

Measurement of the Elderly's Life Satisfaction: Psychological View and Sociological View

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【Abstract】 The purpose of this paper is to compare the measurements between sociology and psychology. Since life satisfaction is a result of changes that individuals experience in their development, Ryff's (1991)¹⁾ emphasis of the developmental approach may be an appropriate method to research elderly's well-being. Variations in psychological well-being with sociodemographical and conditional variables (health, finance, and social support) are necessary to enrich research on aging. So, integrating psychological indicators into sociological research will provide more dimensions for understanding life satisfaction in later life.

【Key words】 Life satisfaction, Well-being, Elderly, Variables

I Introduction

The rapidly growing older population has created a lot of issues for society. Well-being in later life is an issue that the elderly themselves as well as society have been concerned with in recent years. Various definitions and concepts of well-being and successful aging have been introduced in both sociology and psychology. Each approach is different even though the goal is the same—describing the successful aging. “Gerontological researchers elaborated the meaning of psychological well-being to include such dimensions as happiness, adjustment, affect balance, morale, and optimal interplay between the individual and the environment” (Ryff and Essex, 1991).¹⁾

In general, much research on aging has been conducted with psychological well-being in terms of life satisfaction and morale (Wan, Odell, and Lewis, 1982).²⁾ Life satisfaction is the most salient indicator of successful aging

(Baltes and Baltes, 1990:269).³⁾ The classical definition of life satisfaction (Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin, 1961)⁴⁾ is congruence between desired and achieved goals. Similarly, Cantril (1965)⁵⁾ defined it as “an assessment of the overall conditions of existence as derived from a comparison of one's aspirations to one's overall achievements.” The Life Satisfaction Index, developed by Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1961),⁴⁾ has been widely used for measuring life satisfaction (Wan et al., 1982).²⁾ In addition, a single-item measure—“How satisfied are you with your life?” is also widely used. Yet, the single-item measure does not incorporate the individual's psychological condition. The psychological condition varies with many dimensions and is also associated with time. Thus, “the dynamic qualities of life satisfaction” (Wan et al., 1982: 45)²⁾—life course perspective—should be included in any measurement. Larson (1978)⁶⁾ argued that measuring long-term satisfaction is more realistic than the single-item, because the single-item measure

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focuses on the present situation. Also, since gerontological research focuses on older adults, the definition applied to all age groups is not adequate because older adults' well-being may not be the same as well-being for middle-age adults (Ryff, 1989a).⁷⁾ Thus, a multidimensional approach —“the concept of psychological well-being through an analysis of overall life satisfaction” (Wan et al., 1982: 51)²⁾ — may be required to measure life satisfaction.

In sociology, external conditions related to life satisfaction, such as: social support, networks, and roles are significant factors related to satisfaction. On the other hand, psychology is more concerned with internal conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and stress levels. However, for both sociology and psychology, demographic factors —sex, age, income, education, marital status, and race— are used as predictors for life satisfaction (Wan et al., 1982).²⁾ Also, physical (health) and economic conditions are important predictors. Since elderly's bodies have decreased function with age and most are retired from their work, physical and economic conditions change in later life. Thus, the framework of the life satisfaction model is similar in both sociology and psychology, while the measure of life satisfaction (dependent variable) is quite different.

Life satisfaction may be the accumulation or outcome of individual life course experiences. It is demonstrated in the individual's assessment of various areas of life, such as family and friends, activities, work, income, and health (Atchley, 1991).⁸⁾ In general one's well-being can be described by indicators showing his/her available resources and needs for care such as financial resources and social support. For the elderly, not only financial resources and social support but also physical condition are very important factors for well-being.

The purpose of this paper is to compare

the measurements between sociology and psychology. Further, it will investigate how psychological measurements can be applied to sociological research.

II Variables for the Model of Life Satisfaction

Most sociological research has examined psychological well-being in terms of life satisfaction as happiness. Yet, this definition is quite ambiguous. At what point should life satisfaction be measured, through the life course or at the time of the survey? For instance, in the General Social Survey (GSS) “general happiness” is asked as “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days —would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, not too happy.?” This question is very simple but quite ambiguous. How do respondents count their general happiness? What is the criterion of happiness? The concept of happiness could be different for each person. In addition, for measuring life satisfaction, although family satisfaction includes; marital satisfaction, satisfaction with friendship, and satisfaction in hobbies and activities, these measures are still unidimensional, because they do not take into account the individual's state and the emphasis on the present time. However, life satisfaction is not created at one point of time. It is created through the time and events or through one's developmental stages. Thus, the measurements should not be unidimensional. They should have at least two dimensions —internal (psychological or emotional aspect) and external (sociological or environmental aspects). Also, they should include a measure of time.

