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IS "HAPPINESS" UNIVERSALLY MEASURABLE? A LIFESPAN CRITIQUE OF AGE-SPECIFIC DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the prevalent assumption that 'happiness' can be universally measured and compared across all age groups, revealing significant methodological flaws in 21st-century empirical literature. We synthesize diverse findings to demonstrate that happiness is not a monolithic construct but a dynamic, age-specific phenomenon. For children, positive affect from play is central; adulthood integrates affect, behavior, and cognition, focusing on goal attainment and meaning; while old age emphasizes acceptance, meaningful connections, and inner peace. A key critique highlights that current universal happiness measurement tools, unadapted to these fundamental lifespan nuances, yield not only misleading conclusions but also ineffective public policies. Such approaches, akin to assessing apples with orange criteria, overlook the profound influence of age and cultural context on perceptions of well-being, as evidenced by cross-cultural measurement issues. This study advocates for nuanced, age- and culture-specific research methodologies, including mixed-methods and longitudinal designs, to foster a deeper, more accurate understanding of happiness. Ultimately, this approach is crucial for developing truly effective, sustainable, and equitable well-being policies that honor the diverse, evolving realities of human experience across the lifespan.

Keywords: Happiness Measurement Critique, Lifespan Happiness, Age-Specific Well-being, Psychometric Invariance, Public Well-being Policy

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Introduction: The Significance of Happiness and Efforts to Understand It

"Happiness" is widely discussed not merely as a central philosophical or ethical debate, but also as a crucial concept in political thought (Tajik, 2011). It is broadly accepted as humanity's highest natural aspiration (Lodge, 1926), encompassing even the political entity formed by the collective will of the people, namely the nation-state (Thanh, 2023), and has been so for a very long time.

From ancient Greek times, extending through Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Socrates was the first figure in human history to emphasize the importance of the question, “How should we best live our lives?” This appears in the Euthydemus, a dialogue between Socrates and his old friend Crito, where Socrates asks, “What being is there who does not desire happiness?” and continues, “…since we all of us desire happiness, how can we be happy?” (Bremner, 2011). Plato, Socrates' disciple, viewed the core principle for establishing an ideal city as how to achieve the highest collective happiness for the city. He thus placed happiness at the heart of philosophical and political questions concerning the best form of governance in his view, the “Philosopher-King,” asking, “How can the philosopher-king make the citizens happy?” (Tajik, 2011). Meanwhile, Aristotle, Plato's disciple, declared happiness to be the "Supreme Good" (Ezedike, 2018), and those who adhered to his ideas recognized it as the “Supreme End” (Broadie, 1994) of human life. From this perspective, happiness did not merely signify fleeting pleasant feelings or temporary pleasures, but a more profound state of achieving life's ultimate goals.

For approximately 1,000 years during the Middle Ages, under the influence of Christianity, Christians believed that true happiness could not be attained in earthly life but depended on the word of God. This attitude was challenged and transformed during the Age of Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century and peaked in the 18th century, into viewing happiness as something created and achievable by humans (Veenhoven, 2010). A prominent German philosopher of that era, Immanuel Kant, acknowledged happiness as a fundamental basis of the “Highest Good,” and happiness aligned with virtue was considered a “Complete Good” (Bader, 2015). This perspective was consistent with contemporary English philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, who proposed the utilitarian concept of happiness as a psychological experience comprising the sum of positive feelings (Pleasures) and negative feelings (Pains), famously stating “greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Veenhoven, 2010). This concept has become the cornerstone of public policy decisions (Persky, 2016) regarding how society's resources should be distributed to maximize overall happiness and well-being (Plant, 1975).

