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# Patterns of life satisfaction, personality and family transitions in young adulthood<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Little is known about individual patterns of life satisfaction (LS) over the life course. Therefore, we examine individual long-term patterns by making a distinction between the shape of the LS pattern and its mean level. Further, in order to contribute to the discussion about the impact of personality and life events on LS, we examine the effects of both factors on the mean level and the pattern. A Dutch Panel Study is used in which young adults were followed for 18 years ( $N = 766$ ). Six satisfaction patterns are defined: stable, increasing, decreasing, U-shaped, reversed U-shaped and fluctuating. A stable pattern is found to be most common, but the majority of the young adults have a changing LS pattern. The multivariate analyses show that neuroticism exerts negative and extraversion positive effect on the long-term LS mean. Life events in the relationship domain are related to the mean level and the pattern of LS. In addition, there are several interaction effects of events and personality.

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## 1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a life-phase in which many changes occur. These changes often have profound consequences for individuals' future careers, for instance with regard to occupational achievement and family formation (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). These changes may also affect another important individual outcome, subjective well-being (Kohler, Behrman, & Skytthe, 2005; Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005). However, there is an ongoing debate about to what extent long-run changes in subjective well-being will occur. Some argue that well-being is quite resistant to change because it is predominantly determined by genes (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). We refer to

this perspective as 'personality-oriented'. Although important life events may have some lasting effect on well-being, personality is expected to have a larger impact, leading to relative high levels of long-run stability in well-being. In contrast, others argue that life events such as marriage, parenthood or divorce, and fluid changes such as related to one's income position (see e.g. Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004) elicit permanent changes in well-being. This is referred to as the 'event-oriented' perspective. Personality is less important in this perspective, and is largely thought to have a moderating effect. Recently, theoretical attempts have been made to reconcile or integrate these two viewpoints (Headey, 2007; Hobfoll, 2002), but empirical work that examines long-term changes in subjective well-being is still relatively scarce.

This study aims at contributing to this research literature in two ways. First, rather than studying average changes in well-being during young adulthood, we examine whether different individual patterns of change can be distinguished. Second, we study to what extent these long-term patterns can be explained by the combination of personality and life events, in order to

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contribute to the discussion about the importance of these factors for well-being.

Subjective well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that focuses on the subjective evaluation of life (Diener et al., 1999). It includes both a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive component is usually measured by asking people how satisfied they are with their life as a whole. It measures a long-term evaluation of well-being, in contrast to the affective component, which evaluates people's more instantaneous positive and negative feelings. Given the long time-span of this study, our focus is on the cognitive evaluation of well-being, life satisfaction (LS). This focus is even more appropriate, given that life satisfaction can also be viewed as the balance of affective experience over a certain period (Ehrhardt, Saris, & Veenhoven, 2000). To examine changes in life satisfaction, we use a Dutch Panel Study in which young adults are followed during a period of 18 years. In the next section, we discuss personality- and event-oriented theories, previous research and the effects of personality and life events in the family domain on the mean level and pattern of life satisfaction.

## 2. Theoretical approaches to long-term change in LS

### 2.1. Personality-oriented theory

One important perspective on changes in life satisfaction across the life course is offered by the revised dynamic equilibrium theory (Headey, 2006). The original dynamic equilibrium theory was developed by Headey and Wearing (1989) and closely resembles the set-point theory, that was based on Helson's adaptation level theory (1964). The original theory assumes that everyone has a certain set-point or equilibrium level of well-being, determined by genes and personality (Headey, 2007; Lykken, 2000). Genes are supposed to explain as much as 50–80% of the variation in well-being (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Moreover, genes determine personality to a large extent, which makes personality a very stable construct as well (Fujita & Diener, 2005; Huppert, 2005; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). Life events may cause a temporary fluctuation in LS, but a set-point level will be reached within a few months after the event has taken place (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). This quick and complete return to the pre-event level of LS is called the adaptation effect. Because of the adaptation effect and the stable factors that determine LS, long-term changes in LS are unlikely.

A number of recent studies did observe an adaptation effect for some people, but also found that the level of life satisfaction fluctuated for others (Ehrhardt et al., 2000; Fujita & Diener, 2005). In response to these findings, the set-point and the dynamic equilibrium theory were revised. In the revised version of the set-point theory, Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (2006) conclude among other things, that people can have several set-points. In addition, the likelihood of change was expected to depend upon personality and the experience of very important life events. In the revised version of the dynamic equilibrium theory, Headey (2006) maintains that personality is still

the starting point for predicting development in well-being. Personality traits like neuroticism, extraversion and to a lesser extent openness to experience, are supposed to affect well-being both directly and indirectly, by determining the number of positive and negative events that a person experiences and the intensity of these events. However, it is still assumed that almost all of these events have a temporary effect on well-being.

### 2.2. Event-oriented theory

As an example of an event-oriented perspective on changes in life satisfaction across the life course, the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) takes both life events and personality into account, but clearly assumes a larger influence of life events and a smaller influence of personality than the personality-oriented theories discussed above. The conservation of resources theory offers a general approach to the explanation of well-being and stress. Resources are defined as "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (...) or act as means to obtain centrally valued ends" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). They can be either material (e.g. income) or non-material (e.g. extraversion). Resources are related to well-being because they enable or disable someone to fulfill physical and psychological needs. The more access people have to valued resources, the higher their sense of well-being (Diener & Fujita, 1995). Fulfilling needs enhances well-being and losing resources creates stress, and thus reduces well-being. Hobfoll considers personality traits to be key resources because they affect how someone manages the loss and gain of other resources (Thoits, 1994). Another relevant mechanism is the resource caravan: The availability of resources could lead to the acquisition of additional resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Such mechanisms suggest that well-being will unlikely remain stable, but rather is expected to change in response to variations in resource availability.

### 2.3. Empirical studies on long-term change in LS

Empirical studies on long-term trends in LS offer inconclusive results. Some studies explicitly address the issue of long-term LS stability. For instance, Fujita and Diener (2005) found that LS fluctuated significantly from year to year. For some people it had changed significantly in the long run, although it had remained stable for most. Several other studies reached the same conclusion (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Diener et al., 2006; Lucas, 2007). Headey (2006) showed, by following people for almost 20 years, that most people had a stable LS level, but that a minority had a permanent increasing or decreasing level. How large this minority is, remains unclear, however. Clark, Diener, Georgellis, and Lucas (2008) examined in a sample that was followed for many years whether complete adaptation occurred after life events such as marriage, unemployment, and parenthood. They found that well-being fairly rapidly returned to the pre-event level, except in the case of unemployment.

Ehrhardt et al. (2000) focused on variation in LS scores rather than on stability of LS, and found that 30% of this

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