



# Life satisfaction and delinquent behaviors among Korean adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to use a four-year longitudinal dataset to examine the long-term effects of life satisfaction (LS) on delinquent behaviors (DBs) among Korean adolescents. The study also investigated the potential moderating role of early LS on the associations between early DBs and later DBs. The participants were 3079 adolescents who participated in the Korean Youth Panel Study. Self-report measures of LS and DBs were administered annually for four years. The main findings were as follows. First, DBs decreased during mid-adolescence, but then increased thereafter. Second, the unidirectional model between LS and DBs was a better fit than the bidirectional model. In addition, adolescents with high levels of LS at Wave 1 reported less DBs at Wave 4 than adolescents with low levels of LS at Wave 1. Further, DBs at Wave 1 was more strongly associated with DBs at Wave 4, particularly for adolescents with high levels of LS at Wave 1. The results of this study contribute to the positive psychology literature by revealing the effects of LS on DBs using longitudinal data. Additionally, the findings highlight how high levels of earlier LS might be dysfunctional in the context of DBs.

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## 1. Introduction

Delinquent behaviors (DBs) among adolescents have become an increasingly significant social problem in South Korea. For instance, the rate of violent crimes committed by adolescents increased from 2.2% in 2007 to 4.0% in 2011, while the second conviction rate for juvenile offenders likewise grew from 29.1% in 2007 to 36.9% in 2011 (Statistics Korea, 2013). In addition, 19.4% of Korean middle school students and 12.2% of Korean high school students reported alcohol use in the past month, as well as having tried to run away from home in the past year (Statistics Korea, 2013). As Korean society has changed rapidly in recent years, new types of DBs such as internet addiction and cyber-bullying have emerged, and the severity of DBs is also increasing among Korean adolescents (Bae, Kim, Chung, Kang, and Park, 2010).

DBs among adolescents have been defined in various ways, ranging from illegal behaviors to all problem behaviors that lead to adverse outcomes for adolescents and others in terms of safety, physical health, and mental health (Kim, Lee, and Chung, 2013; O'Brien, 2003; Siegel and Welsh, 2014; Shoemaker, 2009). Since DBs among adolescents have generally been interpreted as including a variety of problem behaviors such as alcohol use, smoking, running away from home, theft, physical violence, bullying, and risky sexual behaviors in Korea, in the present study we defined DBs as deviant and criminal behaviors that have a negative impact on adolescents and others.

Numerous studies have investigated the developmental trajectories of DBs during adolescence. Such studies have consistently documented how DBs tend to increase during early adolescence, peak in mid- to late adolescence, and then decrease in early adulthood, a trend known as the age-crime curve (Farrington, 1986; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, and Farrington, 1989; Le and Stockdale, 2011). However, the majority of data on the developmental trajectories of DBs were collected from samples of White or African American adolescents. Only a limited number of research studies surveyed samples of Asian adolescents (e.g., Le and Stockdale, 2011; Vazsonyi and Keiley, 2007). Although these studies revealed that the developmental pathway of DBs for Asian adolescents was similar to those of White and African American adolescents, the Asian adolescents included in the studies were immigrants, so they were ethnic minorities living in individualistic countries. Accordingly, little is currently known about the developmental pathways of DBs among Asian adolescents who live in Asia.

Researchers have consistently investigated the antecedents and correlates of DBs among adolescents. Many researchers have examined how psychopathology or relational problems relate to DBs during adolescence (Ford, Elhai, Connor, and Frueh, 2010; Gilman and Huebner, 2006; Hare and Neumann, 2010; Kreager, Rulison, and Moody, 2011; Moffitt, 2005). Specifically, adolescents who were diagnosed with depression and/or bipolar disorder were more likely to exhibit DBs (Mallett, Stoddard, & Seck, 2009). Among adolescents who display DBs, between 15% and 20% have been found to have depression or dysthymia (Weiss and Garber, 2003). In addition, adolescents who had experienced stressful life events were more likely to be involved in DBs (see Hoffman, 2010 for a review). Although these studies documented

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the associations between psychopathology and DBs, their findings were limited due to the pathogenic approach applied.

Since “positive psychology” has uncovered the beneficial impact of well-being on a variety of human behaviors (Fredrickson, 2001, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, 2005), researchers have now begun to explore the effects of well-being on DBs among adolescents (Martin, Huebner, and Valois, 2008; Sun and Shek, 2010, 2012; Valois, Paxton, Zullig, and Huebner, 2006). In particular, among the various aspects of well-being, global life satisfaction (LS) was most widely used as a correlate or indicator of DBs in adolescents (Huebner, 2004; Huebner, Suldo, Smith, and McKnight, 2004). Global LS, which involves a general and overall evaluation of one’s life as a whole (Diener, 1994), has been widely used in many studies due to both its convenience of measurement and its meaningful implications for the adaptation of adolescents (Huebner, 2004).

Prior research has consistently documented negative associations between LS and DBs in cross-sectional studies. Middle school students with low levels of LS were found to exhibit violent behaviors such as carrying a gun or knife, being involved in physical fighting, or substance abuse (Valois et al., 2006; Valois, Zullig, Huebner, and Drane, 2001). Adolescents who exhibited higher scores in terms of LS were less likely to show DBs and aggressive behaviors, even after experiencing various stressful life events, which suggests that LS might play a protective role during adverse life circumstances (Suldo and Huebner, 2004). Sun and Shek (2010, 2012) also found that higher levels of LS were associated with lower levels of problem behaviors among a large sample of Chinese adolescents. These studies highlighted that there were negative associations between LS and DBs. However, the directionality of the associations between LS and DBs was not clear.