Given this significance, happiness and other related human conditions, often used interchangeably (e.g., Well-being, Life Satisfaction (Diener et al., 2009), and Quality of Life (Brulé & Maggino, 2017)), have become crucial subjects of study in psychology, sociology, and social development evaluation. This applies whether in daily life (e.g., Ayuwat et al., 2019; Boonratmaitree et al., 2020; Amornnimit et al., 2022) or in specific settings such as the workplace (e.g., Sookpier et al., 2023; Saetang, 2024; Worapongpat & Phakamach, 2024). The importance of understanding and measuring population happiness is based on the assumption that it will help develop appropriate policies and approaches to promote happiness among those populations, ultimately leading to positive outcomes in other areas (e.g., Veenhoven, 2008; Jermsittiparsert & Sriyakul, 2020; Trifu, 2024).

However, despite happiness being designated as a life goal for everyone, the reality consistently shows that the understanding of its definition, components, or, in other words, the answer to the question "What is happiness?" remains elusive (Bremner, 2011), and opinions diverge (Lodge, 1926). This is consistent with psychological theories and explanations indicating that happiness depends on an individual's interpretation and perception of the world around them (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Similarly, despite extensive efforts to study and measure happiness, much research overlooks a crucial aspect that has not received sufficient attention: the

fundamental differences in the definition and components of human happiness across various life stages, from childhood to adulthood and old age (Easterlin, 2010; Choi et al., 2024; Helliwell et al., 2024). This includes certain factors that may contribute to trends, such as children and the elderly potentially experiencing greater happiness than middle-aged groups (Frey & Slutzer, 2002). Conducting studies, research, and drawing conclusions for society as a whole without adequately acknowledging these conditions, or comparing the happiness of individuals across different age groups without sufficient attention to the aforementioned differences, can lead to erroneous conclusions and inappropriate policies and approaches.

The objective of this paper is thus to synthesize empirical research from the 21st century (2001-present) on the definitions, components, and unique characteristics of happiness across the life stages of childhood, adulthood, and old age. The aim is to analyze and highlight the similarities and particularly the differences in happiness across these age groups. Subsequently, it will challenge research that compares happiness levels without considering these distinctions by analyzing what theoretical and practical impacts and/or problems such approaches may cause. The ultimate goal is to propose recommendations for future research to prioritize this issue and to adapt research methodologies more appropriately.

ABC Model of Happiness: A Multidimensional Framework for Understanding Happiness

The website of the Faculty of Psychology, Chulalongkorn University, published an article from the radio documentary "Psychology for You" titled “What is Happiness?” by Maneesri and Boonyasiriwat (2017), stating that happiness, according to Veenhoven (as a pioneer in the scientific study of human happiness), is an individual's evaluation of how much they like their life as a whole. Thus, if someone declares themselves happy, it means they like or are satisfied with their life. This simple sociological definition has been further developed into a more technical psychological explanation, characterizing subjective well-being as an individual's evaluation of their life, encompassing emotions, feelings, and life satisfaction (Erus et al., 2024). An even deeper and more complex explanation posits it as an individual's cognitive and emotional appraisal of their life, including emotional reactions to both pleasant and unpleasant life events, as well as cognitive judgments about different aspects of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2009). Delving into the neurobiological level, it comprises an individual's evaluation of their own experiences, encompassing emotional reactions stemming from the nervous system (e.g., affective dimensions, including positive and negative emotions) and cognitive judgments about their life relative to their self-determined psychological ideals (e.g., cognitive dimensions, including life satisfaction) (Esch, 2022).

Given the current lack of shared consensus on what constitutes happiness (McMahon, 2004), and to foster a comprehensive understanding of it, several research groups have proposed various models to explain its nature and components. One such model is the "ABC Model of Happiness," so named because it is founded on three primary components: Affect (emotions and feelings), Behavior (actions and behaviors), and Cognition (thoughts and mental evaluations) (Nima et al., 2024).

