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Does Life Satisfaction Moderate the Effects of Stressful Life Events on Psychopathological Behavior During Adolescence?

Shannon M. Suldo and E. Scott Huebner
University of South Carolina

Psychologists within a positive psychology framework have proposed the existence of a set of psychological strengths that buffer against the development of psychopathology. To date, most research efforts in positive psychology have focused on adults. This longitudinal study tested the prediction that adolescents' judgments of life satisfaction moderate the influence of stressful life events on the subsequent development of psychopathological behavior. Using a sample of 816 middle and high school students, the study demonstrated support for the moderational model for externalizing behavior outcomes, but not internalizing behavior problems. Specifically, adolescents with positive life satisfaction (vs. those who were dissatisfied with their lives) were less likely to develop later externalizing behaviors in the face of stressful life events. The study also revealed that adolescent life satisfaction reports show moderate stability across a one-year time frame and independently predict subsequent externalizing behavior even while controlling for prior levels of externalizing behavior. Taken together, the findings offer preliminary support that life satisfaction operates as a protective psychological strength that provides a buffer against some effects of adverse life events in adolescence.

Recent calls have been made for the development of a science of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Three research foci have emerged: the study of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutional (e.g., schools, families) characteristics that promote well-being. One of the major underlying premises of positive psychology is that prevention of psychopathology is most effective when efforts are focused on building individuals' strengths, rather than on repairing their deficits. That is, positive psychology hypothesizes that there exists a set of buffers (e.g., positive individual traits) against psychopathology, which can provide the foundation for effective prevention programs. Recent attempts at developing an initial taxonomy of human strengths have been articulated in Seligman (2002).

Address correspondence to Dr. Scott Huebner, Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208; E-mail: huebner@sc.edu.

One positive subjective experience, which may also operate as an individual strength, is the tendency to experience life in satisfying ways, also referred to as *global life satisfaction*. Global life satisfaction has been defined as individuals' cognitive evaluations of the positivity of their lives as a whole, based on their own standards (Shin & Johnson, 1978). Life satisfaction has been studied extensively in adults (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) and to a much lesser extent in children and adolescents (Huebner, 1997; Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & McKnight, 2004). Research on life satisfaction with adults has suggested that life satisfaction is not simply a byproduct of various life forces (e.g., environmental events, genetics, etc.), but is an important determinant of many life outcomes, such as successful occupational, interpersonal, and health outcomes (see Frisch, 1999 for a review). Although some studies with children and youth have explored the possibility that life satisfaction serves as more than an outcome variable (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002; Suldo & Huebner, 2004), these studies have been limited to investigations of life satisfaction as a potential *mediating* variable, such that environmental factors influence life satisfaction which, in turn, influences important outcomes like problem behavior.

One way to test whether or not life satisfaction in children and/or youth acts as a true strength is to assess its ability to function as a *moderating* variable in predictions of the development of psychopathological behaviors. For example, a human strength as described above would mitigate against the development of psychopathological behavior in the face of adverse life circumstances. To illustrate, even though the occurrence of multiple stressful life events (e.g., death in the family, divorce, moving to a new city) is known to increase the likelihood of the development of childhood behavior problems (Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999; Compas, 1987), it is nevertheless possible that positive life satisfaction may serve as a buffer against the development of behavior problems. Lazarus (1991) suggests this possibility in his theory of stress and coping. Life satisfaction might reflect a general positive appraisal style, which operates as "ground" relative to the "figure" of the discrete events in people's lives. Such an appraisal tendency is theorized to influence the instantaneous cognitive evaluations that are related to specific environmental events and associated emotional and coping responses (e.g., externalizing behaviors). Such an appraisal style, when positive, may serve as a buffer against stressors in that potentially negative experiences may be interpreted in an overall more positive context, resulting in more positive emotional reactions and effective coping behaviors. When negative, such an appraisal style may predispose an adolescent to be more likely to experience negative emotions and generate more maladaptive coping responses, such as externalizing or internalizing behaviors.

