

Subjective Well-Being in Adulthood and Connected Factors

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Abstract

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The article presents the results of a longitudinal study focusing on the role of family interaction measured in adolescence, and the subjective well-being of young adult women. Subjective well-being was studied using two components: the cognitive component, referring to an individual's self-assessment of their life, and the emotional component, which is made up of two independent components – positive and negative affect. The index of emotional well-being was also taken into account. Family interaction was studied using Lewis' theory. 66 young adult women (2. measurement) and their parents (1. measurement, information gathered ten years ago) participated in the study. The following instruments were used: the Family of Origin Questionnaire (Lewis, 1989), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener et al. 1985, Slovene version) and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS, Watson et al. 1988, Slovene version). The results confirm the

premise that how the mother deals with the needs of the daughter, as perceived by the mother in the daughter's childhood and adolescence, is a significant factor in predicting the daughter's subjective-well being in adulthood. Connections between such predictions and the father's experiences or the competency of the family system were not ascertained. The article also presents the connections between subjective well-being and other demographic factors.

Key words: *subjective well-being, positive affect, negative affect, index of emotional well-being, family*

Introduction

In the last ten years, one of the fundamental paradigmatic fields in the development of positive psychology has been the model of subjective well-being (Musek and Avsec, 2002) developed by Ed Diener (1994; 2000; 2005) and his co-workers. The model consists of the central and global variable of well-being and life satisfaction, which Ed Diener has termed subjective well-being (SWB), and using satisfaction with life as a synonym. Subjective well-being is defined as an individual's evaluation of their own life, a way of measuring how we experience our own lives (Diener, 2000). It refers to experiencing positive emotions, a low level of negative emotions and a high level of subjective well-being (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2005). Musek and Avsec (2002) consider subjective well-being to be an umbrella term, synthesizing a series of evaluations referring to an individual's life: cognitive and emotional, general as well as specific. It is a strictly subjective, phenomena-based concept. The evaluations of subjective well-being depend on past experiences, current circumstances and future expectations. In this way, the evaluation of our lives is significantly linked with our emotional experiences and of course also with our personality and temperament.

Various researchers concur with Diener's claim that there are two sides to subjective well-being. The first is the cognitive component,

measured by the SWLS questionnaire (Satisfaction with Life Scale) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which has been used in our research. Here, subjective well-being is defined as an individual's general evaluation of their life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, 1985, as cited in Schimmack, 2007). In evaluating their own lives, individuals subjectively (according to their own experience) assesses the significant aspects of their lives, consider both the good and the bad, and create a general picture of their well-being in view of the standards they have set for themselves. This evaluation is assumed to be relatively stable and not affected by the individual's current mood. The second factor of subjective well-being is the emotional component, which is comprised of two separate dimensions – positive (PA) and negative affect (NA). Diener (1984, as cited in Schimmack, 2007) thinks that subjective well-being is more than just the absence of negative emotions and moods. For a high level of subjective well-being, a high level of positive emotions and moods is also necessary. In Diener's opinion, both aspects have their own different causes and effects, which was a hot topic of debate in the literature of the field for a long time (Schimmack, 2007). Another questionnaire measuring the emotional aspect of subjective well-being is the so-called PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Scale, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which has also been used in this study. The cognitive evaluation of subjective well-being is largely stable in adulthood, while the emotional component is much more dependent on the personal context of the individual (Larsen, 2009). Larsen (2009) introduces the index of emotional well-being (EWB), which refers to the emotional status of an individual at a certain time. It concerns the main tendency, the characteristic level of emotional well-being in an individual, the positive to negative affect ratio. Responsiveness, duration and cognitive involvement are asymmetric in positive and negative affect and this significantly aids our understanding of the relationship between the two types of affect and helps us in defining the relationship between them. In order for an individual to maintain an overall positive ratio between the affects, one needs to compensate for the negative affects with more numerous or stronger positive experiences, due to the fact that both aspects do not equally contribute to subjective well-being. Negative affect most certainly has a stronger influence on the subjective experience of well-being compared to the positive. This is why, in

order to achieve a favourable emotional balance, it is much more effective to develop self-regulation strategies to limit negative states than to simply encourage positive experiences on an equal level. On the basis of various studies Larsen and Prizmic (2008, as cited in Larsen, 2009) come to the conclusion that the most common ratio between the two affects is between 2.3 and 5.1. They suggest that the best indicator of the ratio is π (3.14). This means that negative experiences trigger negative emotions, which are on average three times as strong as positive experiences of equal gravity.

