



What Factors Influence Subjective Well-Being for Older Adults in Germany?



Social Relationships

The *Value of Children and Intergenerational Relations Study* (VOC) (Albert, Labs, & Trommsdorff, 2010) examined the relationship between satisfaction with respect to family, friendships, and general life satisfaction of 98 German women ages 58 to 83. The results confirmed that social relationships play a prominent role for well-being among older adults. Satisfaction with family was the most important factor in predicting general life satisfaction for the participants with a partner (n = 54). For participants without a partner (n = 44) friendships were rated highest in importance.

Health

Old age has often been regarded as being related to a decline in subjective well-being due to reduced health. However, studies show that people usually adapt to a certain degree to a reduced health status, and after an initial decline, often return to their previous level of life satisfaction (Albert et al., 2010). A three level growth curve was applied to 24 year longitudinal data obtained from 3,427 participants in the *German Socio-Economic Panel Study* (SOEP) (Gerstorf, Ram, Goebel, Schupp, Lindenberger, & Wagner, 2010). The data showed that older adults who died after 85 years of age showed a much steeper decline in well-being with approaching death than do persons dying between 70 and 84 years old, a contributing factor being declining health.

Retirement

In the German SOEP Study (Pinquart & Schindler, 2007), 1,456 older adults that retired between 1985 and 2003 were asked multiple questions regarding income, physical health, feelings of well-being before, during, and after retirement. The majority of older adults showed a temporary increase in life satisfaction after retirement. It was concluded that different trajectories of life satisfaction depended on external circumstances such as transition from unemployment or from employment, individual resources, marriage and physical health. Those found at risk for a decline in life satisfaction during the transition into retirement included elderly with poor physical health, low socioeconomic status and lack of a spouse.

Other Influential Factors: Age, Education, and Cognition

Data from the German SOEP (Gerstorf et al., 2010) showed that more educated persons reported higher well-being two years prior to death and less steep decline with approaching death. This may show that persons with poor education may have increased health burdens and fewer resources in older age.

It was also determined that participants who were living and dying in countries with a higher GDP and lower rates of unemployment reported higher levels of well-being. The study found that a sizable amount of disparities in the progression of well-being at the very end of life is not due to differences between persons but differences between areas where people live. It seems that the most vulnerable segments of society suffer from the lack of community resources.

Longitudinal data from older adults ages 70 to 103 who participated in the *Berlin Age Study* (Gerstorf, Lovden, Rocke, Smith, & Lindenberger, 2007) was used to explore the interaction between age related changes, cognition, and well-being. Participants were tested on perceptual speed and the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale was used to rate each individuals sense of well-being. The results showed that both perceptual speed and well-being declined over time and between-person variability in these longitudinal changes were linked.

Abstract

Although aging is associated with multiple losses, subjective well-being of older compared to younger adults is not necessarily reduced. Here, we explore the question whether subjective well-being of the elderly varies across cultures and how different factors contribute to well-being. Culturally based values such as individualism or collectivism affect the impact of different factors on subjective well-being. In individualistic societies, such as the United States and Germany, there is a greater emphasis on separateness, autonomy, internal attributes, and uniqueness of the individual. In collectivist societies, like China, people evaluate their life satisfaction in relation to society, friends, and family. There is emphasis on connectedness, social context, and relationship harmony.

United States

Results of the *U.S. Health and Retirement Study* (Gerstorf et al., 2010) showed that well-being appears to be stable or a possible small decline during adulthood and into old age. It also was consistent with the theory of terminal decline which shows an alarmingly steep proximate to death deterioration in well-being 3-5 years before death.

A sample including 47 male participants from Harvard University's 68-year longitudinal Health Service study (Waldinger & Schulz, 2010) and their wives or significant others examined day to day links between perceived health and happiness and between time spent with others and happiness over an 8-day period. For some older adults, personal losses and physical declines associated with aging are linked with diminished happiness. However, as a group, older adults in the United States report higher levels of subjective well-being and lower levels of depression than younger adults.

A number of studies have documented the health benefits of being married, but its becoming increasing clear that relationship satisfaction is a key determinant of the health benefits of marriage to Americans (Waldinger & Schulz, 2010).

One survey conducted was a random-digit dialing sample of non-institutionalized English-speaking adults aged 65-74 years, living in the 48 contiguous states, whose household included at least one telephone. Westerhof and Barrett (2005) found that older persons who were subliminally primed with negative stereotypes of old age performed worse on memory tasks, handwriting, and walking and showed higher cardiovascular stress than older persons who were primed with positive stereotypes of old age. Studies also indicate that persons who feel younger than they actually are report higher levels of subjective well-being.

Living arrangements differ in the United States compared to China. In China, cohabitation between family members and elderly was advantageous to elderly due to tradition. As cohabitation is not expected in the U.S., it may be disadvantageous to elderly, because privacy and independence are more highly valued. For elderly in the United States living with spouses seems to be the most beneficial living situation.

