



Mechanisms of change in adolescent life satisfaction: A longitudinal analysis

Michael D. Lyons, E. Scott Huebner*, Kimberly J. Hills, M. Lee Van Horn

University of South Carolina, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the psychosocial mechanisms of change associated with differences in levels and linear change of adolescents' global life satisfaction across a 2-year time period. Based on a theoretical model proposed by Evans (1994), this study tested the relations between selected personality (i.e., extraversion and neuroticism) and environmental (stressful life events) variables and global life satisfaction when mediated by internalizing and externalizing problems. The results suggested support for internalizing problems as a mediator of the relationship of personality and environmental variables with life satisfaction. Pathways mediated by internalizing problems significantly predicted levels and linear change of life satisfaction across a 2-year time span. Furthermore, pathways mediated by externalizing problems significantly predicted the level but not the linear change of life satisfaction. Thus, behavior problems and their antecedents appear to relate significantly to adolescents' perceptions of their quality of life. Implications for adolescent mental health promotion were discussed.

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1. Introduction

School psychologists have historically focused on identifying risk factors that contribute to psychopathology in children and adolescents. Although this research has provided a better understanding of potential causes of psychopathology, positive psychology research suggests that a focus on reducing symptoms of psychopathology in children is not enough (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). For example, Suldo, Thalji, and Ferron (2011) found that collecting data on a child's positive subjective well-being (including life satisfaction) in addition to traditional indicators of psychological symptoms provided a more comprehensive assessment of mental health and predicted significantly more variance in students' school performance. This study and similar studies (e.g., Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, & Valois, 2010; Lyons, Huebner, & Hills, 2012) suggests that collecting information on a child's subjective well-being could prove to be useful in fully understanding children's mental health and school adjustment.

Subjective well-being is typically conceptualized as a higher-order construct including individuals' reports of global life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 2000). Perception of overall quality of life, or global life satisfaction, has received the most research attention in children and adolescents (Huebner, Gilman, & Ma, 2012; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Global life satisfaction has been defined as a person's cognitive evaluation of her life overall, based on her own criteria (Shin & Johnson, 1978). Life satisfaction measures can reflect a continuum of judgments ranging from very low satisfaction to neutral to very high satisfaction. Life satisfaction has proven to be a useful psychological construct in children and adults reflecting meaningful relationships with a wide-ranging network of measures of adaptive and maladaptive functioning across a variety of major life domains (Diener, 2000; Huebner et al., 2012; Proctor et al., 2009). For example, Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener's (2005) meta-analysis revealed that life satisfaction is an antecedent of important social, vocational, and health outcomes for adults. Specifically, the authors found that adults who reported higher levels of life satisfaction were more likely to succeed in work, experience

* Corresponding author at: Dept. of Psychology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, USA. Tel.: +1 803 777 4137.
E-mail address: huebner@sc.edu (E.S. Huebner).
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more satisfying social relationships (e.g., marriages and friendships), and live longer lives. Adults with higher life satisfaction were also less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking and drug abuse.

In a review of life satisfaction research on children and adolescents, Proctor et al. (2009) found that life satisfaction positively correlated with engagement in school, quality of social relationships, and positive self-concept. The authors also found that life satisfaction positively correlated with physical health, goal attainment, and grade point average. Although longitudinal research on the consequences of individual differences in life satisfaction judgments among children has been sparse, low levels of global life satisfaction have been shown to precede decreases in adolescents' school engagement (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011) and parental support (Saha, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2010), as well as increases in peer relational victimization (Martin, Huebner, & Valois, 2008). The previously described literature suggests potential adverse consequences of lower levels of life satisfaction in adults and children. Furthermore, the extant literature suggests that global life satisfaction decreases during adolescence. Such a finding is consistent with evidence from research conducted with samples of children in the United States (e.g., Suldo & Huebner, 2006) and elsewhere (Bradshaw, Rees, Keung, & Goswami, 2010; Chang, McBride-Chang, Stewart, & Au, 2003; Goldbeck, Schmitz, Besier, Herschback, & Henrich, 2007; Leung, McBride-Chang, & Lai, 2004; Park & Huebner, 2005; Ullman & Tatar, 2001; Weber, Ruch, & Huebner, 2013).

