjective well-being were examined. A random sample of 581 Chinese adults living in a metropolitan Taiwanese city completed questionnaires concerning demographic variables, personality traits, life stress, and social support. The results of multivariate analyses indicated that (a) extraversion and social support were related to better mental health, whereas neuroticism and stress were related to poorer mental health; (b) older age, better education, and social support were related to higher life satisfaction, whereas neuroticism and stress were related to lower life satisfaction; and (c) older age, extraversion, and social support were related to higher happiness, whereas neuroticism was related to lower happiness.

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING (SWB) HAS BEEN defined in ethical, theological, political, economic, and psychological terms (Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1984). Thus, SWB has many labels, including happiness, objective well-being, subjective well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction.

An important distinction in SWB research between happiness and life satisfaction is that happiness is generally viewed as an emotion or feeling state, whereas life satisfaction refers to a more cognitive or judgmental process. Many researchers study one aspect of SWB and define the overall construct accordingly. For example, Veenhoven's (1991) definition of life satisfaction, "the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of life-as-a-whole favourably," was extended to represent SWB. In other studies (e.g., Bradburn, 1969) SWB has been viewed as a preponderance of positive affect over negative affect. One exception was Lewinsohn, Redner, and Seeley's (1991) study on life satisfaction

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and depression, although using depressive mood to represent the opposite of happiness is conceptually debatable.

In studies on stress and adjustment, mental health is often a potential outcome variable. If mental health is defined in terms of well-being, then research on stress should offer insights into SWB (for a review, see Cohen, 1988). It seems logical that, just as virtue comprises many types of human goodness that do not necessarily converge (Veenhoven, 1991), the SWB model should include various aspects of human functioning.

Therefore, in the present study I attempted to incorporate affective, cognitive, and (mental) health aspects into the SWB construct and to further explore their psychosocial correlates, in the context of a Chinese culture.

Three types of models have been proposed to explain the correlates of SWB: personality models, models that assess the effects of life events, and adaptation-al models. Because the last type of model attempts mainly to account for changes in SWB, and because I intended the present study to be representational, I focused on several of the psychosocial correlates of SWB that are proposed in the first two models.

Costa and McCrae (1980, 1984), who believe that SWB depends primarily on personality, demonstrated that extraversion and neuroticism accounted for significant variance in SWB and predicted SWB 20 years later. Other researchers have also found that extraversion is a strong correlate of SWB and that its effect is enhanced by social participation, social skills, and cooperation (Argyle & Lu, 1990a; 1990b; Lu & Argyle, 1991). Extraverts were found to be happier than neurotics in social and in nonsocial situations (Diener et al., 1992). However, a major limitation of this model is that a combination of personality measures accounts for only a moderate amount of the variance in SWB (Diener, 1984; Emmons & Diener, 1985). Other variables, including demographic variables, social networks, and life events, must also be included if a model of SWB is to be adequate.

Much research has been based on the assumption that experience and major life events are important contributors to SWB. Although the question of whether life events affect SWB is still unresolved, some researchers have found evidence that they do (Abbey & Andrews, 1985; Reich & Zautra, 1983). However, in such studies the main focus has been on adverse life events and their alleged negative effects on mental health and SWB. Researchers have since recognized that life events are not entirely exogenous and that their impact on the SWB must be considered in combination with the effects of personality characteristics and other consistent variables, such as demographic background.

My main objective in the present study was to assess the independent contributions of demographic variables, personality characteristics, major life events, and social support to the affective, cognitive, and health aspects of SWB. Because almost all the existing research on SWB has been conducted in the West, I examined the general construct of SWB in the context of a Chinese culture.

Method

Participants

Six hundred adults over age 20 living in Kaoshiung City, Taiwan, were recruited for this study, using a multistage systematic probability random sampling procedure. According to published data from the national census, the final sample of 581 participants was fairly representative of the city's population in terms of major demographic variables, such as gender, age distribution, level of education, and family income. All the participants were interviewed at their homes during July through September 1993.

Measures

The data were collected from the following five questionnaires:

Demographic information. The participants recorded their age, gender, and level of education.

Personality traits. Extraversion and neuroticism were measured with the Extraversion and Neuroticism scales in the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975).

Life stress. The 41-item Life Events Scale is based on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and also contains some culture-specific events, such as military service. The participants were instructed to indicate which events they had experienced in the past year and to rate the perceived severity of each of these events on a 3-point scale. The stress score was the total severity score.

Social support. Actual support received was measured with Socially Supportive Behaviours (Barrera, 1981), a scale that includes items assessing tangible, emotional, and informational support.

SWB. Happiness (the affective aspect of SWB) was measured with the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI; Argyle & Lu, 1990a), a 29-item happiness scale that assesses positive affect, negative affect, and overall emotional well-being.

I measured life satisfaction (the cognitive aspect of SWB) by asking the participants to rate their overall life satisfaction on an 11-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction.

Mental health (the health aspect of SWB) was measured with a 12-item version of the Chinese Health Questionnaire (CHQ; Cheng & Williams, 1986) designed specifically for use in the Taiwanese community. Higher scores indicate more psychological symptoms (poorer mental health).

