



Does life satisfaction change with age? A comparison of Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the relationship between age and life satisfaction was examined over a period of 27 years (1982–2009) in four countries—Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Sweden—using nationally representative samples of adults between the ages of 15 and 100 from the European Value Survey, the World Values Survey, and the European Social Survey (total $N = 39,420$). Unlike in Finland and Sweden, the relationship between age and subjective well-being in Estonia and Latvia was best described as curvilinear, with younger and older people having higher levels of life satisfaction. The observed age differences in life satisfaction in Estonia and Latvia, however, seem to be due to an interaction of cohort and period differences.

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1. Introduction

Studies of subjective well-being (SWB) have gained greatly in popularity in recent years. From 1980 to 1985, there were 2152 publications on subjective well-being (including life satisfaction and happiness), whereas in the period of 2000–2005, there were 35,069 studies (Diener, 2009). Over 20 years, the number of publications on subjective well-being thus increased approximately 16-fold! Articles on subjective well-being are published in leading scientific journals such as *Science* (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006; Oswald & Wu, 2010), covered in popular media (e.g., a special issue of *Time* magazine on “The science of happiness”; January 2005), and discussed by eminent economists and policymakers in the context of issues related to the quality-of-life. Furthermore, in the last few decades, data about happiness and life satisfaction have become widely accessible, making it possible to compare countries around the world (Veenhoven, 1996).

Why is subjective well-being so important? Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) reviewed cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental data showing that happy individuals are more likely than their less happy peers to have fulfilling marriages and relationships, high incomes, superior work performance, high levels of community involvement, good health, and a long life. What is even more important is that Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) showed that it is possible for happiness to lead to success, not just the other way around. That explains why policymakers in many different countries argue that a country's development should be measured not purely by economic indicators such as gross domestic product

(GDP), but also by gross national happiness (GNH), just like in Bhutan (Karma, 2008).

One of the most important issues in the field of subjective well-being is the relationship between happiness and age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Easterlin, 2006). The question becomes even more important when considering the shift in age structure associated with the population ageing faced by virtually every country in the world. It is expected that by 2050, the proportion of older persons (60 years and older) will reach 21% of the total population and that, by the same year, the number of older persons will surpass the number of younger persons (under 15 years) for the first time in history (United Nations, 2009). Population ageing has a deep impact on a wide range of political, economic, and social issues crucial for the well-being of both the younger and older generations.

1.1. What is known about the relationship between age and subjective well-being?

Most of the evidence about the relationship between age and subjective well-being is based on cross-sectional studies, asking different people of different ages to report their life satisfaction or happiness. Some studies have not found any relationship between age and subjective well-being (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1998), some have reported a weak positive linear association (e.g., Hansson, Hillerås, & Forsell, 2005), others a weak negative relationship (e.g., Chen, 2001), and still others a curvilinear relationship, with subjective well-being highest among those in middle age (e.g., Easterlin, 2006). Perhaps one of the most influential recent studies relating to these two variables was that conducted by Blanchflower and Oswald (2004), who found happiness to be U-shaped in relation to age in their study of the United States and Great Britain. They later expanded their findings to include a

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wide-ranging set of countries (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008). Holding other factors constant, Blanchflower and Oswald (2008) proposed that a typical individual's subjective well-being reaches its minimum in middle age. Later, however, this conclusion was questioned by several researchers who argued that the U-shape is an artifact of reverse causality with the covariates included (Frijters & Beaton, 2008; Glenn, 2009). Furthermore, as different samples of different ages are used and compared with each other in a cross-sectional design, the observed differences may have little to do with age differences. As argued by Schilling (2005), any age change in life satisfaction in a cross-sectional design is "hampered by the possibility of cohort effects overlaying the effects of chronological age" (p. 254).

Unfortunately, data following the same person over the years is seldom considered in studies of the relationship between subjective well-being and ageing. Only a handful of studies that have longitudinal data have focused on the stability of subjective well-being over time (e.g., Baird, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2010). These studies have found life satisfaction to be most stably correlated with age over the initial years of measurement, but correlations understandably drop when the period between measurement increases (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Fujita & Diener, 2005; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005), while mean levels seem to decline slightly in old age (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Schilling, 2006). Yet, a longitudinal research design alone cannot fully distinguish between age-, cohort- and period-related changes in the level of life satisfaction over time: only once numerous cross-sectional, longitudinal, and time-lag studies have produced consistent results can we then conclude with some certainty that changes in life satisfaction over the lifespan are caused by age (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

