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A life course model for a domains-of-life approach to happiness: Evidence from the United States

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of methodological attention has been given to identifying age patterns in happiness. Yet, few studies have questioned why any specific age pattern should exist, and researchers have tended to focus on socio-psychological rather than socio-structural mechanisms. Thus, I blend life course and subjective well-being theories and utilize multiple waves of nationally representative cross-sectional data from the United States to throw light on the important role of socio-structural mechanisms. Specifically, the age pattern in happiness is driven by distinct patterns in levels, and importance, of satisfaction with specific areas of life. These distinct patterns, which are grounded in the successful aging paradigm, largely explain the slightly increasing quadratic age pattern in American's happiness that researchers have become familiar with. These findings have broad implications for developing initiatives aimed at improving quality of life, and they draw attention to the need for more life course research on subjective well-being.

1. Introduction

Knowledge surrounding quality of life judgments has grown dramatically over the past forty years (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and the usefulness of subjective well-being (SWB) indicators for policy making and evaluation is gaining recognition (Layard, 2010; Oswald & Wu, 2010). Despite this increasing recognition, life course research in this area of scholarship is scant. Consequently, we know little about age patterns in SWB (George, 2010, 2006), which represents a crucial area of inquiry in light of increasing life expectancy and population aging. Thus, the current study aims to establish conceptual linkages between life course and subjective well-being theories, and empirically examine whether these linkages contribute to the current understanding of SWB and age.

Guided by Hagestad and Neugarten & s (1985) *normal expectable life course*, and subjective well-being's *domains-of-life approach* (Rojas, 2007), the current study shows that the age pattern in American's happiness is largely driven by distinct patterns in levels, and importance, of satisfaction with specific areas of life (i.e., family, friends, health, hobbies, and place of residence). The net result is the slightly increasing quadratic age pattern in American's happiness that researchers have become familiar with (see Bardo, Lynch, & Land 2017; Fukuda, 2013; Glenn, 2009; Yang, 2008). The current study is among the first to highlight the importance of age-graded socio-structural mechanisms in shaping SWB across the life course.

2. Background

2.1. Subjective well-being and the domains-of-life approach

Subjective well-being comprises three unique components: (1) affect (e.g., positive and negative emotions), (2) domain-specific satisfaction (e.g., satisfaction with family, friends, health, hobbies, and place of residence), and (3) global assessments (e.g., happiness, and life satisfaction) (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2003), and the current study focuses on the latter two components. These two components, according to subjective well-being's cognitive perspective, are largely based on individual evaluations that are independent from one's affective state and grounded in his or her broader culture (Rojas & Veenhoven, 2013; Schwarz & Strack, 1999). These components are recognized to reflect the gap between one's *expectations* and his or her *achievements* (see Kahneman 1999; Rojas & Veenhoven, 2013). Specifically, domain-specific satisfaction represents perceived gaps in specific areas of life, and happiness reflects an overall evaluation of these gaps (e.g., a cognitive averaging) (Cummins, 1996).[1]

There is some controversy surrounding the relationship between happiness and domain-specific satisfaction (see Argyle, 2001), but a large body of evidence supports a domains-of-life approach (see Rojas,

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[1] The enumeration and demarcation of specific domains is somewhat arbitrary. For example, the number of domains generally vary from a few to thirty or more, but they should meaningfully reflect the way in which people evaluate their lives (see Rojas, 2007).

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2007). This approach holds that happiness is a function of satisfaction with specific areas of life that are pertinent to the way people evaluate their lives, rather than vice versa (Cummins, 1996; Headey, Veenhoven, & Wearing, 1991; Van Praag & Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008). For example, cross-sectional analyses have identified life cycle patterns in the contribution of domain-specific satisfaction to happiness (Easterlin, 2006; Margolis & Myrskyla, 2013), and longitudinal studies have shown that age patterns in domain-specific satisfaction and global life satisfaction map directly on to one another (McAdams, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2012). Therefore, in the present study, happiness is understood to be a product of domain-specific satisfaction. This conceptual framework for understanding happiness is further developed after a brief review of the related literature.

2.2. Subjective well-being and age

The aging-related domain-specific satisfaction literature is broad and relatively non-dialogic, but there are a few notable consistencies. First, satisfaction with health decreases across the life course (Ferraro, 2006; Franks, Gold, & Fiscella, 2003), which is understood to be the result of a normal aging process (see Pedersen & Svedberg, 2000). Second, a positive association between age and satisfaction with place of residence has been consistently documented (see Pinquart & Burmedi, 2003). Previous findings regarding other areas of life are less consistent. However, prominent theories that fall under the umbrella of the successful aging paradigm (Rowe & Kahn, 1987; e.g., socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992)), suggest that satisfaction with social relationships and leisure increases and becomes more important for happiness with age (Menec, 2003; Nimrod & Shrira, 2014).

