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

Abstract

Although aging is associated with multiple losses, subjective well-being of older 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 subjective 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 an 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.

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 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.

Social Relationships

As mentioned previously, social relationships are of significant importance for older adults. The quality of social relationships can be linked to quality of life (Leung, Wu, Lue, & Tang, 2004). More than 60% of those interviewed lived with their children – a considerably high percentage compared to Western cultures. Marriage was also shown to benefit older adults by promoting psychological well-being 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

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 & Schnellert, 2017), 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 study (Gerstorf et al., 2010) showed that more educated persons reported higher levels of well-being during the two years prior to death and its 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.

The Berlin Age Study (Gerstorf, 2008; Gerstorf, Schupp, and 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 Mental Health Score was used to rate each individual’s cognitive ability. The results showed that both perceptual speed and well-being declined over time and between-person variability in these longitudinal changes were linked.

References