Based upon Lazarus's theory, life satisfaction may operate as a moderator, also referred to as a *buffer*; in other words, life satisfaction reports should interact with the experience of various levels of stressful life events to predict subsequent behavior problems. In this manner, it would be expected that individuals with positive levels of life satisfaction would be less prone to experiencing psy-

chopathological symptoms in the face of stressful life events whereas individuals who were dissatisfied would be more likely to develop psychopathological symptoms in response to stressful events. To date, published longitudinal tests of the moderating effects of life satisfaction have not been conducted with adults or children.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to test a moderational model of the effects of life satisfaction on the relationship between stressful life events and subsequent psychopathological behavior in adolescents. Five specific questions were posed: (a) Does global life satisfaction in adolescents demonstrate significant stability across time? (b) Does initial (Time 1) global life satisfaction predict later (Time 2) *externalizing* behaviors, even when initial levels of externalizing behaviors are considered and controlled for? (c) Does Time 1 global life satisfaction predict Time 2 *internalizing* behaviors when Time 1 internalizing behaviors are controlled for? (d) Does Time 1 global life satisfaction moderate the relationship between Time 1 stressful life events and Time 2 *externalizing* behaviors in adolescents?; and (e) Does Time 1 global life satisfaction moderate the relationship between Time 1 stressful life events and Time 2 *internalizing* behavior in adolescents?

METHOD

Procedure

Data were collected on two occasions, one year apart, from two high schools and three middle schools in one school district in a small city in a southeastern U.S. state. On both occasions, the participants completed the self-report questionnaires in counterbalanced order during a single session led by a trained research assistant. Students at Time 2 were recruited from among those who participated at Time 1.

Participants

The participants at Time 1 (fall of 2000) who were targeted for longitudinal study were 1,045 students enrolled in grades six (17%), seven (18%), eight (15%), nine (18%), ten (18%), and 11 (13%). Their mean age was 14.2 (SD = 1.8) years. Sixty-four percent of the students were female. Fifty-eight percent were African American, 34% were Caucasian, and the remainder were of other ethnic backgrounds. A total of 59% reported receiving free/reduced lunches, indicating a low SES level.

At Time 2 (fall of 2001), participation was sought from all 1,045 students who participated at Time 1. Questionnaires were completed by 816 of these students, yielding a return sample of 78%. Of the 22% of eligible students who did not participate at Time 2, school officials reported that 93% had moved/withdrawn from the school district; the remaining 7% of students were either absent on all data collection dates during Time 2 (6%), provided incomplete questionnaires at

Time 2 (1%), or did not obtain parental consent to participate ($n = 1$). At Time 2, the mean age of the 816 participants retained for longitudinal analysis was 15.2 ($SD = 1.8$). Sixty-four percent were female. Sixty-one percent were African American, 33% Caucasian, and 6% were of other ethnic backgrounds. Sixty percent of the students in the sample used for longitudinal analysis reported receiving free/reduced lunches.

A series of chi-square and t-tests between the longitudinal sample (i.e., students who participated at both Times 1 and 2) and the participants lost to attrition (i.e., students who participated at Time 1 only) was conducted to test for potential effects of sample attrition. None of the chi-square tests comparing demographic characteristics of participants at Time 1 to those at Time 2 was significant, indicating that students who withdrew from the longitudinal sample were no more likely to be of a particular race, gender, or socioeconomic status group. Next, comparisons of mean differences on the variables of interests (global life satisfaction, stressful life events, externalizing behavior problems, internalizing behavior problems) at Time 1 between the two groups (i.e., 816 students in the longitudinal sample vs. 229 students lost to attrition) were conducted using an alpha level ($p < .01$) adjusted for multiple comparisons. Mean score comparisons indicated no differences between the groups with respect to levels of life satisfaction, stressful life events, and internalizing behavior at Time 1. However, results revealed a significant difference with respect to initial reports of externalizing behavior ($t = -3.17$, $p < .01$); specifically, the longitudinal sample had a lower externalizing mean raw score and standard deviation ($M = 12.79$; $SD = 7.89$) than students who did not participate at Time 2 ($M = 15.04$; $SD = 9.92$). The effect size of this mean difference is .25, which is considered a small effect (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Thus, there was some tendency for less aggressive children to remain in the study. It should be noted that the sample of interest for all subsequent analyses consisted of 816 middle and high school students.