We are also interested in research that focuses on the factors connected with subjective well-being. Many studies focus on researching the role of important social relationships. Various studies have confirmed this connection both theoretically and empirically (e.g. Myers, 2004, Ryff, 1995; as cited in Diener, & Diener McGavran, 2008). Close social relationships are also linked to mental health (Lewis, 1989; Gable and La Guardia, 2007). Research into social relationships usually focuses on the role of partnerships, family life and friends in relation to subjective well-being. Diener and Diener's (1995, as cited in Diener, & Diener McGavran, 2008) international research has shown a connection between subjective well-being and family relationships based on a sample spanning 31 countries. Various studies have shown that the relationships between parents and children are connected with the child's ability to develop social relationships in general and also remain a good way of predicting subjective well-being in adolescence (Diener & Diener McGavran, 2008). The authors cite the results of various studies which confirm that the most reliable way to predict an adolescent's subjective well-being is an emotional connection and closeness with both parents. Naturally, we have to take into account that the results of correlational studies show a low to medium connection, and that there exist other factors that also significantly influence subjective well-being, e.g. temperament, personality and other demographic factors.

We are, however, hard-pressed to find longitudinal studies in the literature, which would research the connection between family relationships in childhood and adolescence, and subjective well-being in adulthood. Our research is concerned above all with the predictive value of the parents' experience of family interaction in the participants' adolescence for the evaluation of subjective

well-being in adulthood. We will focus particularly on researching the role of the interaction between the daughter and both parents. Preliminary research (Poljšak Škraban, 2010) has shown that systemic family factors (competence) measured in adolescence, while linked to the level of psychosocial development in adulthood, do not have any predictive value for subjective well-being. The results concur with Plomin's findings (in Bussell & Reiss, 1993) that the specific relationship with the parents is more important for the child's development than the general atmosphere in the family. For this reason, we have excluded the variable of the family system's competence from the set of predictive variables. More content specific descriptions of the interactions between the parents and the adolescent are provided in the next chapter on method, in the presentation of instruments and in Poljšak Škraban (2003; 2008).

Method

Participants

92 women in early adulthood were invited to participate; between 1995 and 1999 they had taken part in the research conducted for the doctoral dissertation entitled *The Role of Parents and Interaction in the Family System in the Identity Formation of Students of Social Pedagogy*, where both parents of those included in the sample also participated. 66 women responded to the invitation (60% of the original sample), aged 29 to 37 ($M = 32.2$). 95.5% of the participants live in their own households, 98.5% are employed, 88% are married or are living with a partner, and 64% have children. The information concerning family interaction in late adolescents was taken from the answers given by the parents in the original research. The parents were then aged between 36 and 71 (M mother = 48 years old, M father = 51.5 years old).

Instruments

1. Family of Origin Questionnaire (Lewis, 1989)

The Family of Origin Questionnaire (Lewis, 1989) was used to research the quality of family interaction and how it was

experienced by the three family members. For the requirements of this research, we will only be using the results of the first part of the questionnaire, which Lewis based on Shereshefsky and Yarrow (1973, in Lewis, 1989). It comprises of six questions referring to the interaction between the parents and their adolescent daughter, divided into two sections, childhood and adolescence (12 questions in total). It concerns important qualities of parenthood. The participants answer on the Likert scale from 1 to 5; the content of the answers differs from question to question, but always in the sense that (1) equals *very good* and (5) *very bad*. In the original research, the questionnaire was processed using factor analysis. Based on the results, the following variables were constructed for further statistical analysis, which we have termed as follows:

- D1– parents' anxiety about parenting (in childhood and adolescence),
- D2– dealing with needs (the parents' ability to recognize and satisfy the emotional needs of their daughter, the closeness of the daughter and the parents, and the parents' satisfaction in their parental role – in childhood and adolescence),
- D3– parents' intrusiveness.

The internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's α) of all three versions of the Family of Origin Questionnaire in the first part move within the region of 0.70 and 0.90. For the requirements of this study, we will only take into account the mother's and father's evaluation of family interaction.

2. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener et al. 1985 – Slovene version)

The questionnaire comprises of five items, and the participants answer on the Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The questionnaire is evaluated by summing up the results of all the questions. Cronbach's α is 0.79.

3. Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988 – Slovene version)

The questionnaire comprises of 20 items. The participants answer on the Likert scale from 1 (very slightly) to 5 (extremely). The questionnaire is evaluated by considering the sums of both subscales separately. Cronbach's α is 0.77 in the positive affect subscale (PA), and 0.90 in the negative affect subscale (NA).

Results

To discern which family related factors predict subjective well-being in early adulthood, a number of regression analyses were conducted. As has been mentioned in the introduction, our choice of predictive variables was determined by the results of the preliminary research (Poljšak Škraban, 2010), which showed that the competence of the family system measured in the participants' adolescence does not hold significant predictive value for subjective well-being in early adulthood. The competence of the family system was measured using cluster analysis, taking into account the way the three family members perceived the experiences of the family system; as a result, two groups of families were established according to the level of system competence (more or less competent families – for more information, see Poljšak Škraban, 2002; 2005; 2008). In view of the fact that there were quite a few family-related independent variables to choose from, and taking into account the relatively small research sample, we had to be careful to meet the demands of all the conditions in calculating regression. For this reason a set of regressions was conducted to predict subjective well-being based separately on the mother's and on the father's perception of family interaction. First, five independent compounded variables were included in the regression analysis (D1 – parents' anxiety about parenting, D2 – dealing with needs, D3 – parents' intrusiveness, D4 – communication in the family, D5 – dealing with emotions). The preliminary research showed that beside the family system's competence, variables D4 and D5, where we asked family members about how they experience the family as a system, were also not significant for predicting subjective well-being. The predictive variables were only those where we asked the parents about their interaction with the adolescents (D1, D2 and D3). These variables are more thoroughly described in the presentation of instruments. The following dependent (criterial) variables were included: life satisfaction (SWLS), positive affect (PA), negative affect (NA) and the emotional well-being index (EWB). The latter was calculated according to the formula suggested by Larsen (2009), by dividing the sum of PA with the quotient of the sum of NA and 3.14 (π).

The fundamental finding of the research is that all the predictions with statistical significance are linked exclusively with the mother's perception of her interaction with the daughter, while the father's are not. Table 1 shows the results of the regression analysis for the predictive variables linked with the mother's perceptions.

Table 1: Multiple correlation (R), explained variance (R²) and the statistical significance of the regression analysis

Dependent variables	R	R²	F	df	p
SWLS	0.313	0.098	2.239	3 (62)	0.093
PA	0.334	0.111	2.593	3 (62)	0.061
NA	0.375	0.141	3.378	3 (62)	0.024
EWB	0.438	0.192	4.908	3 (62)	0.004

We can see from Table 1 that the model is statistically significant only for the last two variables: negative affect (NA) and emotional well-being (EWB). For the other two variables, the model is approaching significance. In the cases of all four dependent variables (SWLS, PA, NA, EWB), regardless of the significance of the prediction model, the sole statistically significant predictive variable is the mother's dealing with needs (D2). The results are as follows: life satisfaction (Beta = 0.303, $t = 2.483$, $p = 0.016$), positive affect (Beta = 0.326, $t = 2.689$, $p = 0.009$), negative affect (Beta = -2.73 , $t = -2.29$, $p = 0.025$), and emotional well-being index (Beta = 0.344, $t = 2.978$, $p = 0.004$). The results show that the correlations are positive in every case except concerning negative affect, which is understandable because less negative affect equals higher subjective well-being. The prediction model of the emotional well-being index has the most bearing as it explains almost 20% of the variance. In an absolute sense, this is not a lot, but it is certainly not negligible if we keep in mind that subjective well-being depends on a long line of variables.

Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1987) have already written on the mother's role in the development of female adolescents. They claim that women develop above all through relationships (significantly through their relationship with their mother) and thus through the processes of separation and connectedness. For women it is important to remain one's own person, while at the same

time being close to others. We expect that the mother's sensitivity in dealing with her daughter's needs also enables this. Elium and Elium (2001) claim that girls must develop their own, separate self, but this self develops within an ever increasing complexity of relationships, particularly relationships with the mother. Preliminary research (Poljšak Škraban, 2010) has shown that a well-developed personal self (measured by the level of psychosocial development) is significantly linked with life satisfaction ($r = 0.64$), positive ($r = 0.49$) and negative affect ($r = -0.46$), as well as the emotional well-being index ($r = 0.77$). All of the above-mentioned correlations are significant on the level of $p < 0.01$.

