
Life Satisfaction

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Overview

Adolescent life satisfaction is a key indicator of mental health and is positively related to a broad spectrum of positive personal, psychological, behavioral, social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal outcomes (see Proctor et al. 2008 for a review). Historically, adolescent life satisfaction has been overlooked and understudied along with various other positive indicators of optimal functioning among youth. However, with the advent of positive psychology, there has been a significant resurgence of the study of optimal functioning and well-being during the past decade. Traditionally, positive psychological function was informed from the absence of psychopathological symptoms. However, recent evidence suggests that high psychopathology can be accompanied by high subjective well-being (SWB), just as low psychopathology can be accompanied by low SWB (Greenspoon and Saklofske 2001). That is, an individual may display symptoms of

psychopathology and still be highly satisfied with life or not display psychopathological symptoms and yet be very dissatisfied with life – suggesting that the absence of psychopathological symptoms is not necessarily an indication of positive mental health (Proctor and Linley 2014). Therefore, SWB should not simply be placed at the opposite end from psychopathology on the mental health/disease continuum (Huebner 1991a). Past investigations into subjective psychological well-being among adolescents have relied heavily on objective indicators such as family income level, divorce rate, housing quality, access to recreational facilities and medical health services, and school expenditure. However, such objective indicators fail to tap into individual (i.e., subjective) perceptions of quality of life (cf. Proctor 2014). Life satisfaction, on the other hand, is an individual cognitive evaluation of life as a whole (Shin and Johnson 1978) and one of the most well-established indicators of well-being and positive functioning among young people (Suldo et al. 2006).

Subjective well-being is considered a broad area of scientific interest, which includes individual emotional responses (i.e., positive [e.g., joy, optimism] and negative [e.g., sadness, anger] affect), domain satisfactions (e.g., work satisfaction), and global judgments of life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1999). Unlike emotional responses, which are invariably short lived and fluctuating (Gilman et al. 2000), domain satisfactions and overall appraisals of life satisfaction are

considered to be the more stable components of SWB and therefore the indicators most amenable for inclusion in examinations of adolescents' perceptions of their life circumstances (Eid and Diener 2004; Huebner 2006). Measures of life satisfaction are created on the basis of unidimensional (i.e., global and general life satisfaction) and multidimensional frameworks (Huebner 2004). In general, both unidimensional and multidimensional measures of life satisfaction are self-report. Unidimensional measures provide an overall total score as an indication of life satisfaction, whereas multidimensional measures provide a profile of life satisfaction across various domains (see Proctor et al. 2009 for a review). For global unidimensional measures, the total score is derived from context-free items that allow respondents to use their own criteria in weighting the various aspects of their lives (Pavot and Diener 1993). Examples of global unidimensional measures include the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner 1991b) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985). For general unidimensional measures, the total score is the sum of life satisfaction reports across domains considered fundamental to the contribution of overall life satisfaction (Gilman and Huebner 2000). Examples of general unidimensional measures include the Perceived Life Satisfaction Scale (Adelman et al. 1989) and the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Seligson et al. 2003). For multidimensional measures, total scores are calculated for each domain (Huebner 2004). Examples of multidimensional measures include the Extended Satisfaction with Life Scale (Alfonso et al. 1996) and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner 1994).

Adolescent Life Satisfaction Research

Research into the correlates and consequences of life satisfaction among adults has been studied extensively. Comparatively, research among adolescents has only begun to receive attention more recently. Indeed, over the course of the last decade, research examining the correlates