Measures

Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS; Huebner, 1991a). The SLSS is a 7-item self-report scale designed for children in grades three through 12. The seven items reflect satisfaction with life as a whole (e.g., I have what I want in life). Students chose from among six response options: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = mildly disagree, 4 = mildly agree, 5 = moderately agree, and 6 = strongly agree. Internal consistency reliabilities of the SLSS have been reported in the .80s (Dew & Huebner, 1994; Huebner, 1991a; Gilman & Huebner, 1997). Test-retest reliability across one to two weeks has been reported at .74 (Huebner, 1991a). Concurrent validity has been supported by correlations with parent reports (Dew & Huebner, 1994; Gilman & Huebner, 1997), teacher reports of classroom behavior (Huebner & Alderman, 1993), and other measures of overall life satisfaction (Dew & Huebner, 1994; Huebner, 1991a). Additional evidence of

construct validity has been provided by predicted relationships with measures of global self-esteem, locus of control, and positive affect (Huebner, 1991b & c).

Youth Self-Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1991). The YSR is a 118-item, self-report scale of behavior problems. Students rated their behaviors on a 3-point metric, in which 0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, and 2 = very true or often true. For this study, only the 61 items that constitute the externalizing and internalizing composite subscales were used. The internalizing composite reflects adolescents' levels of somatic complaints (9 items), depression/anxiety (16 items), and withdrawal (7 items), while the externalizing composite refers to adolescents' total levels of reported delinquent (11 items) and aggressive (19 items) behaviors. Validity studies support the usefulness of the YSR in identifying children and adolescents with behavior disorders. For example, adolescents referred for clinical services demonstrate significantly higher scores on all problem subscales compared to nonreferred adolescents. Also, correlations between the YSR and the parent ratings from the Child Behavior Checklist were .38 to .42 for the internalizing and .43 to .49 for externalizing scores. One-week, test-retest reliability was reported as .79. Finally, the internal consistency of the internalizing and externalizing scales was good; the alpha coefficients were .89 and .87 respectively in this study.

Life Events Checklist (LEC; Johnson & McCutcheon, 1980). The Life Events Checklist is a 46-item measure in which adolescents indicate the occurrence of stressful, major life events. Twenty-eight items refer to controllable events, whereas 18 items refer to uncontrollable events. We used only the 18 items that referred to events that were considered uncontrollable or fateful, such as changing schools, parental divorce, new sibling, and/or the death of a close friend (vs. controllable events like joining a new club). Students indicated the presence or absence of the events during the past year; each student's score thus ranged from 0 to 18.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the instruments completed by the adolescents at Time 1 and one year later (Time 2). Test-retest correlations were .40, .57, .63, and .65 for stressful life events, life satisfaction, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors, respectively. Correlation analyses reveal that at Time 1, stressful life events had modest correlations with life satisfaction, internalizing behavior, and externalizing behavior. In addition, both stressful life events and life satisfaction at Time 1 were significantly correlated with externalizing and internalizing behaviors at Time 2.

Furthermore, regression analyses that controlled for externalizing scores at Time 1 revealed that Time 1 life satisfaction scores were significant predictors of Time 2 externalizing behavior scores ($F(1, 808) = 6.64, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .005, R^2 = .403$). However, Time 1 life satisfaction scores did not predict Time 2 internaliz-

