Understanding the typologies of child subjective well-being: A cross-country comparison

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ABSTRACT

Comparative international studies on children’s happiness and life satisfaction using child-centric measures are gathering much interest. The aim of this exploratory study is to expand the literature in this area by examining the typologies of children’s well-being across various domains of their lives. The present study utilizes data from ten countries that participated in the first wave of the International Survey of Child Well-Being (ISCWeB). Latent Profile Analysis was utilized to identify the latent classes extracted from the Personal Well-being Index—School Children (PWI-SC). We then examined how children’s overall life satisfaction and happiness differ across classes using ANOVA. We found the 6-class model to be the best fitting model. Children were identified to be in classes entitled, “high satisfaction overall,” “high overall satisfaction but low satisfaction for outside activity,” “medium satisfaction overall,” “low satisfaction with health and safety,” “high satisfaction with health and low satisfaction with safety and ability,” and “low overall satisfaction.” Findings from ANOVA analysis suggest that classes significantly differ in terms of their overall life satisfaction and happiness. The implications of the study findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

Happiness is the ultimate outcome that individuals as well as policymakers pursue in most societies. The recent developments in positive psychology have led researchers in the field to focus more on human strength and happiness rather than weakness and problems (Yoo, 2016). Also, efforts at the societal level have been consistently made to enhance happiness of its members. For this reason, there is increasing interest in understanding the level of happiness or well-being across nations (i.e. Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2012–2016). Yet, the study of children’s subjective well-being has lagged behind compared to research on adults (Rees & Main, 2015; The Children’s Society, 2015).

Recently, comparative international studies on children’s happiness and life satisfaction have been gathering much interest, as there has been a shift of perspective from children’s well-becoming to well-being, as well as a shift from objective indicators to child-centric measures that reflect the subjective perspectives of children (Ben-Arie, 2008). For example, numerous organizations, such as UNICEF, The Children’s Society in the UK, and Children’s World have been making research efforts to understand the international variation in children’s happiness and subjective well-being (Rees & Main, 2015; The Children’s Society, 2015; UNICEF, 2013). These studies have highlighted the importance of childhood happiness on an individual’s life course. Specifically, childhood experiences have profound effects on both children’s current lives and their future opportunities and prospects (Ben-Arie, 2008). There is a strong possibility that happy children will grow into happy adults, which will lead to a happier society in general.

However, most comparative studies have utilized either mean comparisons or mean-centered analytic methods to compare levels of children’s subjective well-being. While this approach has been informative in understanding how countries differ in overall levels of children’s subjective well-being, it does not help us understand how patterns of children’s subjective well-being differ within and across countries. When we rank the countries in their level of subjective well-being, we assume that children from countries with similar mean levels enjoy equitable happiness. However, there is a lot of variation among children within as well as across the countries. Also, there are possibilities that the factorial constitution of happiness is different among the countries or people with similar means of overall happiness. In fact, although children’s mean satisfaction ratings for life as a whole were higher than in adult populations (Rees & Main, 2015; The Children’s Society, 2014), there are fluctuations among various dimensions in their lives. Children were more satisfied with some aspects of their lives.
than others, depending on the country to which they belong (Rees & Main, 2015).

Considering that happiness and well-being is a multi-dimensional concept which consists of diverse indicators reflecting various dimensions of human life, a simple mean comparison seems to be a rather reductive approach. We need to better understand why some people are vulnerable in certain areas of well-being, but not in other areas to capture details on the differences among people worldwide.

Thus, to investigate the diverse patterns of happiness among the children from participating countries, we pooled the data of different countries and classified the sample children using Latent Profile Analysis (LPA). We examined how 12-year-old children from ten countries that participated in ISCWeB could be classified into different latent classes based on various dimensions of children's subjective well-being. The results will discern the overall patterns of children's happiness regardless of the country in which they live. Then, the proportion of each country pertaining to the individual cluster was analyzed to examine the differences in the pattern of children's well-being among countries. Finally, we compared the average scores of children's overall life satisfaction and the Student Life Satisfaction Scale across classes to examine the differences in children's evaluations of their life satisfaction in general. By conducting this research, we sought to move beyond the ranking approach based on simple mean comparison and improve our understanding of how patterns of children's subjective well-being are similar or different across countries.

2. Literature review

2.1. Children's well-being as a multi-dimensional concept

Children's well-being measures the quality of children's lives. However, as simple as the concept sounds, there is no unique, universally accepted way of actually measuring child well-being (OECD, 2009). The indicators of child well-being are used to describe the condition of children, and to monitor or track child outcomes (Ben-Arie, 2008).

