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Psychological needs and emotional well-being in older and younger Koreans and Americans

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Abstract

This study tested the relevance of ten psychological needs in emotional well-being among older and younger adults in two cultures (the US and South Korea). Participants were asked to recall their “most satisfying event” for the past month, and then were asked to evaluate the relevance of ten psychological needs to that event. Results indicated that both age and cultural groups generally emphasized the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as proposed by self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991). There were, however, some cultural variations. For Americans, self-esteem was the most important need for both young and old age groups. For Koreans, autonomy was the most salient need for young adults, whereas self-actualizing-meaning and popularity-influence were the most important needs for older adults.

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1. Introduction

It is part of our everyday knowledge that the source of the emotional well-being may vary across individuals. For example, an 18-year old woman and a 70-year old woman may both report

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that they were very satisfied when they ran into an old friend and had a good conversation, but the reasons *why* they felt satisfied may not be the same. The 18-year-old girl may report that she was very satisfied when she ran into her old friend because during that event she felt that she is very popular and influential; the 70-year-old woman may report that she was very satisfied when she ran into her old friend because during that event she felt close and connected with the people around her. In other words, simply saying that the two women were satisfied when they met their old friends does not describe the inner wants and needs which define each woman's personal growth and well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000).

In the present study, we attempted to explore the fundamental dimensions of emotional well-being via an identification of the inner psychological needs related to emotional well-being across different age and cultural groups. By determining the inner needs related to emotional well-being from different age and cultural groups, we integrate research on psychological needs, aging, and cultural variations of well-being, in a way that we believe helps synthesize disparate areas in psychology.

1.1. Emotional well-being in older adults

Old age is often characterized as a period of multiple losses (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Mayer, 1999), loneliness (Pratt & Norris, 1994), declining physical and mental functioning (Erber, 1989; Manton, 1990; Ryan, 1992), and restricted cognitive abilities (Cavanaugh, 1989; Levy & Langer, 1994; Ryan & Kwong-See, 1993). Given these well-documented changes in physical and cognitive functioning and social losses, a question about the emotional well-being in old age arises: Do the increasing health risks and social losses in older individuals lead to a decline in emotional well-being? Surprisingly, recent findings suggest that emotional well-being in old age remains relatively intact (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1997; Horley & Lavery, 1995; Larson, 1978; Smith, Fleeson, Geiselman, Settersten, & Kunzmann, 1999). Empirical support for this “paradoxical” (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandstädter & Greve, 1994; Filipp, 1996; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995) pattern of the relationship between age and well-being consistently displays that older adults fare well emotionally.

However, it is still unclear whether the underlying mechanisms of emotional well-being remain stable throughout adulthood. For example, Ryff (1989) reported that views on positive functioning among middle-aged and older adults reflected both developmental variation and invariance. Both middle-aged and older adults responded that “others orientation,” namely, being a caring person and having a good relationship with others, is a key feature of a well-adjusted and mature person. At the same time, older adults emphasized “accepting changes” as the second most important quality of positive functioning, whereas middle-aged adults underscored self-confidence and self-acceptance, suggesting a difference in the conceptual prerequisites of well-being throughout adulthood.

1.2. Psychological needs and emotional well-being

In an earlier investigation of the role of needs in emotional well-being, Omodei and Wearing (1990) assessed need-satisfaction in relation to well-being. They developed single-item phrases for creativity, self-esteem, personal control, purpose and meaning, and 20 of Murray's (1938)

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