(e.g., demographic, personal, and environmental factors) of adolescent life satisfaction has steadily expanded such that current research in this area seeks to understand the specific mechanisms that link life satisfaction to its determinants and consequences (Huebner et al. 2004). For example, Ash and Huebner (2001) demonstrated that adolescent life satisfaction was mediated by locus of control (LOC) orientation (i.e., frequent negative life events were related to decreased perceptions of control, which was related to lower life satisfaction). Similarly, Fogle et al. (2002) demonstrated that social self-efficacy mediates the relationship between extraversion and life satisfaction. That is, although extraversion itself lacked a strong direct influence on life satisfaction, positive perceptions of social capabilities (i.e., social self-efficacy) served as the mechanism through which extraversion effected life satisfaction (Fogle et al. 2002). Research has also demonstrated that life satisfaction is not only an outcome of various psychosocial relationships but also acts to mediate and moderate the relationship between the environment and behavior. For example, Suldo and Huebner (2004b) demonstrated that life satisfaction mediates the relationship between the social support-involvement dimension of authoritative parenting and adolescent problem behavior and partially mediates the relationship between the other two parenting dimensions (i.e., strictness-supervision and psychological autonomy granting) and problem behavior. Further, support has been provided for the potential mediating role of life satisfaction between stressful life events and internalizing behavior (see McKnight et al. 2002). In addition, there is recent evidence to suggest that increased life satisfaction buffers against the negative effects of stress and the development of psychological disorders. For example, adolescents with positive life satisfaction are less likely to develop later externalizing behaviors as a result of stressful life events than adolescents with low life satisfaction, suggesting that life satisfaction acts as a moderator for (i.e., buffer against) externalizing behavior (Suldo and Huebner 2004a).

Demographic Factors and Life Satisfaction Levels

Research has consistently shown that the relationship between demographics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status [SES]) and life satisfaction is weak and that these variables contribute only modestly to the prediction of adolescent life satisfaction. However, noted differences in the relationships between demographic variables and adolescent life satisfaction have been made. For example, Ash and Huebner (2001) found that SES was significantly related to life satisfaction reports of lower SES students (i.e., lower SES students reported lower life satisfaction than higher SES students), whereas other studies have only found modest (e.g., Dew and Huebner 1994) relationships between the two. Similarly, with regard to ethnicity, some studies have found that African-American students report lower levels of satisfaction in specific domains, such as friends and living environment, than Caucasian students (e.g., Huebner et al. 2000a), whereas others have found no differences (e.g., Adelman et al. 1989). Indeed, a study of 5,545 American students' perceptions of their global and domain-specific life satisfaction found that global life satisfaction did not differ for adolescents as a function of gender, grade, or ethnicity but that there were modest relationships between demographics and several of the domains sampled (Huebner et al. 2000a).

Similar to cross-national data that has demonstrated a positive level of happiness among adults throughout the world, most adolescents report their life satisfaction to be in the positive range. For example, Huebner et al. (2000a) found that 73% of 5,545 high school students in grades 9–12 reported life satisfaction ratings in the “mostly satisfied” to “delighted” range. Similar findings of an overall positive level of life satisfaction among adolescents have been reported across various international studies (Huebner et al. 2000a, b; Kuntsche and Gmel 2004; Leung and Zhang 2000; Neto 2001; Park and Huebner 2005), as well as among studies involving special groups, such as those with mental disabilities and learning difficulties (Brantley et al. 2002; McCullough and Huebner 2003). However, it is noteworthy that

research findings also demonstrate that global life satisfaction tends to decline slightly with the onset and progression of adolescence (i.e., advancement in age) and that these findings are similarly supported by international research, including those from America (Suldo and Huebner 2004b), Israel (Ullman and Tatar 2001), South Korea (Park 2005), and China (Chang et al. 2003).

Intrapersonal Factors

Unlike the modest impact of demographic variables on the components of SWB (e.g., life satisfaction), personality and temperament variables have been demonstrated to account for most of the variance in SWB (Diener 1996). For example, McKnight et al. (2002) found that temperament variables accounted for approximately 16% of the variance in prediction of life satisfaction ratings among adolescents. Additional research has linked increased life satisfaction during adolescence with high levels of extraversion, social self-efficacy (Fogle et al. 2002), social interest and participation in structured extracurricular activities (Gilman 2001), intrinsic values (Casas et al. 2004), self-esteem (Dew and Huebner 1994), perfectionism (Gilman and Ashby 2003), internal LOC (Ash and Huebner 2001), hope (Gilman et al. 2006), and an adaptive attributional style (Rigby and Huebner 2005). Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that adolescent life satisfaction is positively associated with individual strengths of character (i.e., virtues) (Gillham et al. 2011) and participation curriculum-based strength initiatives (e.g., Proctor et al. 2011). In particular, Park and Peterson (2006) found the personal strengths of hope, love, gratitude, and zest to be linked to increased life satisfaction among adolescents. Similarly, Shogren et al. (2006) found that both hope and optimism predicted life satisfaction in adolescents with and without cognitive disabilities. Further, related research has shown that participating in strength-based exercises, such as counting blessings is associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction and decreased negative affect (Froh et al. 2008). In contrast, life satisfaction among adolescents is