Two important variables in sociological research are social supports or social networks and a person's role. These emphasize the relationships between environment and individuals—

how do society and people affect individual's life satisfaction. Often the common single-item indicator, "happiness" is used to measure life satisfaction. Although other indicators, such as marital satisfaction, satisfaction with friendship, and satisfaction in hobbies and activities are used, they still measure basically the same dimension. In psychology, self-development, cognition, interpersonal and relationship are common indicators of life satisfaction. These indicate more internal states and are related to life course development.

The sociological measurement of life satisfaction focuses on the environmental or external causes that affect the elderly's happiness. On the other hand, psychological measures focus on the elderly's personality, attitude, and internal effects. Therefore, the psychological framework may give us a more adequate measure of life satisfaction since life satisfaction is associated with the individual's characteristics and developmental process.

Demographic Variables (Age, Sex, Education, Marital Status, Income, and Race)

Not all of these variables directly affect life satisfaction, while all indirectly affect it. Since the subject of gerontological research is the elderly, age is a key factor that is associated with other factors, such as their health and economic conditions, which have a direct effect on the elderly's life satisfaction. Sex and marital status are also related to economic condition. For instance, men are less likely to experience financial problems than women (Holden, Bukhauser, and Myers, 1986),⁹⁾ and widowed women are more likely to have financial strain (Rossi and Rossi, 1990).¹⁰⁾ Marital status directly affects life satisfaction since one indicator of life satisfaction is marital satisfaction. Educational attainment is associated with income and health condition. The higher educational attainment the elderly

have, the less financial difficulty in later life, and the higher health consciousness they reported (Krause, 1991).¹¹⁾ Educational attainment is also associated with race. Non-whites are less likely to have higher education, as a result they tend to have lower income than whites.

Physical/Health Condition

With increasing age, physical health and physical ability comprise the most salient dimension of life satisfaction. The ability to maintain adequate health in later life implies successful aging (Quinn and Hughston, 1984).¹²⁾ Since good health is the necessary condition that directly affects our daily life, health condition may be the most significant predictor for life satisfaction, especially when people reach their fifties (Willits and Crider, 1988).¹³⁾ Also, health condition is associated with health expenditure; less health expenditure means good health condition so that those with less expenditures may have more life satisfaction (Roos and Havens, 1991).¹⁴⁾ Health condition is an important factor for life satisfaction and the major reason for unhappiness for the elderly (Ryff, 1982).¹⁵⁾

Financial Situation

Since the elderly who are retired may experience a decrease in income, financial situation may change and a negative change tends to have an affect on life satisfaction. In general, satisfaction with finances tends to increase with age whereas satisfaction with health tends to decline with age (Andrews and Withey, 1976).¹⁶⁾ Yet, when income is controlled, life satisfaction of the elderly is equal to or greater than that of the young (Harris et al., 1975: cited at Atchkey, 1991).⁸⁾ In addition, financial situation is strongly affected by socioeconomic status. The elderly with higher education reported fewer health problems and fewer financial strains than those with lower education (Arling, 1987).¹⁷⁾ Those

with deteriorated health and/or inadequate income may not retain their life satisfaction. However, "while a low income does not necessarily mean low income, a high income is associated with greater life satisfaction" (Chatfield, 1977: 598).¹⁸⁾

Roles

According to disengagement theory (Comming and Henry, 1961),¹⁹⁾ the elderly decrease their activities or roles due to retirement, death of spouse, or health condition. In other words, when the elderly reach a certain age, they may experience changed roles—the departure of children from their families, retirement, and widowhood. Consequently, they gradually withdraw from their activities and/or social networks, even if they desire not to do so. Their life satisfaction may decrease with changing roles. In addition, with increasing age, individuals face inevitable changes: biological change (physical condition); psychological change (anatomy or independence); and social changes (retirement and widowhood), and these changes may directly affect their life satisfaction. Also, the loss of roles may lead to a loss of identity and a concomitant decrease in life satisfaction (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977).²⁰⁾

Social Support/Networks

There are two types of social support: formal support (provided by government as social security systems) and informal support (provided by family members and others). However, as formal support is rarely used for the life satisfaction model, only informal support will be discussed here.

In sociology, social supports are divided into instrumental support and emotional support. Instrumental support includes; homemaking, personal care, health care, and maintenance of the house. Emotional support is related to the quality and quantity of intimacy with family

members. The child–parent relationship is a major target of research. In general, frequency of visits and telephone calls are applied for measuring the quality of the relationships. For instance, Rossi and Rossi (1990)¹⁰⁾ showed that the cohesiveness of early family life and the quality of the emotional bond between parents and children had direct effects on the frequency of contact and amount of help. Furthermore, this frequency is associated with geographical distance, number of children and gender of children (Rossi and Rossi, 1990;10) Spitze and Logan, 1990).²¹⁾ Daughters were more likely to be in contact with and to provide help to their frail parents than sons (Rossi and Rossi, 1990;10) Spitze and Logan, 1990).²¹⁾ Thus, the sociological measure of social support is more concerned with external conditions than the psychological measure.