Similar to other social psychological frameworks (van Harreveld et al., 2015; Gruber et al., 2022), the Affect component of happiness refers to experiencing positive emotions and pleasant feelings, such as joy, contentment, and excitement, and conversely, avoiding negative emotions, such as hopelessness, sadness, and anxiety. The Behavior component of happiness refers to actions and behaviors that generate happiness, such as engaging in enjoyable activities, supporting others, and achieving one's personal goals. The Cognition component of happiness refers to mental evaluations and opinions about one's life, including aspects like life satisfaction, the meaningfulness of life, and the perception that one's life has value and purpose (Nima et al., 2024).

The ABC Model for explaining happiness (whether referring to Affect, Behavior, and Cognition, or adapted to other three-component frameworks such as A: Activating Events, B: Beliefs, and C: Consequences (Oltean et al., 2017) or (A) Wanting, (B) Avoiding, and (C) Non-wanting (Esch, 2022)) is supported by empirical research, which demonstrates the independence and collaborative functioning of these three components. Therefore, evaluating happiness using the ABC Model necessitates considering all three components, and undue emphasis should not be placed on only one (Tiba et al., 2025). Furthermore, the ABC Model indicates that these components of happiness may hold different significance and manifest differently across individuals of varying ages and characteristics (Esch, 2022).

Definitions, Components, and Specific Characteristics of Happiness Across Different Life Stages

Happiness in Childhood

Happiness in children, spanning from early childhood through early to late adolescence, exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other age groups (and also varies considerably among different sub-stages within childhood itself (López-Perez et al., 2016; Chaplin et al., 2020)). Recent research has demonstrated that children's happiness primarily involves components related to joy, fun, and immediate pleasure from current activities (Holder et al., 2009; Puroila et al., 2012). Similarly, studies that sought to explore the meaning of happiness by allowing children and adolescents to define it themselves, such as those by Holder et al. (2009), Kok et al. (2015), and Ayriza et al. (2022), found that most children perceive happiness as related to play, having fun, and being with family and friends. This aligns with case studies from Izzaty (2018) in Indonesia and Moore and Lynch (2018) in Ireland.

Within the ABC Model framework, Affect emerges as a primary component of happiness in children. Positive emotional states such as joy, fascination, and excitement are central to children's definition of happiness. Children's Behavior in the context of happiness largely involves play and spontaneous, enjoyable social interactions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2018). As for Cognition, this component is not yet fully developed in children, as they are still in a stage of cognitive development (Holder et al., 2009). The younger the child, the less likely they are to have a deep understanding of life's meaning, often focusing only on their immediate needs or daily routines (Lagattuta, 2005; Yang & Frye, 2018).

Given these limitations, significant phenomena that have persisted through time and continue to exist among youth include alcohol consumption, smoking, drug abuse (Johnston et al., 2003), and the use of stimulants for recreational purposes (Sahakian & Morein-Zamir, 2007; McCabe & West, 2013). This raises the question, as Kaminer (2013) posed, whether it constitutes an excessive pursuit of happiness. However, a case study by Chen et al. (2023) offers another perspective, showing that even young children might perceive engagement in socially unacceptable activities as less enjoyable.

Happiness in Adulthood

In adulthood (typically defined as ages 18-65), the definition and components of happiness become notably broader and more complex. Research indicates that adult happiness is not solely confined to Affect—i.e., positive emotional feelings—but also encompasses Cognition. This includes life satisfaction, meaning in work, achievement of set goals, and a sense of contributing to societal objectives (Helliwell et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2025). Case study research in China by Samal and Manchana (2025) strongly confirms the robust relationship between Cognition and happiness in this age group.

Adults tend to prioritize purposeful Behavior, such as working, achieving career success, building and maintaining meaningful relationships, and accomplishing goals related to academic plans or financial security. Adults' affect is more balanced; that is, they are willing to tolerate some negative feelings to achieve long-term goals. Immediate pleasure is not the

primary objective, and adults' Cognition is more philosophical. They tend to emphasize life's meaning, a sense of purpose, and their role in society (King & Hicks, 2021; McMillan & Smith, 2025).