inversely related to psychopathological conditions, such as depression (Adelman et al. 1989), anxiety, and neuroticism (Heaven 1989). Decreased life satisfaction during adolescence has also been linked with suicide behavior, such as serious suicide consideration, planning for suicide, attempted suicide, and suicide attempt requiring medical treatment (Valois et al. 2004a), loneliness (Moore and Schultz 1983), emotional disturbance (Huebner and Alderman 1993), poor self-concept (Dew and Huebner 1994), and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Suldo and Huebner 2004b).

Physical and Health-Related Factors

Research aimed at examining adolescent mental health has revealed life satisfaction to be negatively associated with various health-risk behaviors. For instance, studies have linked low life satisfaction with abuse of various substances including cigarettes, cocaine, marijuana, steroids, and alcohol (Zullig et al. 2001; Valois et al. 2010). Similarly, dissatisfaction with life has also been linked to violent and aggressive behaviors including physical fighting, carrying a gun, carrying a weapon, riding in a car with an impaired driver, bullying, dating violence, and forced sex victimization/perpetration (Callahan et al. 2003; Valois et al. 2001). Conversely, research has revealed prosocial experiences among adolescents to be associated with increased life satisfaction and positive affect over and above the influence of overt and relational peer victimization – suggesting that prosocial peer interactions act as a protective factor (Martin and Huebner 2007). Adolescent life satisfaction is also negatively related to eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa (Halvorsen and Heyerdahl 2006), poor eating habits, and obesity. For example, Valois et al. (2003) found life satisfaction to be negatively related to poor perceptions of body weight, trying to lose weight, and dieting, vomiting, using laxatives, and taking diet pills to lose weight among American adolescents. Similarly, Saluoumi and Plourde (2010) found that Canadian adolescents dissatisfied with their body, afraid of becoming overweight, and engaged in weight control behaviors, such as smoking and avoiding food, had

reduced life satisfaction. Further studies have shown eating disorders to be related to numerous negative psychological, personality, and behavioral factors, such as neuroticism, perfectionism, negative self-evaluation, depression, and low self-esteem (Halvorsen and Heyerdahl 2006; Lombardi et al. 1998). Similarly, negative associations have been demonstrated between life satisfaction and poor self-rated health, poor physical health, poor mental health, and activity limitation among adolescents (Zullig et al. 2005). Conversely, however, life satisfaction has a positive relationship with a good diet (Piko 2006), strenuous physical exercise, and various physical exercise behaviors (Valois et al. 2004b; Vilhjalmsson and Thorlindsson 1992). Indeed, research findings suggest that health-risk behaviors in adolescence are associated with numerous functioning difficulties that continue across the lifespan, including reduced academic and occupational functioning, impaired relationships, employment instability, and early parenthood (Rohde et al. 2007; cf. Georgiades and Boyle 2007).