1.2. Are there cultural differences in relation to changes in subjective well-being over the lifespan?

Not only does the composition of what makes people happy and more satisfied vary across cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008), so too does the relationship between age and subjective well-being (Deaton, 2008). In a recent study, Baird et al. (2010) examined the relationship between age and life satisfaction using longitudinal data from the UK and Germany. Although both studies showed that life satisfaction declines little across adulthood, there were also remarkable cultural differences in the changes in life satisfaction observed over the lifespan. More specifically, in a large and nationally representative panel from Germany, life satisfaction was found to be relatively stable in relation to age, with a steep decline only among those older than 70, whereas in the data from Britain, life satisfaction peaked after middle age (Baird et al., 2010). These cultural differences are consistent with earlier findings in the field (Clark, 2007; Clark & Oswald, 2007; Van Landeghem, 2008).

In the current paper, we will examine the relationship between age and life satisfaction (as one of the components of subjective well-being, see Diener, 1994; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Kuppens et al., 2008) in four Northern European countries—Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Sweden—which, despite their geographical, historical, and cultural closeness, have experienced rather different economic and political conditions over the past 70 years. Our aim is to show whether or not, and to what extent, life satisfaction follows a similar age trend across the four neighboring cultures.

1.3. Distinguishing age, cohort, and period effects

As discussed above, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies alike have yielded inconsistent results regarding the relationship between age and life satisfaction. In addition to cultural dissimilar-

ities in change trajectories, differences may occur because of other confounding variables which, at least to some extent, may alter the age and life satisfaction relationship.

Drawing on the existing literature on age-related changes in human behavior (Baltes, 1968; Glenn, 1976; Glenn, 2003; Harding & Jencks, 2003; Schaie, 1965; Schaie, 1986), there seem to be three possible explanations for changes in life satisfaction across the lifespan: effects of growing older, that is, age-related changes such as biological maturation and decline; role changes, etc. (i.e., age effects); replacement of (happier or less happier) birth cohorts born early in the 20th century by cohorts born later in the same century (i.e., cohort effects); and societal or cultural changes that influence the level of life satisfaction of all cohorts simultaneously (i.e., time or period effects). Although there have been attempts to disentangle age, cohort, and period effects, it is clear that, for purely statistical reasons, the three effects cannot be estimated at the same time (Glenn, 2003; Schaie, 1986).

1.3.1. Cohort effects

In cross-sectional studies related to age and subjective well-being, any findings may be due to cohort effects rather than age-related change per se. On the one hand, Schilling (2005, 2006) argued that, in Western industrialized societies (including Finland and Sweden), living conditions for older adults—born in the early decades of the twentieth century—have improved steadily from when they were young. On the other hand, the development in the decades following World War II was different in those countries incorporated into the Soviet Union (including Estonia and Latvia). Lower levels of life satisfaction in Estonia and Latvia are often seen as an inheritance of their 50 years of Communist rule—although Communism is not necessarily related to lower levels of SWB, its legacy seems to have detrimental effects on it, especially in Eastern Europe (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008). Yet, there is a whole new generation of young people born in the second half of the 1980s and in 1990s who have virtually no memories of either the Soviet period or the collapse of communism. As put cogently by Nugin (2010), they "do not have any doubts if the independent state will stand, and do not fear that anyone might come and deport you [to Siberia]" (p. 359). So, we should anticipate a difference in life satisfaction rates between the youngest and the older generations in both Estonia and Latvia.

1.3.2. Period effects

It is also possible that there are cultural, political, social, and/or economic changes that alter the views of all cohorts simultaneously (period effects). Previous research has shown that life satisfaction profiles are nearly flat across the last 30 years in many European countries, including Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008), and in the United States (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Diener et al., 1999). Thus, we do not expect to see dramatic period effects on life satisfaction in Finland and Sweden. Yet, as stated above, the legacy of Communist rule and the declining economic conditions following the collapse of the Soviet Union are often used to explain the low subjective well-being of people in Eastern Europe (Inglehart et al., 2008). Under the difficult social and economic conditions of the first years of independence, life satisfaction rates dropped significantly in most ex-Soviet countries (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), including Latvia and Estonia (Realo, 2009). As a result, period effects may confound the relationship between age and life satisfaction in these two countries. Furthermore, as argued by Schaie, Willis, and Pennak (2005), it also possible for the same historical event (e.g., the restoration of independence) to result in very different outcomes for the different cohorts experiencing the same event but at different life stages.

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