However, entering a broader social context than in childhood means adults must bear increasing financial and personal responsibilities, which are not easy to manage (Bultmann et al., 2020). Coupled with the emphasis on higher goals and achievements compared to other age groups, such pressures can increase the risk of poor mental health and higher suicide rates (MacKinnon & Colman, 2016). A study by Choi et al. (2025) in South Korea empirically showed that individuals in this age group facing financial difficulties and low social support are more prone to suicidal ideation.

Happiness in Old Age

In old age (typically defined as ages 65 and above), the definition and components of happiness show significant changes compared to adulthood. Current research indicates that Affect remains important, but its pattern shifts. Older adults often report positive emotional feelings linked to tranquility, acceptance, and social support, making happiness characterized by contentment and a more balanced well-being (Beygi et al., 2023; Hong et al., 2026).

Furthermore, older adults' Behavior includes meaningful activities that do not necessarily involve high achievement or goal attainment. Instead, it revolves around maintaining meaningful relationships, reminiscence and storytelling, and community participation (Carstensen et al., 2011; Tammisalo et al., 2024). Most importantly, older adults' Cognition encompasses acceptance of physical changes and declining capabilities (Kanungpiarn & Sanpaung, 2020), while still maintaining an awareness of meaning in existence and reflecting on past life experiences. Older adults tend to prioritize health, social relationships, and acceptance of their current state over pursuing new achievements (Mandi & Bansod, 2023; Maximiano-Barreto et al., 2024).

Consequently, good health, family support, and participation in religious activities are sources of happiness for elderly Muslims in Indonesia (Taufik et al., 2021). Similarly, the ability to dance, which signifies sufficient health, brings happiness to elderly women in South Korea (Han & Sa, 2023). Meanwhile, older adults who continue to work in urban China can experience greater happiness than their retired counterparts, due to their perceived value and contributions in personal, family, and societal dimensions of life (He et al., 2023).

Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences in Happiness Across Different Life Stages

While happiness in each life stage has distinct characteristics, there are also aspects in which happiness exhibits cross-sectional commonalities. For instance, children, adults, and the elderly all share a fundamental need for meaningful relationships with family and community. However, the nature and attributes of these relationships vary significantly across age groups.

Table 1 Comparison of Happiness Components Across Different Life Stages

Component	Childhood	Adulthood	Old Age
Affect	Prominently positive emotions (joy, fun, excitement, fascination) — Present emotions are central to happiness.	Balanced mix of emotions (acceptance of negative feelings for long-term goals) — Short-term pleasures become less central.	Calm and accepting positive emotions (peace, contentment, acceptance) — Focus on emotional balance and tranquility in life.

Component	Childhood	Adulthood	Old Age
Behavior	Behavior focused on play and enjoyable interactions (immediate activities, informal socializing).	Purposeful behavior (work, goal achievement, maintaining meaningful relationships).	Behavior aimed at maintaining relationships and meaning (activities that provide meaning but do not necessarily target high achievement, such as storytelling, community participation).
Cognition	Perception/thought not yet fully developed — Focus on immediate needs and proximal context, less on philosophical meaning.	Philosophical/planning thought — Emphasizing life's meaning, goal attainment, and social roles.	Awareness/acceptance of changes (declining health/capabilities) — Valuing meaning derived from the past, relationships, and acceptance of the present state.
Other Characteristics	Happiness is tied to family/friends and play activities; susceptibility to risky behaviors for the sake of certain pleasures.	Bearing financial and social responsibilities, pressure from goals may increase the risk of mental health issues and suicidal ideation; social networks and support are crucial factors.	Emphasis on health, family support, religion, and community involvement as sources of happiness; some groups find happiness in continued work or maintaining social roles.

The main differences in happiness across life stages are clearly demonstrated in several aspects. Firstly, children's definition of happiness is often shaped by immediate experiences and positive emotions. Children typically define happiness through play, having fun with friends, and being with family. In contrast, adults define happiness more broadly and complexly, encompassing elements of life satisfaction, meaning, and goal attainment. The elderly, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on accepting their current circumstances, recognizing life's value, and achieving inner peace or contentment.