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of and between Target Variables for Adolescents at Time 1 and Time 2 (N = 816)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. T1 Stressful life events	4.99	3.23							
2. T1 Life satisfaction	4.22	1.14	–.19*						
3. T1 Externalizing beh	12.78	7.89	.28*	–.37*					
4. T1 Internalizing beh	14.35	9.61	.22*	–.50*	.50*				
5. T2 Stressful life events	3.57	2.69	.40*	–.17*	.17*	.17*			
6. T2 Life satisfaction	4.27	1.11	–.14*	.56*	–.27*	–.36*	–.23*		
7. T2 Externalizing beh	12.56	8.23	.23*	–.30*	.63*	.34*	.27*	–.37*	
8. T2 Internalizing beh	13.04	9.39	.18*	–.37*	.33*	.65*	.29*	–.48*	.52*

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; beh = behavior.
*$p < .05$.

ing behaviors when Time 1 internalizing scores were controlled for ($F(1, 793) = 3.71$, $p > .05$, $R^2 = .424$). Thus, when initial reported levels of psychopathology are taken into account, low adolescent life satisfaction reports appear to be a risk factor for subsequent externalizing behavior problems, but not for internalizing problems.

According to the hypothesized moderation model, a simple correlation between life satisfaction reports and behavior problems is *not* crucial. Instead, to achieve a moderator effect, the presence of life satisfaction (vs. life *dis*satisfaction) must alter the association between stressful life events and the future occurrence of problem behaviors. Thus, using hierarchical multiple regression procedures as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), we predicted externalizing behaviors at Time 2 by centering all predictor variables and first controlling for Time 1 externalizing behaviors scores (step 1), then entering stressful life events scores at Time 1 (step 2), Time 1 life satisfaction scores (step 3), followed by the interaction between Time 1 stressful life events and life satisfaction scores (step 4). Results of regression analyses are presented in Table 2. The interaction term was significant [$b = –.12$, $F(1,806) = 4.92$, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .004$], indicating that life satisfaction interacted with stressful life events to predict subsequent increases in externalizing behavior problems. To interpret the interaction effect, we followed procedures set forth in Cohen et al. (2003) and constructed simple regression lines by regressing Time 2 externalizing behavior on Time 1 stressful life events at meaningful levels of the moderator (i.e., life satisfaction at Time 1), specifically negative life satisfaction (mean scores between 1 and 3.9), and positive life satisfaction (mean scores at or above 4). Externalizing behavior at Time 1 was controlled for in both regression analyses by entering it first in the predictor statement. The interaction effect is plotted in Figure 1, in which the range of Time 1 stressful life events is on the X axis, and Time 2 externalizing composite scores are on the Y axis (with Time 1 externalizing scores held constant at zero).

As shown in the figure, the slope of the association of Time 1 stressful life

TABLE 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Interactions between Initial Life Satisfaction and Stressful Life Events Scores as Predictors of Subsequent Adolescent Psychopathology (N = 816)

Step and Variable	B	$SE\ B$	β	R^2 Change	F Change
Time 2 Externalizing Behavior:					
1. Time 1 Externalizing	.66	.03	.63	.398	542.79*
2. Time 1 Stressful life events	.15	.07	.06	.003	4.48*
3. Time 1 Life satisfaction	−.50	.21	−.07	.004	5.70*
4. Time 1 SLE * LS	−.12	.06	−.06	.004	4.92*
Time 2 Internalizing Behavior:					
1. Time 1 Internalizing	.63	.03	.65	.421	578.82*
2. Time 1 Stressful life events	.10	.08	.04	.001	1.69
3. Time 1 Life satisfaction	−.46	.26	−.06	.002	3.27
4. Time 1 SLE * LS	.03	.06	.01	.000	.17

Note. R^2 = .409 for Time 2 externalizing behavior; R^2 = .425 for Time 2 internalizing behavior. SLE = stressful life events; LS = life satisfaction. All statistics for a given independent variables were computed at the step that variable entered the equation.
*$p < .05$.

events with Time 2 externalizing behavior was the steepest for adolescents with negative life satisfaction at Time 1 (b = .28) and small and nonsignificant for adolescents with positive life satisfaction at Time 1 (b = .06) In other words, stressful life events predict subsequent externalizing behavior only if an adolescent has low life satisfaction, providing evidence for a buffering function of life satisfaction.