Results

I conducted descriptive analyses to examine the demographic characteristics of the sample. There were 327 men (56.4%) and 253 women (43.6%); 26.4% of the participants ranged from 20–29 years old, 23.6% ranged from 30–39 years old, 19.9% ranged from 40–49 years old, 10.3% ranged from 50–59 years old, and 19.8% were older than 60. More than two thirds of the participants were married. Most of the participants (76.4%) had completed 12 years of formal education.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed for all the variables, with women coded as 1 and men as 2. For simplicity's sake, only the correlations that involved the three aspects of SWB will be reported in this article. Women reported more psychological symptoms than men did ($r = -.10, p < .05$), and better educated people were more satisfied with life ($r = .20, p < .001$) and happier ($r = .14, p < .01$). Extraverts were more satisfied with life ($r = .15, p < .001$), happier ($r = .38, p < .001$), and reported fewer psychological symptoms ($r = -.15, p < .001$), whereas neurotics exhibited the opposite pattern ($r = -.25, p < .001$; $r = -.22, p < .001$; and $r = .34, p < .001$, respectively). Higher life stress correlated with lower satisfaction ($r = -.19, p < .001$), lower happiness ($r = -.09, p < .05$), and more psychological symptoms ($r = .24, p < .001$), and more social support correlated with higher satisfaction ($r = .22, p < .001$), and higher happiness ($r = .32, p < .001$).

After the correlation analysis I conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses to predict the three aspects of SWB individually. In all three equations the variables were entered in the following order: (a) demographic variables, including gender, age, and education; (b) personality traits, including extraversion and neuroticism; (c) life events; and (d) social support.

For mental health, extraversion and social support were associated with fewer psychological symptoms ($\beta = .11, p < .05$, $\beta = -.10, p < .05$, respectively), whereas neuroticism and stress were associated with more psychological symptoms ($\beta = .31, p < .001$; $\beta = .17, p < .001$, respectively). In the final regression model, 18% of the variance was accounted for, $F = 15.97, p < .001$.

For life satisfaction, older age ($\beta = .14, p < .01$), better education ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), and social support ($\beta = .20, p < .001$) were related to higher life satisfaction, and neuroticism and stress were related to lower life satisfaction ($\beta = -.24, p < .001$; $\beta = -.13, p < .01$, respectively). In the final regression model, 17% of the variance was accounted for, $F(7, 561) = 15.16, p < .001$.

For happiness, older age ($\beta = .10, p < .05$), extraversion ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), and social support ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) were related to higher happiness, whereas neuroticism was related to lower happiness ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$). In the final regression model, 24% of the variance was accounted for, $F(7, 588) = 22.71, p < .001$.

Discussion

Demographic Variables

The results of the present study indicate that the older participants were more satisfied and happier than the younger participants. Findings regarding an age-related difference in SWB have been inconsistent. In early studies (e.g., Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965), young people were found to be happier than old people, but in more recent studies (e.g., Cameron, 1975), virtually no age-related differences in SWB were found. In still other studies (e.g., Argyle, 1987), the younger participants were happier than the older participants.

Certain factors must be taken into consideration in the interpretation of these differences. First, the participants in many existing studies have had narrow age ranges, whereas the participants in the present study had a wide age range (20 to 91 years old), making the age effect less ambiguous. Second, most studies (e.g., Cameron, 1975), have not controlled for the effects of other factors that tend to covary with age. In the present study, education (which covaries strongly with age in Taiwanese society) was examined separately in regression analyses and thus did not obscure the independent effect of age on satisfaction or on happiness. Education also contributed to satisfaction, having a positive impact on the cognitive aspect of SWB. Third, these differences in findings may reflect differences in the constructs that were measured. Most previous research has been focused either on satisfaction or on positive affect and has indicated that, in contrast to satisfaction, which increases gradually with age, positive and negative affect are experienced more intensely by the young (Diener, 1984). However, in the present study, both satisfaction and scores on a broader measure of happiness increased with age, indicating that older people were not only more satisfied with life but also happier overall.

Finally, the age-related difference in SWB may have been cultural. Traditional Chinese society is based on a clearly defined hierarchy; seniority, commanding almost unconditional respect and obedience, represents power, wealth, and achievement. Modernization in Taiwan has not weakened this traditional societal structure and has displaced little of the authority and respect that are accorded to age. Thus, older people in Taiwan enjoy psychosocial advantages that enhance their SWB.

Personality Characteristics

The finding that neuroticism was related to poor mental health, lower satisfaction, and lower happiness supports previous findings (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Lu, 1994) concerning the negative effects of neuroticism on mental health and positive affect and extends them to all aspects of SWB. Extraversion was found to be related to better mental health and higher happiness, consistent with previ-

ous findings (Argyle & Lu, 1990b; Lu, 1994), but not to higher satisfaction. Thus, the extraverts were no more satisfied with life as a whole than the introverts were. Overall, the neurotic introverts had the worst SWB.

Stress

Stress, measured in the present study by the perceived severity of major life events, was related to poor mental health and to low life satisfaction, consistent with previous findings (Lewinsohn et al., 1991, Lu, 1994). Stress was not related to happiness, however. One possible explanation for this finding is that the present measure of happiness was quite broad, encompassing much more than just the documentation of positive and negative affect, which would be expected to fluctuate with life stress.

Social Support

Social support demonstrated protective effects for all three aspects of SWB. This result extended previous findings, which have mainly been related to mental health and life satisfaction (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lewinsohn et al., 1991).

In summary, each aspect of the SWB construct— affective, cognitive, and health—was found to be related to some common and some specific psychosocial processes. The results of the present study also indicate that a similar composite of psychosocial predictors may explain considerable variance in SWB for Taiwanese Chinese and for their Western counterparts. Although the relatively small but statistically significant relationships that were found in the present study must be interpreted cautiously, the fact that a large community sample was used means the present results may well be generalizable.

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