Components of Subjective Well-Being				
Pleasant Affect	Unpleasant Affect	Life Satisfaction	Domain Satisfaction	
Joy	Guilt and Shame	Desire to Change Life	Work	
Elation	Sadness	Satisfaction with Current Life	Family	
Contentment/Pride	Anxiety/Worry/Anger	Satisfaction with Past	Leisure Health	
Affection	Stress	Satisfaction with Future	Finances	
Happiness	Depression	Significant Others' View of One's Life	Self	

What Factors Influence Subjective Well-Being for Older Adults in China?

Social Relationships

Social relationships have proven to be a key part of Chinese culture. It is tradition for children to take in their parents and care for them as they age. These expectations stem from Confucian values. A focus group study asked 44 people aged 65-86 about their opinions regarding their quality of life (Leung, Wu, Lue, & Tang, 2004). More than 60% of those interviewed live with their children – a considerably high percentage compared to Western cultures. Marriage was also shown to benefit health by increasing economic resources, promoting healthy behaviors, and providing emotional and instrumental support. However, the death of a spouse is the most stressful event in the elderly (Leung et al., 2004). Living alone has been shown to be a disadvantage for mental and physical health and subjective well-being. 80% of elderly living alone claimed they would have chosen otherwise if they would have had the option (Leung et al., 2004).



Health

The same study asked a series of questions regarding the general happiness (Leung et al., 2004). Most of the elderly people were worried about the consequences of physical illness, but were also concerned with the availability and affordability of medical care. Quality care seemed to be a basic need for the elderly in all focus groups. Basic needs such as physical functions were shown to have priority over other needs.

Retirement

A sample of people aged 60+ were questioned about their life after retirement. The 4,049 person sample were young adults during WWII with a vivid memory of the war. Results suggested that life satisfaction decreased after retirement and in the oldest old group. However, income decrease showed no effect on life satisfaction (Chen, 2001). Cross comparison showed that the elderly's assessment of future life decreased as age advanced (Chen, 2001). The level of social activities also had an effect on the elderly's level of life satisfaction. The Disengagement Theory states that as people age they tend to retreat from society cutting their ties with family and friends relationships. Studies showed that elderly have typically accepted their retreat from work. Research showed that elderly have also accepted a disengagement status, but also to the evolution of one's inner equilibrium. Meaning that elderly are typically okay with retiring, losing friends, death of loved ones, etc. Elderly have perceived some drastic social changes similar to other adults. However, they are not affected by life domains reflecting drastic social changes, but rather the domain of financial status (Chen, 2001). Chen found that the elderly are most likely not bothered by changes in their social environment, but they are affected by changes in their financial status.

Other Influential Factors: Age, Education, and Cognition

Chen (2001) found that better educated, married, and more resourceful elderly tended to be more satisfied with their lives. This could be a result of more opportunities available when one has a higher education.

In another survey that was part of a longitudinal study (N = 240 adults in wave 1 and N = 170 in wave 2), results showed that the turning point of cognitive abilities tends to be at age 65 (Tang & Wang, 2009). Therefore, basic mental processes tend to decline with old age. With that, one's priorities change accordingly.

References

- Albert, I., Labs, K., & Trommsdorff, G. (2010). Are older German women satisfied with their Lives? On the role of life domains, partnership status, and self-construal. *Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*, 23, 39-49.
- Chen, C. (2001). Aging and life satisfaction. *Social Indicators Research*, 54, 209-224.
- Chen, C. (2003). Testing the disengagement theory with differential life determinants of life satisfaction. *Social Indicators Research*, 64, 209-224.
- Chen, F., & Short, S. E. (2008). Household context and subjective well-being among the oldest old in China. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29, 1379-1400.
- Gerstorf, D., Lovden, M., Rocke, C., Smith, J., & Lindenberger, U. (2007). Well-being affects changes in perceptual speed in advanced old age: Longitudinal evidence for a dynamic link. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 705-718.
- Gerstorf, D., Ram, N., Goebel, J., Schupp, J., Lindenberger, U., & Wagner, G. (2010). Where people live and die makes a difference: Individual and geographic disparities in well-being progression at the end of life. *Psychology and Aging*, 25, 1-16.
- Gerstorf, D., Mayraz, G., Lindenberger, U., Ram, N., Hidajat, M., Wagner, G., & Schupp, J. (2004). Late life decline in well-being across adulthood in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States: Something is seriously wrong at the end of life. *Psychology and Aging*, 25, 477-485.
- Leung, K.-K., & Wu, E.-C., Lue, B.-H., & Tang, L.-Y. (2004). The use of focus groups in evaluating the quality of life components among the elderly. *Quality of Life Research*, 13, 179-190.
- Pinquart, M., & Schindler, I. (2007). Changes in life satisfaction in the transition to retirement: A latent class approach. *Psychology and Aging*, 22, 442-455.
- Schultz, M., & Waldinger, R. (2007). "What's Love Got to Do With It?" Social Functioning, Perceived Health, and Daily Happiness in Married Octogenarians. *Psychology and Aging* 25 (2010): 422-431 Web Jan 25 2011
- Tang, D., & Wang, D. (2009). Reason or result? Subjective well-being of the elderly in urban Beijing: A cross lagged regression panel analysis. *Ageing International*, 34, 189-202.
- Westerhof, G. J., & Barrett, A. E. (2005). Age Identity and Subjective Well-Being: A Comparison of the United States and Germany. *Journal of Gerontology*, 60, 129-136.