A similar model was tested for the prediction of Time 2 internalizing behaviors. The interaction term was not significant in this model, thus failing to provide support for a moderation model in the case of *internalizing* behavior problems.

DISCUSSION

These results provide threefold support for the notion that the experience of life satisfaction may serve as a significant psychological strength for adolescents. First, the findings of this study revealed a correlation of r = .57 between life satisfaction at Time 1 and one year later at Time 2. The magnitude of this association is similar to the one-year, test-retest coefficient (r = .53) found in another study of adolescents (Huebner, Funk, & Gilman, 2000). This finding implies that, similar to the case for adults (Diener et al., 1999), global life satisfaction judgments represent a moderately stable characteristic of adolescents, including some trait-like components. However, the moderate magnitude of the coefficient also suggests that adolescent life satisfaction reports are sensitive to changing life circumstances.

Second, adolescent global life satisfaction reports demonstrated significant

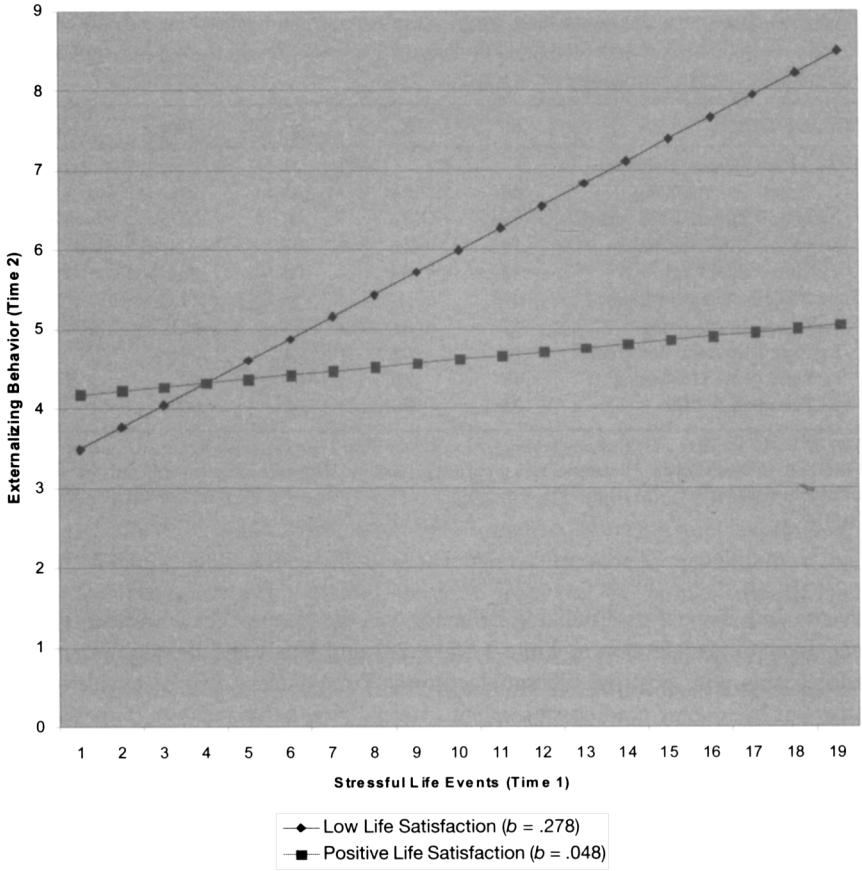

FIGURE 1. Interaction of stressful life events with life satisfaction in predicting subsequent levels of externalizing behavior (controlling for initial externalizing behavior). Low and positive refer to levels of adolescent life satisfaction that are either below the mean item raw score of 4 or at and above a score of 4, respectively. The slope of each line is denoted by the corresponding unstandardized regression coefficient (*b*).

predictive capability. Initial life satisfaction predicted later externalizing behavior, even when controlling for initial externalizing behavior. This finding implies that low life satisfaction, in and of itself, may be an important precursor of externalizing behavior problems.