Given the potential adverse consequences of lower levels of life satisfaction and declines in life satisfaction among adolescents, researchers have begun investigating the determinants of individual differences in life satisfaction. Although numerous antecedents have been identified, most pertinent to this study, prominent scholars have reported that a person's display of behavior problems (e.g., externalizing disorders, internalizing disorders, psychotic disorders) is an important antecedent of low perceived quality of life (e.g., life satisfaction; see Diener & Seligman, 2004, for a review). However, these studies have been primarily limited to adults. One exception is a study by Shek (1998) who found a significant bidirectional relationship between a measure of composite measures of behavior problems and positive mental health (including life satisfaction) in Chinese adolescents. Together, extant research on child and adolescent life satisfaction suggests the need for additional studies of its antecedents, including behavior problems. Clarification of relationships between youth behavior problems and quality of life should have major implications for public policy making and individual choices (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Much of the existing research on children's life satisfaction has been atheoretical in nature (Huebner, 2004). However, in a review of research on life satisfaction, Evans (1994) proposed an integrative bio-social-cognitive model to explain individual differences in life satisfaction. The model proposed by Evans suggests that personality factors (e.g. extraversion and neuroticism), along with environmental factors (e.g. life stressors), directly and indirectly affect life satisfaction. Evans further argued that four cognitive and behavioral mechanisms potentially mediate the relations between environmental and personality factors and life satisfaction. Evans defined the four variables that mediated the relations between environmental, personality, and life satisfaction as general social behaviors (e.g., maladaptive social behaviors, such as externalizing and internalizing problems), domain-specific skills (e.g., academic ability), affect, and social support. Although not all individual causal pathways have been tested within this model, empirical evidence exists for some of these variables as mediators between environmental and personality factors and life satisfaction. For example, research suggests that individual differences in social behaviors mediate the relations between personality and environmental conditions and individuals' well-being, including life satisfaction (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Fogle, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2002; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Finch, 1997). Since the time that Evans proposed his model, research related to the origins and associated psychosocial mechanisms through which life satisfaction develops in children and adolescents has grown; however, major gaps in knowledge remain. The extant body of research, which is limited mostly to cross-sectional studies, supports portions of the model proposed by Evans.

Nevertheless, more comprehensive longitudinal studies, incorporating a wider array of personality, environmental, and psychosocial variables, are needed to test the model proposed by Evans (1994). In the following section, we provided an overview of the literature related to adolescents' global life satisfaction and the constructs used to evaluate Evans' theory: personality variables (i.e., extraversion and neuroticism), environmental conditions (i.e., stressful life events), and maladaptive social behavior (e.g., externalizing and internalizing problems). These particular variables were selected because they are among the strongest correlates of global life satisfaction (see Proctor et al., 2009, for a review). Specifically, we included neuroticism and extraversion because a meta-analysis of studies of personality traits and subjective well-being revealed that neuroticism and extraversion were significant correlates of life satisfaction (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Furthermore, we also examined stressful life events, because Luhman, Hofman, Eid, and Lucas (2012) reported, in another meta-analysis, that the rate of adaptation was much slower for many negative life events than positive life events. Finally, we included measures of both internalizing and externalizing problems to cover the two major factors of maladaptive social behaviors in adolescents (Achenbach, 1966).

1.1. Correlates of life satisfaction

Extraversion and neuroticism constitute two of the most widely empirically validated personality variables relevant to life satisfaction of adolescents (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Shiner & Caspi, 2003). Extraversion refers to a personality trait characterized by sociability, cheerfulness, and high activity levels, whereas neuroticism refers to a personality trait characterized by frequent negative emotions, such as anxiety and insecurity (Cloninger, 2008). A modest but growing body of research suggests that these personality characteristics are correlated with global life satisfaction in children and adolescents. For example, Greenspoon and Sasklofske (2001) found that extraversion was positively related to life satisfaction, whereas neuroticism was negatively related to life satisfaction and positively related to psychopathology in a sample of Canadian elementary school students in grades 3 through 6. McKnight, Huebner,

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