A handful of longitudinal studies have investigated the benefits of high levels of LS in reducing DBs among adolescents. Adolescents with high levels of LS showed more internalizing and externalizing behaviors one year later (Shek, 1998) and two years later (Haranin, Huebner, and Suldo, 2007). These findings suggested that high levels of LS might be a protective factor against DBs among adolescents. However, the directionality between LS and DBs is not yet evident because even longitudinal studies have methodological limitations. For example, Shek (1998) did not examine the trajectories of LS and DBs together, while Haranin et al. (2007) only tested the unidirectional effects of LS on DBs during a relatively short period. Although Lyons, Otis, Huebner, and Hills (2014) found that earlier LS predicted later externalizing behaviors, whereas earlier externalizing behaviors did not influence later LS among adolescents in middle school, the results were limited to a short-term longitudinal design. Thus, more long-term longitudinal studies are needed to reveal the directionality between LS and DBs, as well as the beneficial effects of high levels of LS on DBs.

However, some researchers in the field of positive psychology have raised the notion of “the dark side of happiness”, which suggests that high levels of LS might not function in a positive way under certain circumstances (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Gruber, Mauss, and Tamir, 2011; Oishi, Diener, and Lucas, 2006). For instance, Gruber et al. (2011) suggested that happiness might be maladaptive when experienced in the wrong ways. They argued that happiness might not always be good in every context and for every reason, and thus it is important to explore which contexts are not appropriate for happiness. Oishi et al. (2006) also explained that happiness might have non-optimal effects on life outcomes for certain domains. They used the case of job dissatisfaction in Switzerland as an example. In their longitudinal study, job dissatisfaction played an important role in motivating changes and improving employment circumstances. Similar results were also found by Oishi et al. (2006) and Semmer, Tschann, Elfering, Kälin, and Grebner (2005). In addition, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) explained that deficits of guilt and shame, resulting from high levels of LS, led to moral transgressions in the context of delinquent behaviors. Taken together, these findings suggested that higher levels of LS might not necessarily lead to positive consequences or life outcomes in the context of DBs.

In sum, although many cross-sectional studies have provided evidence of the robust negative associations between LS and DBs (Suldo and Huebner, 2004; Sun and Shek, 2010, 2012; Valois et al., 2001; Valois et al., 2006), in addition to some longitudinal studies having investigated the effects of LS on DBs (Haranin et al., 2007; Huebner, Funk, & Gilman, 2000), the directionality of the associations between LS and DBs has not been obvious. In addition, while some researchers have suggested “the dark side of happiness” (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Gruber et al., 2011; Oishi et al., 2006), no previous study has examined the role of high levels of LS in the context of DBs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the long-term effects of LS on DBs among Korean adolescents by comparing the alternative directions of the associations between them using a four-year longitudinal dataset. The current study also aimed to investigate the potential moderating role of early LS on the associations between early DBs and later DBs. The study would hence extend previous research by testing the directions of the associations between LS and DBs, as well as the interactions between them, at a four-year period. Based on a review of previous research, four specific research hypotheses were established for the present study: (a) the trajectories of DBs among Korean adolescents would be similar to those of Western adolescents; (b) a unidirectional model in which a change in LS affects DBs would be a better fit than a bidirectional model; (c) adolescents with high levels of LS at the initial period would be less likely to be involved in later DBs, even when earlier DBs were controlled for with other significant covariates; and (d) high levels of LS in combination with high levels of DBs at the earlier period would not reduce the levels of later DBs.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study examined a cohort of adolescents from the Korean Youth Panel Study (KYPS), conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute in Korea. The KYPS surveyed adolescents annually, starting when they were the second-year in middle school in 2003 (Wave 1) through their freshman year in college in 2008 (Wave 6). To examine the effects of life satisfaction in the middle school years on delinquent behaviors in the high school years, we used the data from Wave 1 (in 2003) through Wave 4 (in 2006). Among 3449 adolescents who participated in all 4 waves, those who did not attend high schools were removed from the sample. A total of 3079 adolescents (male = 1545; female = 1534) were included in the sample. Depending on the analysis methods and the variables with missing values, the number of records used in the analysis ranged from 2838 to 3079.

### 2.2. Measurements

#### 2.2.1. Delinquent behaviors

Delinquent behaviors (DBs) were measured based on the adolescents’ self-report questionnaires. The adolescents answered whether they had been involved in each DB (1) or not (0) in a total of 14 types of DBs over the past year and the dichotomized information on each DB was summed to yield the variable of DB.<sup>1</sup> Types of DBs included smoking, drinking alcohol, being absent from school without leave, running away from home, having sex, hitting someone, being involved in gang fights, and other behaviors. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.63. The results of the descriptive analysis on the total incidence of DBs from Wave 1 through Wave 4 were presented at Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> Since each DB shows low frequency among general population, the variable of DB is often created based on the information whether the behavior was exhibited (1) or not (0), as in Delinquent Activities Scale (Reavy, Stein, Paiva, Quina, and Rossi, 2013). The number of types of exhibited DBs was also adopted in the analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (e.g., Le and Stockdale, 2011).

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