Third, the results provide partial support for the hypothesized moderation model of the effects of life satisfaction in relation to stressful life events and psychopathology in adolescence. Children who can develop relatively stable, positive attitudes toward their lives in general may be less likely to experience the occurrence of particular behavior problems, such as the externalizing behavior

problems (but not internalizing behavior problems) investigated in this study. In contrast, youth who are pervasively dissatisfied with their lives may be predisposed to experience such behavior problems. Therefore, life satisfaction appears to operate as a buffer against the development of subsequent externalizing behavior problems in the face of stressful life events. Thus, as suggested by Lazarus (1991), the tendency to appraise life in a positive manner affects the likelihood of subsequent, effective coping behavior.

Practical implications of the current study are amplified by recent research that indicates the reciprocal deleterious relationships between cumulative stressful life events and psychopathology during adolescence. Specifically, Kim, Conger, Elder, and Lorenz's (2003) report of their six-year prospective study of adolescents revealed that as adolescents develop, not only do stressful life events predict later internalizing and externalizing behavior, but increased levels of psychopathology in turn predict increased stressful life experiences the next year. The identification of a variable that buffers youth who experience stressful life events from subsequent externalizing behavior holds exciting intervention potential for psychologists who aim to disrupt this harmful cycle. Future research efforts should focus on identifying other outcomes for which life satisfaction may serve as a buffer.

Given the routinely robust bivariate correlations between life satisfaction and both internalizing and externalizing psychopathology, the finding that life satisfaction predicts and moderates subsequent increases in externalizing *but not internalizing* behavior warrants discussion. We propose two explanations for this phenomenon, specifically a theoretical explanation regarding the function of life satisfaction at different points in time, and a statistical explanation involving the calculation of moderator effects. With respect to the former, our research suggests that life satisfaction levels have a greater *concurrent* relationship with internalizing behavior but a stronger *longitudinal* effect on externalizing behavior. Specifically, previous research that examined associations between these constructs at a single point in time revealed that life satisfaction served as a mediator between adolescents' experiences of stressful life events and their coexisting internalizing problems (McKnight et al., 2002). In other words, recent stressful life events influenced internalizing behavior indirectly through global life satisfaction judgments. This relationship was *not* found with respect to aggressive and delinquent problems; rather, a direct link best explained the association between stressful life events and externalizing behaviors. The current study reveals a different pattern, such that while the short-term effects of reduced life satisfaction are most apparent in internalizing symptoms, the longer-term effects primarily manifest in increased externalizing behavior. In sum, in understanding the impact of stressful life events during adolescence, life satisfaction appears to function as a *mediator* with respect to internalizing behavior, and a *moderator* with respect to externalizing behavior. Another explanation for the current results pertains to the statistical assumptions in moderator tests. Specifically, Baron and Kenny (1986) noted that mod-

erator effects can most readily be discerned when the moderator variable is uncorrelated with both the predictor and the criterion. In the current study, we identified a higher bivariate relationship between reports of initial life satisfaction and subsequent internalizing behavior compared to externalizing behavior. The greater shared variance between life satisfaction and internalizing behavior may have precluded the identification of moderating effects.

This longitudinal study provides a first test of a moderational model of life satisfaction effects. Nevertheless, this study has some important limitations. First, although the sample was large and sufficiently heterogeneous to ensure a range of stressful life experiences among the adolescents, it was not representative of the U.S. as a whole. Second, analyses of attrition patterns indicated some tendency for adolescents with lower levels of externalizing behavior to remain in the study. Coupled with the fact that most of the participants were within the normal range of externalizing behavior, particularly those in the longitudinal sample, the findings should not be generalized to clinically referred groups of youth. Third, all measures employed in the study were self-reports; interrelationships among variables may have been influenced by method variance. Thus, generalizability of the findings should be enhanced by subsequent tests of the model across different samples using multiple measures of the constructs (e.g., parent or teacher reports of adolescent life satisfaction, behavior problems, etc.). Additional research is also needed to determine whether life satisfaction moderates the experiences of *specific* stressful life events on subsequent behavior problems. Although the current study elected to strictly examine the effect of *cumulative* stressful life events on subsequent pathology, some research has shown that specific adverse events are differentially associated with psychopathological disorders such as conduct disorder, depression, and separation anxiety disorder (Tiet et al., 2001). Moreover, interpretations of the results of the current study must be cautious because the stressful life events scale employed may or may not reflect equal interval data as assumed in the statistical analyses, although most studies treat the data in this manner.

