



Piecing the jigsaw puzzle of adolescent happiness

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is increasingly recognized as a proxy for utility and therefore a valuable maximand for policy decisions. As a result many studies have investigated happiness and the associated determinants in both overall and specific life domains. Adolescent happiness, however, remains largely unexplored. The aim of this study is to explore the relative importance of happiness of young Dutch adolescents at home, school, and leisure, and their associations with a broad array of personal and context characteristics within each of these domains.

We used data from a study which investigated adolescents' health behaviour in relation to their attitudes regarding health and lifestyle as well as their considerations and expectations regarding the future consequences of their behaviour ($n = 1436$). Variables were selected on the basis of findings in the literature or significant univariate Pearson correlations between the variable and domain-specific or overall happiness. The data was analysed using multiple hierarchical stepwise regressions.

In line with international findings, most adolescents reported high levels of overall happiness with a mean score of 7.69 ($SD = 1.23$) on a scale from 0 to 10. Personal and context characteristics were associated with adolescent overall happiness either directly or indirectly, via domain-specific happiness. Happiness at home, at school, and during leisure hours contributed approximately equally to overall happiness but were associated with different characteristics. Finally, the results demonstrate that adolescents differentiate their happiness levels between life domains, which support the relevance of a multidimensional approach in happiness studies.

This study provides additional insight over single-dimensional studies of happiness and a more comprehensive explanation of previously published findings.

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1. Introduction

Happiness is typically conceived as a subjective measure of the overall enjoyment of life, generally defined as 'the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life favourably' (Veenhoven, 1991) and is frequently designated as an important life goal (Ng, 1996). In disciplines like psychology, biology, and sociology, happiness has been widely accepted as a significant concept (Dolan & Kahneman, 2008; Layard, 2006).

The concept of happiness has a long standing, yet controversial, tradition in economics. It can be traced back to the work of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1789), who used the pursuit of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' as a central argument in his reasoning (Bruni, 2007). Whether 'happiness' can be equated with 'utility' or 'welfare', however, has been long-disputed. The use of happiness became controversial when economists started to question whether subjective

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well-being as a measure of welfare could be a good and stable indicator – or even synonym – for ‘utility’, especially since it cannot be measured objectively and interpersonal comparisons may thus be considered ‘unscientific’, also because of differences in reference point, coping etcetera. At the time, economics therefore moved away from using (self-reported) well-being (Robinson, 1962; Diener, Suh, et al., 1999; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; Graham, 2005; Kimball & Willis, 2006). More recently, however, the study of happiness has regained popularity in economics and studies are increasingly using it as a proxy for utility (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Frey, Stutzer, et al., 2003; Powdthavee, 2007). In this genre, happiness is considered to be a (partial) index of welfare, or as Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) describe it, ‘a positive monotonic transformation of an underlying metaphysical concept called welfare’ (Brouwer, Culyer, et al., 2008).

Many studies have been conducted to better understand what constitutes happiness, showing that determinants of happiness may differ across individuals, life stages, and life domains (Easterlin, 2005). The happiness of adolescents (ages 12–18), however, remains largely unexplored. At present, our knowledge of what constitutes adolescent happiness can best be seen as a large, unsolved jigsaw puzzle. Some studies have explored the determinants of overall adolescent happiness or happiness within a specific life domain (Lu & Hu, 2005; Mahon, Yarcheski, et al., 2005); others have focused on the relations between domain-specific and overall adolescent happiness (Huebner, Drane, et al., 2000). What is lacking, however, are studies investigating the relations between overall and domain-specific happiness alongside a broad array of possible determinants. In other words, many, but certainly not all, pieces of the adolescent happiness jigsaw puzzle have been identified and we are only at the very early stages of piecing it together.

This article aims to contribute to the completion of this puzzle by exploring the relative importance of happiness of young Dutch adolescents at home, at school, and during leisure hours to their overall happiness, in association with a broad array of personal and context characteristics.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we present an overview of the relevant recent literature on adolescent happiness. We then describe the dataset and statistical analyses, followed by the results of the study. Last, we discuss our findings.

2. Background

A number of studies have focused on overall happiness of adolescents. Although different measurement instruments have been used, it appears that most adolescents rate their overall happiness levels positively (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). UNICEF (2007) initiated a study on the overall well-being of adolescents in 21 industrialized countries. Well-being was assessed in six different dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, education, peer and family relationship, behaviours and risks, and peoples’ own subjective sense of well-being. Within this study young adolescents were asked to rate their overall life satisfaction on a ‘life satisfaction ladder’ (0, worst possible life; 10, best possible life; scores above the midpoint, i.e., scores of six or more were treated as positive). A great majority of young adolescents scored their life satisfaction positively, ranging from 77.4% (15-year-old girls) to 88.1% (11-year-old boys). The Netherlands reported the highest overall well-being of young adolescents: more than 90% of adolescents between the ages of 11 and 15 rated life satisfaction positively.

The studies investigating determinants of adolescent happiness have largely focussed on the influence of personal characteristics. Some studies have reported that adolescents differentiate their happiness levels across life domains (e.g. UNICEF, 2007), indicating that differentiation of the analysis to specific life domains may provide incremental information in relation to overall happiness (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). We will first discuss the influence of personal characteristics on adolescent happiness, followed by domain-specific variables that may influence (domain-specific) happiness.

Beginning with personal characteristics, age was shown to be an important determinant of adolescent happiness. Happiness scores tend to decrease through the teenage years with the lowest level at age 16, followed by a small recovery up to age 18 (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Contradictory results have been reported regarding the association between gender and adolescent happiness. A number of studies have reported significant differences in happiness scores between boys and girls, with girls generally being happier (Crossley & Langdrige, 2005; UNICEF, 2007), while a few others have found no significant association between gender and adolescent happiness (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Mahon et al., 2005).

Mahon et al. (2005) studied the relation between adolescent happiness and health. The results show significant and positive correlations between adolescent happiness and three aspects of health: perceived health status, wellness, and clinical health, with correlation coefficients of 0.61, 0.55, and 0.14, respectively. Given the strength of the correlations it seems that subjective perceptions of health are more strongly related to happiness than objective measures. This was consistent with earlier findings (Mahon et al., 2005).

No clear evidence has been found regarding the relation between social class and adolescent happiness. Some studies have reported no significant differences between social classes, while others have noted small differences in favour of higher social classes (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). One study reported large differences in happiness between social classes, but the relation was arbitrary: young people living in working class communities on average reported the highest level of happiness, followed by middle class, poor, and upper class, and the lowest level of adolescent happiness was found in the upper middle class (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003).

Whereas Robbins and Francis (1996) reported a positive association between religious beliefs and happiness, Lewis et al. (1997) found no clear relationship in their study. These differences could however be explained by the use of different measurement techniques or definitions of happiness and religiosity (Lewis et al., 1997).

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