The aging-related global SWB literature is more integrated than the domain-specific literature, but the findings are somewhat less consistent. For example, the age pattern in happiness has been reported to be constant, positive, negative, U-shaped, and upside-down J-shaped (see Yang, 2008). While many studies have examined these patterns, few have addressed why any specific age pattern should exist. Aside from the fact that perceptions of overall life quality are often expected to decrease with age in light of average declines in physical health, income, and social ties, theoretically grounded expectations for gross age patterns in happiness are practically non-existent (George, 2010, 2006).

Indeed, only a small number of theories have consistently emerged in the related literature, and they tend to support either a stable or slightly increasing level of happiness across age (see Martin, 2002). However, these theories are generally based on subjective well-being's affective perspective (e.g., happiness as a function of human nature), as they have primarily focused on socio-psychological mechanisms that are thought to influence happiness evaluations (see Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). For example, social comparison theory posits that reference points used to evaluate happiness shift downward with age (see Gana, Alaphilippe, & Bailly, 2004; Heckhausen & Brim, 1997). The maturational perspective on aging suggests that positive psychological traits increase with age (see Gove, Ortega, & Style, 1989). Selective optimization with compensation theory (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) highlights the general ability of older adults to maintain positive perceptions in face of aging-related losses (see Neubauer, Schilling, & Wahl, 2015). These theories are certainly useful, but it is obvious that key life course insights – namely the age-graded structuring of the life course itself – have been underemphasized.

Another impediment to contemporary aging-related SWB research has been its focus on global assessments. In fact, pioneers in this field recognized the limitations of this narrow focus and called for a domains-of-life approach (e.g., Cutler, 1979; Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961). Yet, their calls have gone relatively unanswered—with a few exceptions. Economists have identified life cycle patterns in the contribution of domain-specific satisfaction to happiness (Easterlin, 2006), demographers have shown that a domains-of-life approach is sensitive to cultural contexts (i.e., cross-national differences; Margolis & Myrskyla, 2013), and social gerontologists have found that midlife is a particularly critical life stage (Schafer, Mustillo, & Ferraro, 2013). However, these recent studies are admittedly exploratory and echo earlier researchers' calls to conceptually link the life course with a domains-of-life approach.[2]

3. Conceptual development

3.1. Toward linking the life course with a domains-of-life approach

Among the life course perspective's central contributions are its specified age-graded structure of life events and transitions and its recognition of stability and change in long-term patterns of life course trajectories (George, 1993; Kohli, 2007; Mayer, 2009). While there is certainly disagreement surrounding the structuring of the life course and its underlying mechanisms (see Mills, 2009; Silverstein, 2012), the insights that this perspective provides regarding the ebb and flow of life remain invaluable (Dannefer & Patterson, 2007). One such insight is the normal expectable life course, which recognizes the dynamic nature of life course patterns, but it also stresses the importance of timing in life events and transitions (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985).

This emphasis on timing is evidenced by the concept of "cultural age deadlines," which collectively represent a shared timetable for when life events and transitions are expected to occur within a given society. Cultural age deadlines, also referred to as social age deadlines (see Billari et al., 2011), reflect *expectations* for how one's life path should be carved out (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996a; Settersten, 2003). This framework becomes especially salient for understanding the relationship between SWB and age, given that such judgments reflect the gap between one's *expectations* and his or her *achievements* (see Kahneman, 1999; Rojas & Veenhoven, 2013). For example, if social age deadlines represent a timetable for life transitions, then off-time transitions should have a negative effect on SWB, given that *expectations* were not met. Such linkages, while not yet explicitly developed, are evident in recent life course studies.

For example, women's increasing educational and job opportunities have partially contributed to, and resulted from, evolving social age deadlines (i.e., age-graded expectations)—such as those related to employment and motherhood (see Morgan & King, 2001). In turn, recent research has shown that women who become mothers at a younger age are less happy than their older counterparts (e.g., Myrskyla & Margolis, 2014). This emerging body of research that points to the important role of age-graded socio-structural mechanisms in shaping SWB has thus far focused on non-normative (e.g., off-time) events and transitions (e.g., Balbo & Arpino 2016; Pollmann-Schult, 2014; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). However, this accumulating evidence implicitly suggests that the normative structure of the life course itself can be used to understand a given society's gross age pattern in happiness.

3.2. Life course model for a domains-of-life approach to happiness

In sum, happiness can be understood as a function of satisfaction with specific areas of life that are pertinent to the way people evaluate their lives (Cummins, 1996; Rojas, 2007). Satisfaction with specific domains tends to increase and/or decrease with age (e.g., levels). For example, satisfaction with health (Ferraro, 2006) and satisfaction with place of residence (Pinquart & Burmedi, 2003) generally decreases and

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[2] "Our efforts to understand the shifting contexts of life satisfaction, as with all exploratory studies, are a tradeoff of strengths and weaknesses. No specific hypotheses were tested because we had insufficient a priori knowledge to construct a series of testable propositions; clarifying a set of patterns for future research, however, is more a necessary first scientific step than an actual limitation" (Schafer et al., 2013, p. 577).

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