Familial and Environmental Factors

Crucial to the attainment of adolescent life satisfaction is adaptive and satisfying familial and environmental conditions, such as family structure, parenting style, parental emotional and social support, family conflict, and quality of the physical environment. Specifically, adolescent life satisfaction has been demonstrated to be positively associated with authoritative parenting (Suldo and Huebner 2004b), authoritative mothering (Milevsky et al. 2007), perceived parental support (Burke and Weir 1979; Young et al. 1995), perceived quality of attachment to parents (Greenberg et al. 1983), perceived loving parental relationship (Grossman and Rowat 1995), perceived family functioning (Heaven et al. 1996), cohesive family relationships (Manzi et al. 2006), quality of parent-adolescent communication (Piko and Hamvai 2010; Shek et al. 2006), and parental marital status (Demo and Acock 1996). For example, Kwan (2010) found that Chinese adolescents from intact families enjoyed higher life satisfaction than adolescents not living with both parents. Further, healthy adolescent adjustment is also

influenced by the quality of sibling relationships, especially among adolescent girls (Oliva and Arranz 2005). Overall, research suggests that parental separation, divorce, and remarriage are associated with diminished well-being in adolescents (Demo and Acock 1996); however, it is more complex familial variables, such as lack of paternal involvement, that have been shown to exert a greater negative effect (Flouri and Buchanan 2002; Grossman and Rowat 1995). For example, Grossman and Rowat (1995) found that perceived poor parental relationship, and not family status, was associated with reduced life satisfaction among a group of Canadian adolescents. Similarly, Winkelmann (2006) found that among German adolescents, it is living circumstance and not parental separation, which has the greatest negative effect on well-being. Furthermore, removal of children from their homes into residential treatment care due to severe family discord is also associated with diminished life satisfaction. For example, Sastre and Ferriere (2000) examined the life satisfaction reports of French adolescents living in residential treatment centers and found that these adolescents had lower life satisfaction than matched adolescents living at home with their families. Moreover, research conducted by Gilman and Barry (2003) demonstrates that life satisfaction ratings can increase as a function of time in residential care, suggesting that life in a residential treatment facility may enhance, rather than diminish, perceived quality of life for some adolescents. In addition to studies of major life events affecting adolescent life satisfaction, there is growing interest in the role of minor life events (e.g., daily hassles, everyday stressors) in changes in life satisfaction. For example, McCullough et al. (2000) found that minor daily events (e.g., fights with friends, doing poorly on an exam, enjoying a hobby, helping other people) contributed unique variance over and above that of major life events (e.g., death of family member, divorce). Similarly, Suldo and Huebner (2004a) found that adolescents with positive life satisfaction were less likely to develop later externalizing behavior problems following stressful life events than those with low levels of life satisfaction. Overall,

quality of parental attachment has been found to be the strongest unique predictor of adolescent life satisfaction (e.g., Ma and Huebner 2008). This finding is in keeping with previous research supporting the importance of perceived support by parents in determining adolescent life satisfaction (e.g., Dew and Huebner 1994; Greenberg et al. 1983). Similarly, Paxton et al. (2006) demonstrated the importance of additional adult bonding and meaningful relationships in the community with other significant adults to be associated with increased life satisfaction among adolescents.

Other familial and environmental factors that affect adolescent life satisfaction include parental alcoholism and adolescent pregnancy. In a cross-sectional sample of Australian youths, Braithwaite and Devine (1993) found that parental alcohol dependency and family disharmony made significant independent and unique contribution to life dissatisfaction (i.e., parental alcoholism added to the stress of family disharmony, which in turn was associated with decreases in adolescent life satisfaction). Indeed, research indicates there is substantial transmission of mental distress between parents and children, such that parental distress affects the life satisfaction of their child and a child's life satisfaction influences the happiness of their parent (Powdthavee and Vignoles 2008). In a study of family risk factors associated with adolescent pregnancy, Guijarro et al. (1999) found life satisfaction and happiness were higher among nonpregnant adolescents and their families than among the pregnant adolescents and their families. Further, pregnant adolescents showed a higher level of depression and sexual abuse than their nonpregnant peers, whereas nonpregnant adolescents had higher academic achievement and future expectations than their pregnant peers (Guijarro et al. 1999).

