

Intergenerational Differences in the Effect of Life Satisfaction on Happiness

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ABSTRACT: As perceptions of happiness and well-being shift throughout life, expectations for the future may influence subjective well-being (SWB) differently depending on age. Younger individuals, particularly in uncertain social and economic contexts, may place greater emphasis on anticipated life satisfaction than on their present circumstances. Generational differences are important in exploring how people form and are affected by future expectations, as well as the psychological and contextual factors involved. Such research may deepen our understanding of age-specific pathways to well-being and inform more effective strategies for supporting mental health across different life stages. This paper emphasizes that expectations of future life satisfaction represent a valid and distinct construct that plays an important role in shaping SWB, particularly among younger individuals. Unlike present satisfaction, which reflects current circumstances, anticipated satisfaction functions as a forward-looking cognitive resource, offering accountability in developmental contexts where the current quality of life may not align with optimism or happiness.

Keywords: Happiness; Life satisfaction; Expectation; Intergenerational differences



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Although the pursuit of happiness is a universal aspiration shared by nearly all individuals, factors influencing happiness vary widely among different people and life circumstances [1]. Happiness is often referred to as subjective well-being (SWB), as it depends on how individuals perceive and interpret it [2]. Diener [3] describes SWB as an individual's perceived quality of life, encompassing both emotional experiences and cognitive judgments. Among these components, life satisfaction is considered the primary cognitive dimension of SWB, reflecting an individual's evaluative judgment of their life as a whole [3,4]. SWB comprises three key elements: life satisfaction, which represents an overall assessment of one's life; positive affect, which refers to the presence of pleasant emotions; and negative affect, which reflects the extent of unpleasant emotions [3].

Thus, life satisfaction is not conceptually distinct from SWB but is embedded within it as a critical facet. Rather than being determined solely by objective conditions, SWB is influenced by personal perceptions, emotional tendencies, and individual interpretations of life circumstances, with life satisfaction often serving as a stable cognitive anchor for evaluating overall well-being. Empirical studies have demonstrated strong correlations between life satisfaction and overall SWB, further supporting their interdependence as a unified psychological construct [4,5].

This perspective emphasizes the varying influence of life satisfaction on happiness across life stages. Younger individuals—including those in late adolescence and early adulthood—may experience happiness in different ways from older adults, who include both middle-aged and older individuals, as their priorities, experiences, and perspectives on well-being evolve over time. For middle-aged and older adults, life satisfaction is a key determinant of happiness. In contrast, younger individuals, who often forgo or sacrifice present comfort in pursuit of future aspirations, may find that their happiness is shaped more by the anticipation of a fulfilling life ahead than by satisfaction with their current circumstances. Unlike adults, adolescents can maintain a certain level of happiness even if their current lives are not satisfying as long as they have positive expectations for the future [6]. Further, positive future expectations may contribute significantly to adolescent well-being [7,8]. Kim et al. [9] question whether measuring SWB using “Life Satisfaction” is a satisfactory approach, suggesting that for younger individuals, expectations of a fulfilling future play a more significant role in SWB and happiness than their current life satisfaction.

While one's current evaluation of life typically measures life satisfaction, emerging research suggests that expectations of future life satisfaction represent an independent and meaningful dimension of SWB, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood. This distinction is not merely conceptual; empirical evidence indicates that future-oriented satisfaction predicts well-being outcomes beyond those explained by current life satisfaction in younger populations [10,11]. Thus, incorporating anticipated life satisfaction allows for a more developmentally sensitive understanding of well-being throughout an individual's life.

Some scholars view well-being as the opposite of stress [12,13]. However, individuals experiencing stress can yet maintain a sense of happiness if they hold positive expectations for a fulfilling future [14,15]. In later adulthood, personal interpretations of one's past life may play a significant role in well-being [16], while among younger individuals, the stress-buffering and well-being-enhancing effects of positive future expectations may be more pronounced. Moreover, in contrast to the future-oriented outlooks observed among younger populations, the SWB of older adults tends to be more strongly influenced by present conditions such as socioeconomic status, physical health, and daily functional capacity. This reflects a developmental shift in which the "source" of life satisfaction may transition from future anticipation in youth to present realities and retrospective evaluation in older age. As such, the roles of anticipated versus present life satisfaction are not opposing but rather represent complementary pathways to well-being across the lifespan. These insights highlight the need for further research regarding the role of anticipated life satisfaction across different life stages.

Given the increasing uncertainty faced by younger generations due to shifting social and economic conditions, exploring how expectations for future life satisfaction shape well-being presents an opportune avenue for research. Generational differences in the formation and experience of future expectations warrant further investigation. Previous studies have identified various predictors of future expectations in young adults, such as commitment, gratitude, self-directedness, and stress, emphasizing the need to understand better how these factors contribute to well-being [10]. Additionally, self-efficacy and positive thinking may enhance well-being by shaping optimistic future expectations, particularly among adolescents and young adults [11]. Factors such as interpersonal competence, social support, and perceived health also play crucial roles in helping young adults maintain a positive outlook on their future. Moreover, positive expectations can enhance resilience against adverse events, reinforcing SWB even under challenging circumstances [14].

Subsequent research should explore the evolving impact of future expectations on well-being through longitudinal approaches that trace their development over time. It is also important to examine how socioeconomic disparities influence young adults' outlooks, as financial instability and limited opportunities may moderate the relationship between future expectations and well-being. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons could offer insights into how differing societal values shape future optimism. Finally, evaluating the effectiveness of psychological interventions—such as programs aimed at strengthening self-efficacy, resilience, and goal-setting—may help support young adults in cultivating future-oriented well-being.

In addition, examining generational differences in psychological factors related to future expectations may reveal distinct patterns in how well-being is maintained across different age groups. For example, Lyubomirsky and Lepper [17] measure subjective happiness based on whether individuals perceive themselves as happier or less happy compared with others. This highlights how the influence of social comparison on happiness differs across generations, particularly regarding the effects of upward and downward comparisons. Given that both tendencies and styles of social comparison vary by generation [18], a deeper investigation into how social comparison relates to SWB across age groups could offer valuable insights.

Conclusions

Understanding how future expectations influence SWB across generations provides new perspectives for age-specific experiences of happiness. As younger individuals face increasing uncertainty, future-oriented thinking may become a central component of their well-being. Further research is needed to clarify these generational dynamics and to inform tailored interventions that support psychological resilience and satisfaction throughout life.

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