Unfortunately, we did not find much research concerning the prediction of subjective well-being in adulthood on the basis of family interaction. Research that analyses the interaction of children and parents predominantly focuses on the opposite question – how much do children affect the subjective well-being of parents. Research focusing on predicting subjective well-being in childhood and adolescent is more numerous. Diener and Diener McGavran (2008) cite results that confirm the predictive value of the interaction between parents and children for subjective well-being both in childhood and in adolescence. According to the authors, the mother is more significant to the subjective well-being of the child, while interaction with both parents is significant for adolescents (Ben-Zur, 2003, as cited in Diener, & Diener McGavran, 2008). Demo and Acock (1996, *ibid.*) found that the strongest and most consistent factor for predicting dissatisfaction with life in adolescence is discord between the mother and the adolescent. Although in our research the father's perception of his interaction with his daughter did not turn out to be a significant factor for predicting the daughter's subjective well-being, we have detected in the above-mentioned variables low, yet nevertheless significant correlations on the level of $p < 0.05$, moving from $r = -0.26$ for negative affect to the highest point at $r = 0.34$ on the emotional well-being index. Thus we can supplement the claims of the authors (*ibid.*) by saying that the results of the correlational studies which confirm the positive connection between the parents-children interaction and subjective well-being in childhood and adolescence extend to early adulthood as well. This is also compatible with the results of the research of Guarnieri, Ponti and Tani (2010) into important relationships in early

adulthood. Among a number of variables their results highlighted only the relationship with one's parents and romantic partners as significant for predicting an individual's subjective well-being.

Many authors of course stress the fact that other factors are important when it comes to subjective well-being, in particular temperament and demographic factors. Temperamental characteristics were measured in our original research, but will not be discussed here. Our results did show similar connections between extraversion and neuroticism, and various aspects of subjective well-being, compatible with other findings (Musek & Avsec, 2002). Demographical data shows that many significant events have occurred in the lives of the young women from our sample in the last decade: they have all completed their university education, created their own homes (95.5 % of the participants have set up their own households), are employed (98.5 %), living with a partner (88 %) and have children (64 %). We expect that these events also had a significant impact on subjective well-being as they concern the basic developmental tasks of young adults. In view of the high percentages cited above, we can assume that at least some of the developmental tasks have been successfully accomplished by the participants. Many researchers confirm the significant connection between age, gender, income, education and marital status (or partnership), which should explain around 20 percent of the subjective well-being variance (Musek & Avsec, 2002; Diener, 2008).

Discussion

Social relationships, among which the relationship with one's parents is among the most important, have again both theoretically and empirically been proven to be a notable factor in an individual's development. The results of the research have shown that certain family characteristics are an important developmental factor not only in earlier periods, but in adulthood as well. The research focuses primarily on the role played by the interaction between both parents and their daughter as it concerns subjective well-being. The results have shown that how the mother deals with the daughter's needs, how she perceives them in the period of the daughter's

childhood and adolescence is a significant factor in predicting subjective well-being in adulthood. Meanwhile, connections were not ascertained between subjective well-being predictions and the father's experiences, or the competence of the family system. While mother-daughter interaction explains only a relatively small amount of variance in predicting subjective well-being, it is not negligible. Subjective well-being depends on a long line of variables, particularly on temperamental and demographic factors. Our research also took some of these into account (completed university education, living in one's own household, employment, partnership and children) and we expect that these factors also play a significant part in explaining subjective well-being in adulthood.

The results reveal the importance of preventative and curative work with parents of children and adolescents, because such work affects not only the subjective well-being and mental health of children and adolescents, but in the long run also the subjective well-being and mental health of adults.

Our research is of course limited in certain ways, primarily in the size and composition of the sample (exclusively female). A fair amount of research confirms Lewis' findings (1989) that family factors play different roles in the mental health of men and women, which is why it would be beneficial to expand the research to both genders. The particular advantage of the presented research is that it is set in a longitudinal manner, as this gives weight to the prediction of results.

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