Secondly, the significance of factors promoting happiness varies by age. For children, play and spontaneous social interactions are paramount. For adults, purposeful behaviors such as work, goal achievement, and maintaining relationships are more important. For the elderly, key factors include health, social support, maintaining meaningful relationships, and engaging in community activities that provide a sense of meaning.

Thirdly, the role of cognitive processes and self-evaluation evolves with development. Children have limited ability to abstract, so they prioritize immediate needs and experiences. Adults engage in more strategic thinking and reflection on life's meaning, as well as in evaluating success in their social roles. The elderly often reflect on past life experiences, accept physical changes and limitations, and derive meaning from relationships and experiences rather than pursuing new high-level goals.

Critiquing Aggregate Happiness Measurement and/or Cross-Life Stage Comparison Disregarding Definitional Variations

Theoretical Problems

Despite growing understanding of age-specific differences in happiness, a considerable body of research that measures aggregate happiness levels and/or compares happiness across life stages continues to use identical measurement tools for all age groups. This approach fails to acknowledge that it is akin to assessing the taste of apples using criteria for oranges, or comparing apples to oranges. Researchers have not adequately recognized or sufficiently emphasized the reality that "happiness" in the context of children may not hold the same meaning as "happiness" in the context of adults or the elderly.

For example, many studies use the same questions, such as "At present, how are you feeling?" (Gray et al., 2008) or "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" (Lelkes, 2008), for all age groups. While these questions are, to some extent, widely accepted as perfect measures of subjective well-being, both individually and universally (Cummins, 2008), the fundamental issue lies in the markedly different meanings of "life satisfaction." For children, it revolves around play and fun; for adults, it concerns work, goals, and achievement; and for the elderly, it centers on health and relationships. Consequently, the use of such universal measurement tools may fail to capture the most fundamental aspects of happiness for each life stage (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Ng, 2022), much like observations regarding cross-cultural measurement (Raudenská, 2023). Although measurement results might indicate the level of happiness for individuals or even age groups, comparing happiness levels based on different underlying bases may not be appropriate and could lead to unreliable conclusions. As many researchers have argued concerning the problem of "equivalence of measurement" in studies comparing happiness across diverse population groups, measurement inequivalence refers to situations where the same measurement tool may not assess the identical construct or may not carry the same meaning across different groups (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Byrne, 2016). For this reason, in the context of inter-age happiness comparison research, this problem of measurement equivalence can lead to erroneous conclusions.

The following represent examples of research practices stemming from these theoretical problems:

1) Studies attempting to measure the happiness levels of individuals with varying ages and other backgrounds, such as gender, social status, and economic status, using tools developed without acknowledging fundamental age-group differences. An example is Prakobchai (2018), who investigated the happiness of gender-diverse individuals aged 19-55.

2) Studies attempting to measure happiness levels of individuals within the same age range using tools developed without acknowledging age-specific fundamental bases. An example is Sonpaveerawong et al. (2016), who studied the happiness of undergraduate students but measured it through other fundamental components for that age group, particularly life stability and access to dharma.

3) Studies measuring happiness levels of individuals within the same age range using tools designed for assessing happiness levels across all age groups. An example is Sitthichokvorakarn et al. (2024), who investigated the happiness of 5th-grade secondary school students (average age 16.4 years) using the "Thai Happiness Index 15-item questionnaire" designed for individuals aged 15-60.

4) Studies intending to measure the happiness of a specific age group using tools designed to measure other constructs. An example is Pinjai et al. (2023), who aimed to study the happiness of working adults but instead employed a Mental Health Indicator. All these examples are rooted in theoretical problems concerning the measurement of happiness.

Practical and Policy Implications

The problem of measuring aggregate happiness and/or comparing happiness across life stages without considering definitional differences is not merely theoretical but also has significant implications for practical application and policy-making.