Quality of the immediate physical and social environment has also been shown to be pertinent to youth life satisfaction. For example, Homel and Burns (1989) found that children residing in poorly maintained houses and/or rented accommodation reported less overall satisfaction and less happiness with their families than other children. Moreover, children living on industrial or

commercial streets reported lower life satisfaction and expressed more unhappiness with their families, than children living on residential streets (Homel and Burns 1989). Similarly, Nickerson and Nagle (2004) found parent and peer alienation to be inversely related to adolescent living environment satisfaction. Longitudinal examination of rural adolescents from America's Appalachian region has revealed a variety of variables, including (1) family's SES, community size, and marital status, (2) perceived attainment in job and life goals and self-esteem, and (3) perceived disparity between job aspirations and job opportunities, educational demands and educational aspirations, desired residence and actual residence, and desired children and actual number of children, to be predictors of life satisfaction among economically dispossessed Appalachian youth (Wilson et al. 1997).

Educational Factors

School is the primary activity during childhood and adolescence, and necessarily the classroom environment plays a crucial role in the attainment of life satisfaction. For example, recent research conducted by Suldo and Huebner (2006) demonstrated that the effect associated with support from classmates was twice as large as support from close friends, indicating the specific influence of the classroom environment on adolescent life satisfaction. In related research, Froh et al. (2008) have demonstrated requiring adolescents to list up to five things every day for which they were grateful results in greater satisfaction with their school experience than students in a control group. Similarly, Gilman and Huebner (2006) have shown extremely high life satisfaction to be positively related to a positive attitude toward school and teachers, grade point average, participation in structured extracurricular activities, and interpersonal relations. Conversely, research conducted within the United Kingdom suggests that schools with an excessive focus on academic test results negatively impact youth life satisfaction (Marks 2004). Examination of special education placement due to cognitive and learning disabilities has revealed that students with mild mental disabilities (MMD) who are in self-

contained special education settings have significantly higher school satisfaction than that of peers with MMD who spend three or more hours in a regular educational setting (Brantley et al. 2002). Further results revealed that MMD students experience more dissatisfaction with their friendships, but higher satisfaction with school than typically achieving students (Brantley et al. 2002). Similarly, a comparison of a group of deaf/hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students educated in a segregated residential setting with those attending day schools revealed significant differences in global life satisfaction between the D/HH groups collectively and the non-D/HH group, with the D/HH group reporting both lower global and domain-specific life satisfaction. Further, the D/HH residential group reported significantly lower living environment satisfaction than the D/HH day school group, whereas no differences were found between the D/HH day school group and the non-D/HH group. In contrast, Ash and Huebner (1998) explored the well-being of a group of academically gifted students and found no differences in global or domain-specific life satisfaction between this group and normally achieving students. However, results did suggest that gifted students determined their global life satisfaction differently than non-gifted students. Specifically, living environment and school satisfaction were the strongest unique contributors for gifted students, whereas self- and family satisfaction were the strongest unique contributors for non-gifted students, with school satisfaction serving as the weakest overall contributor for this group (Ash and Huebner 1998). Comparative differences in school satisfaction ratings have also been found among cross-cultural comparisons of adolescent life satisfaction. For example, Liu et al. (2005) found that Chinese students scored higher on the dimensions of friends, school, and general life satisfaction than American students. Similarly, Park and Huebner (2005) compared the life satisfaction reports of Korean and American students and found that Korean students reported lower life satisfaction than their American counterparts. The greatest differences were found in the self and school domains, with Korean students reporting significantly less satisfaction in the self-domain

and American's reporting less satisfaction in the school domain.

Indeed, school and the classroom environment are an ideal place for initiatives that foster life satisfaction and well-being. For example, research has demonstrated the benefits of encouraging adolescents to participate in activities that facilitate "flow" – a mental state in which the challenge of an activity matches the skill required (Csikszentmihalyi 2002). The flow state has been linked to academic success, reduced delinquency, physical health, and life satisfaction (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Similarly, academic achievement and life satisfaction have consistently been positively linked to participation in structured extracurricular activities (see Gilman et al. 2004; Suldo et al. 2006 for reviews). Research has also demonstrated the benefits of grateful and engaged living on levels of life satisfaction and additionally a host of positive academic, social, and psychological outcomes, such as increased positive affect, self-esteem, grade point average, and hope (2010a, b). In accordance with these findings, a positive link has been found between life satisfaction and employment experience and finding purpose in life. For example, findings reported by Hirschi (2009) demonstrate the benefits to life satisfaction and career adaptability through vocational education and social support that enables work experience. Similarly, research by O'Brien (1994) found that employed youth have higher life satisfaction and greater commitment to values than unemployed youth. Indeed, research by Bronk et al. (2009) revealed that having an identified purpose in life was associated with greater life satisfaction during adolescence (see also Bronk and Finch 2010).

