Subjective well-being and its domains across different age groups: An Israeli sample

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ABSTRACT. Subjective well-being (SWB) across the life span was studied in a representative Israeli sample by a national survey of 1183 subjects, ranging from 18 to 80 years of age. Subjects were given "life scales", on which they rated their SWB in their present life, as well as their satisfaction regarding health, relations with friends, family, work, economic status, sense of personal achievement, and sense of control. The results indicate that: (a) SWB is negatively correlated with chronological age; (b) the relative strength of most of SWB domains changes in the different age groups; (c) SWB is best explained by different sets of domains in different age groups; and (d) economic status is the strongest domain, accounting for SWB in 6 out of 8 age groups. Explanations for these results confronted the developmental view of changing tasks across the life span vs cohort-based differences between the age groups. The decreasing number of domains that account for SWB variance with progressing age, as well as some unexpected findings with regard to the oldest age group (71-80) are also discussed.

(Aging 2: 181-190, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

Subjective well-being (SWB) in adults of various ages was studied from a differential point of view, addressing whether (1) general SWB differs in intensity along the life span, (2) differences in SWB in various ages are also expressed in specific domains of SWB, and (3) variations in general SWB are explained by different sets of domains in various age groups.

SWB refers to a subjective sense of overall satisfaction that is personal in nature and indicative of one's basic life conditions and positive mental health (1-3); while this concept is often replaced by related terms such as life satisfaction, happiness, morale, etc. (4, 5), it involves both affective and cognitive components (6, 7), even though it seems basically affective in nature (3, 8).

In approaching SWB from a life span perspective, the relation between SWB and age is questioned. On one hand, no substantial correlations between various indices of SWB and age are found (9-11); while most of these results are based on cross-sectional studies, there are also reports of relative SWB stability with time in longitudinal studies (12, 13). On the other hand, several studies find SWB variations with progressing age (14-16). Campbell (17) noted a negative correlation between SWB and age in publications of the late fifties and early sixties, and a positive correlation in reports during the seventies. Evidence that older people may express more satisfaction with life than younger people was found in large national samples in the United States (18, 19), although this seems to contradict our view of old age as a period of decline (20). To explain these discrepant results, Campbell (17) and Diener (2) suggested that the relation between SWB and age may be considerably influ-

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enced by cohort effects, demographic variables, psychological and social processes, as well as methods of measurement. As observed in some recent studies, such background variables may induce spurious correlations between SWB and age (21, 22), while age, even without a correlation to SWB, may moderate relations between SWB and other variables (23).

The empirical ambiguity concerning the relation between SWB and age calls the comparability of SWB measures across different age groups into question. Studies addressing this issue came to the relatively reassuring conclusion that the basic structure of some widely-used measures of SWB remains constant (at least in part) in different age groups of 25 years and older (24, 25). In contrast with Cutler’s report (26), Herzog and Rodgers (27) demonstrated that satisfaction, which relates to specific life domains, manifests the same latent structure in the 25 to 74 year age range with some modifications for younger and older people; this finding is particularly important because specific life domains, such as work and family, change their meaning and quality for people of differing ages.

In view of the inconclusive evidence regarding the relation between SWB and age, we explored this aspect in a representative Israeli sample. The special characteristics of the Israeli society, such as ethnic pluralism, wide array of stresses and the imperative to survive, may be relevant to this issue as they probably act differently on the various age groups. In dealing with a large national sample, we decided to measure SWB through global as well as specific domain evaluations of one’s life satisfaction, as this approach was efficient in American national samples (9, 18). This set of SWB evaluations, often referred to as perceived quality of life (3, 28), may be incorporated into a SWB model for life span adaptation (29).

Some studies (26, 30) of SWB in specific domains reported that different ages present different profiles of satisfaction in these areas. The second purpose of this study was to examine how such changes in SWB would be differentially reflected in the following, commonly accepted, specific domains, health, relations with friends, family, work, and economic status, and in two other components specifically added to this investigation, a sense of personal achievement, and a sense of control.

Developmental approaches that assume differing tasks in different periods of life suggest that the various domains of SWB change roles and influence in explaining the overall SWB along the life span. With only a few studies referring specifically to this thesis (16, 30, 31), it was our third purpose to examine whether variations in SWB could be accounted for by different sets of domains in the various age groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

A national survey sample, representing the adult Jewish population in Israel excluding Kibbutz members, was used in this study. This sample consisted of 1183 subjects, 589 females and 578 males (16 failed to mention their sex), ranging in age from 18 to 80, and was divided into the following age groups: 18-22, 23-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-65, 66-70, 71-80. Separation of the subjects into the different age groups was predetermined in the survey within which this study took place; data was collected in February, 1983.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire included items of sex, age, education, family status, income and self-rating of religiousness.

Life scale measuring SWB. This scale (1) provides a simple and efficient technique for measuring SWB; used frequently in studies of well-being, life satisfaction and adjustment, its reliability and validity has been demonstrated (32), and like similar single-item based rating scales, it compares satisfactorily with other SWB measures (7). The subject was given a vertical score of nine steps (from 1 to 9), symbolizing his/her personal “life scale”, and asked to indicate on the scale where he or she stood at the time; the upper part of the scale represented the best possible life, and the lower part the worst possible life. This instrument was translated into Hebrew by Eyal (33).

Life scales measuring specific domains of SWB. The technique proposed by Cantril (1) may also be used to measure specific areas of