Firstly, research has indicated that "happiness is U-shaped" when considering age; that is, happiness is high in childhood, decreases during adulthood, and then increases again in old age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Ng, 2022). This can lead to the formulation of policies based on flawed assumptions and inappropriate approaches. For example, designing policies to increase adult happiness based on "mental health support" or "increasing leisure time for adults," presuming this would boost adult happiness because studies show "happiness increases with more leisure time," might be ineffective. In reality, the relationship between various factors and happiness differs across age groups because adult happiness has distinct characteristics compared with children's.

Secondly, policies and approaches designed to achieve "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" without considering the definitional and component differences of happiness across life stages may lead to policies that are not suitable for various population segments. For instance, designing happiness policies that include "increasing green spaces and play areas in communities" to achieve "the greatest happiness for society as a whole" might be a good proposal for children, but may not be the optimal solution for the elderly. This is because the elderly may not benefit as much from play areas as from improved healthcare services or social engagement programs.

Thirdly, disregarding age-specific happiness differences can lead to problems in mental health and well-being. Specifically, if communities or organizations attempt to promote happiness across all age groups using the same methods, it may fail to address the actual needs of each group. The elderly, for example, might feel that happiness programs designed for children, such as "sports programs," are irrelevant to them. This could lead to feelings of marginalization or social exclusion, as well as diminished roles for older adults.

Examples of Problematic Studies

Numerous influential studies have been published and have shaped policy. Yet, they suffer from problems in measuring aggregate happiness and/or comparing happiness across life stages without accounting for definitional differences. For example, Blanchflower & Oswald (2008) investigated the U-shaped relationship between age and life satisfaction using data from multiple countries and found that "happiness is U-shaped" with age. Although this study has been widely cited in subsequent literature, follow-up research has indicated that these findings might not genuinely reflect a U-shaped relationship between happiness and age, but rather stem from measurement issues and a failure to account for other confounding factors (Dolan et al., 2022).

Another group of researchers, Helliwell et al. (2017), re-examined the Blanchflower & Oswald study and found that when considering other age-related background factors such as health, parenthood, employment stability, etc., the results did not consistently show a clear "U-shape." It might even be that the elderly are not, in fact, significantly happier than middle-aged individuals (Lelkes, 2008). These findings not only underscore the importance of considering other factors that may enhance or diminish happiness—beyond age alone—but also highlight the inherent problem of using universal measurement tools to assess life satisfaction across people of different ages.

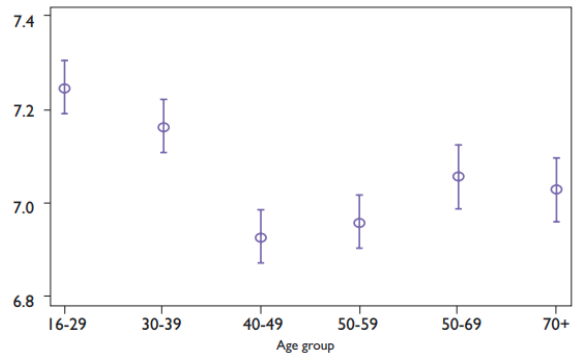

Figure 1.1 Average life satisfaction in specific age groups (mean and confidence interval)
Source: Lelkes (2008)

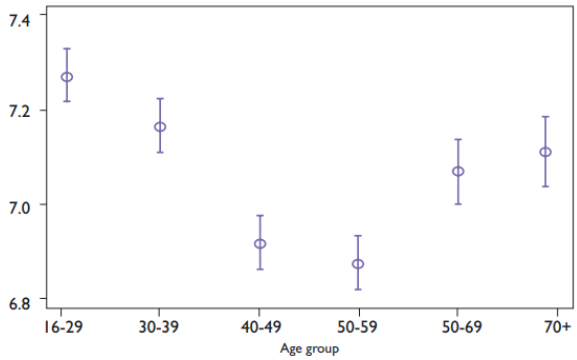

Figure 1.2 Average life satisfaction by age, adjusted for differences in income

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

The synthesis of literature in the 21st century to explore the definitions, components, and specific characteristics of happiness across various life stages, alongside a critique of measurement practices and cross-life-stage comparisons that disregard these fundamental differences, underscores the urgent need to re-evaluate the paradigm of happiness research. This has significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical application.