Sociocultural Factors

Recently attention has begun to focus on the psychological well-being of immigrant youth and the acculturation of ethnic minorities. For example, Bradley and Corwyn (2004) found that marital status was the most consistent family context predictor of life satisfaction among five divergent sociocultural groups of adolescents of non-European descent living in America. Similarly, Leung et al. (2006) examined the

psychological adaptation and autonomy among three immigrant Asian groups living in Australia and found that successful adaptation could be explained by migration circumstances (i.e., voluntary or refugee), cultural differences (e.g., emphasis on education), and the ability of the cultural group to support the adolescent (e.g., presence of preexisting English-speaking immigrant community). Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2000) investigated the effects of acculturation on the psychological well-being of immigrant adolescents in Finland from the former Soviet Union, Turkey, Somalia, and Vietnam and found that perceived discrimination increased acculturative stress and behavioral symptoms and reduced life satisfaction and self-esteem, whereas perceived parental support, acceptance of parental authority, and length of residence increased life satisfaction among these groups. In Israel, Hofman et al. (1982) found Jewish adolescents to have higher life satisfaction than their Arab peers. In America, Constantine et al. (2006) found that the life satisfaction among African-American girls was positively related to adherence to Africentric values and self-esteem, but not to perceived social support satisfaction. Moreover, perceptions of discrimination have been demonstrated to be linked to low life satisfaction, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms among this group (Seaton et al. 2010, 2008). In contrast, in Canada, markedly higher life satisfaction was found among adolescent from noneconomically motivated immigrant families from Hong Kong reporting positive experience making friends with Canadians (Chow 2007), whereas in a cross-cultural study, Tanaka et al. (2005) found that Japanese students report higher numbers of physical and psychiatric symptoms, less happiness, and more stressful life events, and considerably lower levels of life satisfaction than Swedish adolescents.

Conclusion

Adolescent life satisfaction is a key variable in the attainment of psychological well-being during youth and, as evidenced from the research literature, is positively related to a broad spectrum of

desirable psychological, social, behavioral, and health-related variables. Current shifts within psychology away from an almost exclusive focus on the disease model of mental health have led to an increase in examinations of quality of life among youths. The literature clearly provides evidence to support conceptualizations of life satisfaction as more than just an outcome of positive psychological states. Indeed, recent research supports the role of life satisfaction as an influential predictor of various psychosocial variables such as depression and poor physical health (Lewinsohn et al. 1991; Zullig et al. 2005). Overall, promotion of the conditions fostering positive levels of life satisfaction among adolescents cannot be understated. Life satisfaction is not only a psychological strength that can act to protect adolescents from the harmful effects of environmental and social stressors but also the key cognitive mechanism through which subjective and psychological well-being is attained. As an individual cognitive variable, life satisfaction manifests itself in the social environment. Adolescents with high life satisfaction are generally more extroverted, agreeable, and social, have more satisfying relationships, participate in greater numbers of structured extracurricular activities, are healthier, and benefit from increased academic success and school satisfaction. Conversely, those suffering from low life satisfaction are at risk of poor mental and physical health and are more prone to externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, violence, and aggression and psychopathological conditions, such as neuroticism, depression, and anxiety. Future research in this area should continue to seek out and identify the causal pathways that will provide insight into the relationships between the environment, personality, and life satisfaction. This valuable knowledge may then be applied to the development of strategies aimed at increasing life satisfaction among those who fall below normative levels. In line with the current zeitgeist, our focus should be on the building of strength, as opposed to the repairing of damage (i.e., prevention as opposed to treatment). Adolescent life satisfaction is one such strength and the key indicator of well-being among youths.

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