Support for the moderation model is consistent with the theory that life satisfaction is not an epiphenomenon, that is, a simple by-product of positive life experiences. Rather, an individual's life satisfaction has important consequences, such as altering the probability of developing externalizing behavior problems. Thus, health promotion and prevention programs must consider the important role of adolescents' subjective well-being, in particular their life satisfaction, in models of planned change. Life satisfaction is likely an important protective asset that should be fostered by parents, teachers, and others who work to promote the positive development of children and youth. Although the necessary components of a comprehensive taxonomy of significant human strengths remain controversial (Seligman, 2002), these results suggest that, pending further research, life satisfaction should remain under consideration as one of the fundamental psychological strengths.

Implications for mental health professionals involve both prevention and in-

tervention efforts aimed at strengthening malleable factors known to relate to adolescents' satisfaction with their lives. Unfortunately, there are few reports of intervention programs that attempt to enhance life satisfaction directly (see Frisch, 1999). Given research in other subjective well-being areas (e.g., Harter, 1999), it is likely that intervention/prevention programs with children and youth must distinguish between the goal (i.e., enhanced life satisfaction) and the target (i.e., causal determinants) of the intervention, with intervention efforts focused on modifying the determinants. Although extant work is correlational in nature, research to date suggests a variety of environmental, personal, and task-related variables to consider in developing comprehensive well-being programs (see Huebner, 1997; Huebner et al., 2004). For example, prevention program components that target family, teacher, and peer supports appear crucial to the development and maintenance of positive life satisfaction among pre-adolescent and adolescent age groups. Also, the school-wide encouragement of participation in structured, meaningful group activities (e.g., service learning activities, structured recreational activities) and individual activities (e.g., taking time for hobbies, helping others) is likely beneficial. In addition, program components that target the enhancement of students' social-emotional problem solving skills and a greater sense of personal control likely mediate improved life satisfaction. We have noted elsewhere (see Huebner et al., 2004) the possible value of efficacious, short-term, cognitive-behavioral treatments that alter students' ineffective cognitions (e.g., attributions for good events, social self-efficacy) that are linked with global tendencies to appraise life negatively. Such individual interventions are especially applicable for school psychologists treating children who experience, or are at risk for experiencing, elevated numbers of stressful life events.

In short, programs that seek to promote positive youth development will likely require comprehensive, coherent, and integrated approaches that account for the complex interplay among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors (Flay, 2002).

This article demonstrates that such grand efforts are indeed worthwhile, for in the face of stressful life experiences, positive life satisfaction appears to prevent subsequent delinquent and aggressive behavior that necessitates vast resources being devoted to ameliorating harmful behaviors. A more proactive approach devoted to building strengths in order to prevent pathology is in line with the goals of the positive psychology paradigm, whose rationale is supported by the findings in this study.

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Action Editor: Melissa A. Bray

Shannon Michele Suldo is a doctoral candidate in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Carolina. She is currently completing a predoctoral internship program at the Kennedy Krieger Institute/Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Her research interests include the developmental course of life satisfaction during adolescence, effects of parenting behaviors on adolescent mental health, and positive indicators of children's psychological well-being.

Scott Huebner, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the School Psychology Program at the University of South Carolina. His current research interests involve the conceptualization, measurement, and application of positive psychology measures in school psychology practice. He is a Fellow of Division 16 of the American Psychological Association and the International Society for Quality of Life Studies. He obtained his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1983 and was a recipient of the 1999 Indiana University School of Education Distinguished Alumni Award. The School Psychology Program at the University of South Carolina is accredited by the APA.