The first crucial finding is that happiness is not a static, singular concept throughout life but a dynamic construct that evolves with age. In childhood, happiness is often tied to Affect (positive emotions) such as fun, play, and excitement, reflecting immediate perceptions. Upon entering adulthood, the definition of happiness becomes broader and more complex, encompassing Affect, Behavior, and Cognition, linking to goal achievement, life meaning, and valuable relationships. In old age, happiness often focuses on acceptance of one's current state, maintaining meaningful relationships, reminiscing about past experiences, and seeking inner peace. These insights indicate that the structure and sources of happiness change significantly with human development.

A pivotal problem highlighted by this article is the use of universal happiness measurement tools or cross-life stage comparisons that disregard fundamental age-specific distinctions. This issue is broadly recognized in academic circles, as evidenced by the edited volume "Metrics of Subjective Well-Being: Limits and Improvements" (Brulé & Maggino, 2017). This book elucidates several significant challenges, such as the complexity of the relationship between happiness and income, and the necessity of considering cultural dimensions in measuring life satisfaction. Therefore, measuring happiness across different life stages with a single criterion inevitably leads to inaccurate conclusions and inappropriate policies. This is akin to attempting to measure diverse objects with a single instrument, which can result in "happiness-boosting policies" failing or even creating negative consequences.

Beyond age, cultural context also plays a significant role in shaping the definition and components of happiness. For instance, the Hindu concept of "Ashrama 4" divides human life into four stages: Brahmacharya (student life), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (forest dweller), and Sannyasa (renunciant). Each ashrama has distinct goals and duties that directly influence perceptions of and sources of happiness. For example, in Brahmacharya, happiness might be associated with learning; in Grihastha, with family formation and social responsibilities; and in Sannyasa, with liberation from worldly attachments to achieve moksha. This demonstrates how deeply embedded philosophical and social structures within a culture can distinctly define "happiness" across different life stages.

Cultural differences are also evident in the details of happiness, such as the importance of social networks for the elderly. In Thai society, older adults place significant importance on family, care from children, and participation in religious activities as key sources of happiness. This contrasts with some Western societies, where the elderly may prioritize independence, friendships, and participation in social activities with peers (Gray et al., 2015), reflecting differing values between "patronage societies" and "individualistic societies." These differences underscore the necessity of analyzing and measuring happiness with a refined cultural lens.

Therefore, the author proposes the following recommendations for future research:

1) Develop age- and culture-specific definitions and measurement tools for happiness. Instead of relying solely on universal questionnaires, instruments should be designed or adapted with validated reliability and validity specific to each age group and cultural context. This may include using mixed-methods research to gain a deeper understanding from participants' direct perspectives.

2) Prioritize age- and culture-specific factors that promote or diminish happiness. Understanding which variables (e.g., health, relationships, work, education, economy, and society) exert the most influence on happiness in each life stage and cultural context will enable researchers to identify appropriate leverage points for promoting happiness effectively, rather than searching for universal variables applicable to all cases.

3) Support longitudinal studies that account for life transitions. Studying the happiness of the same individuals as they move from one life stage to another will provide a clearer understanding of the evolving dynamics of happiness shaped by life experiences. This will also help identify factors that enable individuals to adapt and maintain their happiness levels.

Ultimately, the contribution of this article is to stimulate a broader discussion, urging researchers and policymakers to acknowledge the hierarchical and evolutionary nature of happiness. This necessitates nuanced research approaches and policies that align with the complex and diverse realities of "happiness" across various age groups and cultural contexts, thereby promoting sustainable and truly effective human well-being, rather than merely conducting research for completion's sake.

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