The well-being of children cannot be represented by a single domain or an indicator, as their lives are influenced by multiple domains of everyday life (Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009). Many researchers have made efforts to capture the diverse domains of children's well-being comprehensively. For example, Moore and Theokas (2008) presented four outcome domains and four contextual domains of child well-being: outcome domains include physical well-being, cognitive/educational well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being; in contrast, contextual domains consist of family, neighborhood/community, school (for school aged children), and peer context. Ireland child indicators project developed nine domains of children's development (National Children's Office, 2005, cited in Lee, 2013) including physical and mental well-being, emotional and behavioral well-being, intellectual capacity, spiritual and moral well-being, identity, self-care, family relationships, social and peer relationships, and social presentation. Kids Count in the USA has been annually reporting the changes in child well-being indicators with a method that consists of four domains (economic well-being, education, health, and family and community) since the early 1990s. Kids Count reports are also useful sources of information for the comparison of child well-being across states in the USA. In their recent efforts to represent the domains of child indicators for Korean children, Lee, Kim, Ahn, and Yoo (2013) constructed five outcome domains (health condition, social well-being, emotional well-being, cognitive well-being, and flourishing) and four contextual domains (family context, school context, community context, and child well-being recognition).

As can be seen, the choices of child well-being domains and indicators vary depending on the perspectives of the researchers. However, recently, scholars have made a strong case about the importance of listening to what children themselves say about their own lives. Particularly, studies have emphasized that subjective well-being measures record something real and important about children's lives (UNICEF, 2013). As a result, a growing number of studies are using children's evaluations of their lives to measure their well-being or include subjective well-being as one of the indicators of child well-being. For example, UNICEF (2007) suggested six domains to represent children's well-being, including material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, relationships, behaviors and risks, and subjective well-being. Moreover, in 2013, UNICEF separated subjective well-being from other indicators and compared the subjective well-being of children with the remaining objective indicators, which constituted the other five dimensions (UNICEF, 2013). In addition, Bradshaw and Richardson (2009) also included subjective well-being as one of the seven domains of children's lives, which includes health, subjective well-being, personal relationships, material resources, education, behavior and risks, and housing and environment. Although subjective well-being is included in these indicators as a single domain, subjective well-being itself also reflects the diverse dimensions of children's lives (Cummins & Lau, 2005).

Despite the multi-dimensional nature of child well-being indicators, approaches that typically utilize a composite index or a summary number have been widely used to capture children's well-being. Based on these index or summary score approaches, the results were mainly shown as a ranking of countries like studies by the UNICEF (2013) or The Children's Society (2014), where countries have newspaper headlines such as “England ranked ninth out of 11 countries for children's well-being” (The Guardian, 28 August, 2014) or “South Korean children finish last in happiness survey” (Reuters, 4 November, 2014). Using a single number such as the mean or a composite index would facilitate an easier assessment of progress, decline, or comparison across demographic groups and different regions (UNICEF, 2007; Ben-Arie, 2008).

However, this approach tends to blur the whole picture of child well-being by throwing all of the elements of well-being into one pot. To overcome this shortcoming, we tried to delineate the diverse patterns of child well-being summed up in one single value by examining which domains are relatively higher level and which ones are lower level in each class compared to the others.

2.2. International comparison of subjective well-being

Children's subjective well-being is not determined entirely by personal factors, but is influenced by the country's policies, environment, and culture (Lee & Yoo, 2013). Since both personal traits as well as environmental factors affect people's level of happiness or well-being, there have been increased attempts to capture the universal conditions for children's well-being by international comparative studies.

International comparisons of children's subjective well-being have considerable potential value, enabling the findings for particular countries to exist in a broader context and informing policymakers to identify priorities in improving children's lives (The Children's Society, 2014). However, there are few comparable data on child subjective well-being.

UNICEF (2013) presents the latest overview of child well-being in the world's most advanced economies and, based on a comparison of the subjective and objective well-being of children, concludes that there is a reasonably close but not exact correlation between the results of the two measures. While objective indicators identified the top countries (Netherlands and the four Nordic countries), middle level (four southern European countries – Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), and the bottom four (Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and the United States), there were some striking increases in the rankings of the three southern European countries of Greece, Spain, and Italy when subjective well-being was considered (UNICEF, 2013).

The Children's Worlds survey (Rees & Main, 2015) surveyed children's views on their lives and well-being in 15 countries in 2013–2014 and found the overall picture of their lives to be a positive one,
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