In psychology social support is measured by internal conditions. Holahan and Holahan (1987)²²⁾ showed five indicators to measure social support: "attachment (I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person); social integration (There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do); reassurance of worth (I have relationships where my competence and skill are recognized); reliable alliance (There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it); and guidance (There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life)" (Holahan and Holahan, 1987: 66).²²⁾ These measures indicate the internal effects on individuals in the relationship.

Life Satisfaction

Although many approaches have been taken to measure life satisfaction for the elderly, there has not been a comprehensive measurement. In general, the Life Satisfaction Index A (LSIA) (Neugarten et al., 1961),⁴⁾ the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1969),²³⁾ and the PCB

Morale Scale (Lawton, 1972)²⁴⁾ are used in psychology. The LSIA, in particular, has been used in a large quantity of research, and the results often suggested that the elderly were quite satisfied in their later life (Atchely, 1991).⁸⁾

The Life Satisfaction Index (Neugarten et al., 1961)⁴⁾ indicates five dimensions:¹⁾ zest versus apathy —vitality in several areas of life; being enthusiastic,²⁾ resolution and fortitude — the consideration life as meaningful and resolute acceptance of the life that has been,³⁾ congruence between desired and achieved goals —the feeling of success in achieving major goals,⁴⁾ positive self concept —thinking of oneself as a person of worth,⁵⁾ mood tone —being optimistic, having hope. The PCG Morale Scale (Lawton, 1972)²⁴⁾ contains three components:¹⁾ sense of satisfaction with self;²⁾ feeling there is a place in the world for self; and³⁾ acceptance of what cannot be changed. The Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1969)²³⁾ focused on the recent (during the past few weeks) experience of affective status. It was divided into two states: positive states and negative states.

These measures evaluate respondent's various internal conditions, applying multidimensional indicators, while sociological indicators are external and unidimensional measures, such as happiness, satisfaction with friends, and marital satisfaction. However, these psychological measures emphasize the distinction between positive and negative affects and various other factors (Ryff and Essex, 1991).¹⁾ Therefore, they often ignore the individual's potential factors such as "achieving purposes, goals, and other higher forms of positive functioning" (Ryff and Essex, 1991: 147).¹⁾

III Ryff's New Approach for the Positive Measures

Ryff (1989b)²⁵⁾ suggested that although our conception life satisfaction is positive, most research has used measures with a negative connotation; such as, anxiety, depression, worry, anomie, loneliness and somatic symptom. In addition, even though most research is positive, it focuses on measuring successful living but not successful aging (Ryff, 1989b;23) Ryff and Essex, 1991).¹⁾ Thus, Ryff (1989b23); 1991)¹⁾ applies a new approach, developmental perspective. She suggested six criteria for creating measurements. The first criterion is self-acceptance. The second is positive relations with others. The third is autonomy, which refers to "self-determination, independence, and the regulation of behavior from within" (Ryff, 1989b: 42).²⁵⁾ The fourth is environmental mastery, which implies that "active participation in and mastery of the environment are important ingredients to an integrated model of positive psychological functioning" (Ryff, 1989b: 43).²⁵⁾ The fifth is purpose of life. It is an important factor for well-being because it generates feelings of meaningfulness for life. The last criterion is personal growth. This criterion focuses on one's potential.

IV Conclusion

Even though this new approach expands the dimension of well-being in later life, other factors are still important. Larson (1978)⁶⁾ evaluated the measures of well-being and concluded that health and physical disability, socioeconomic status, social activity/interaction were adequate measures for well-being while the proportion of variance in well-being explained by these variables was not high: health is 4 to 16 percent; socioeconomic status is 1 to 9 percent; and social activity is also 1 to 9 percent. Yet, a great proportion of

variance in life satisfaction is unexplained by these variables. In other words, other factors may be associated with life satisfaction.

Longitudinal research is required to understand life satisfaction. Also, human life is not unidimensional and unidirectional; each individual has different factors and experiences, so that complex interactions may exist among variables. Further, although major events or experiences, such as divorce, retirement or death of spouse, have an effect on life satisfaction, accumulation of small daily events are also important factors for quality of life (Reich Zautra, and Hill, 1987)²⁶⁾.

Since life satisfaction is a result of changes that individuals experience in their development (Ogilvie, 1987),²⁷⁾ Ryff's (1989b;25) 1991)¹⁾ emphasis of the developmental approach may be an appropriate method to research elderly's well-being. Further, integrating psychological indicators into sociological research will provide more dimensions and meaning for life satisfaction in later life. Variations in psychological well-being with sociodemographical and conditional variables (health, finance, and social supports) are necessary to enrich research on aging.

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