

LIFE EVENTS, SELF-CONCEPT, AND ADOLESCENTS' POSITIVE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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This study investigated the interrelationships among global self-concept, life events, and positive subjective well-being (positive affect [PA], negative affect [NA], and life satisfaction [LS]) in a sample of 92 high school students. The results demonstrated that life events contributed significant variance to predictions of PA, NA, and LS, over and above that of global self-concept. Also, daily events contributed variance over and above that of major life events. Looking at the specific event types that related uniquely to the positive well-being measures, only negative daily events related significantly to PA and NA, and only positive daily events related significantly to LS. The results also indicated that the positive well-being constructs each contained unique variance and had different correlates, thus providing strong support for the multidimensionality of adolescent positive well-being reports. Implications for further research and intervention programs are discussed.
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Psychologists have increasingly emphasized the importance of the promotion of positive mental health and adaptation in children in addition to traditional emphases on the treatment of established psychological disorders (e.g., Huebner, 1991a, 1997; Phillips, 1993; Seligman, 1998). Proponents of positively focused orientations have identified various domains of positive psychological outcomes, including a sense of subjective well-being. Similar to findings with adults, researchers have proposed a tripartite model of subjective well-being comprised of three interrelated, but separable components of subjective well-being in children and adolescents: global life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Huebner, 1991c; Huebner & Dew, 1996). Global life satisfaction has been defined as a positive cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole. Positive affect refers to an individual's frequency of positive emotions (e.g., proud, interested) whereas negative affect refers to the frequency of negative emotions (e.g., distressed, hostile). Thus, persons who demonstrate positive subjective well-being experience a preponderance of positive emotions, relatively few negative emotions, and evaluate their overall lives as positive (Myers & Diener, 1995).

Research with adults has shown that maintaining positive levels of well-being (i.e., above the neutral point) is not only normative, but appears crucial to adaptation (Diener & Diener, 1996). Studies of nonclinical samples of individuals experiencing low levels of subjective well-being indicate a variety of negative intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences. For example, linkages with interpersonal rejection (Furr & Funder, 1998) and depression and anxiety (Frisch et al., 1992; Lewinsohn, Redner, & Seeley, 1991; Pavot & Diener, 1993) have been demonstrated, suggesting that departures from a positive baseline create an increased risk for maladaptive outcomes. Diener and Diener (1996) speculated that high levels of positive well-being are advantageous from an evolutionary perspective in that predominantly positive well-being levels may motivate human sociability, exploratory behavior, curiosity, and coping. Also, a positive set point for affective well-being ensures that negative, threatening events will be responded to rapidly. Efforts to understand the naturally occurring processes that allow most people to maintain positive levels of subjective well-being should inform intervention efforts designed to assist individuals experiencing psychological distress.

Although the study of subjective well-being in adults has a relatively long history (Diener, 1984, 1994), studies of the correlates of positive subjective well-being in children and youth have just begun. Studies to date have focused largely on the relations between demographic variables (e.g., age,

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gender, and socioeconomic status) and intrapersonal characteristics (e.g., self-concept, extraversion, internal locus of control) and well-being (see Huebner, 1997; Huebner, Drane, & Valois, *in press*). Similar to findings with adults, the findings have revealed that demographic variables contribute only modestly to adolescent subjective well-being reports whereas intrapersonal variables contribute more substantially. Specifically, in studies of adults and children (Diener, 1984; Huebner, 1991b), global self-concept has been the most powerful intrapersonal correlate of life satisfaction and happiness reports. However, much variance in child and adolescent positive well-being reports remains to be explained.

Research with adults has demonstrated the influence of life events on positive subjective well-being. For example, Heady and Wearing (1989) found that both negative and positive major life events influenced life satisfaction and positive affect. Interestingly, the magnitude of the influence of life events on subjective well-being has been surprisingly modest and short-lived in adulthood (e.g., Heady & Wearing, 1989; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996), even for major events, such as winning a lottery or becoming a quadriplegic (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Such findings suggest the importance of well-being models that incorporate both intrapersonal variables and environmental events to account for individual differences in subjective well-being.

In addition to investigations of major life events, the role of minor events (chronic, everyday stressors) has also been examined, particularly with respect to the development of psychopathology. Previous research suggested that daily hassles, in addition to major life events, result in increased levels of daily stress, and that daily stress is more strongly associated with psychological symptoms than major events (Daniels & Moos, 1990; Dubois, Felner, Brand, Adam, & Evans, 1992). In a study of adolescents, Rowlinson and Felner (1988) found daily hassles and major life events to be associated with adjustment, with hassles predicting over and above the effects attributable to major life events. Rowlinson and Felner thus suggested that "daily hassles and major life events represent conceptually distinct sources of life stress, each of which can make an independent contribution to the individual's overall level of functioning" (p. 441). Colton (1985) also found that major life events were rated as more stressful than hassles; however, interpersonal hassles explained more of the variance in stress ratings than did major life events. Thus, it seems likely that both major and minor life events should be considered in the study of adolescent positive subjective well-being as well.

There is a dearth of research, however, that investigates the relationship between life events (i.e., major, minor, positive, negative) and the positive subjective well-being of adolescents. Because adolescents are in a transitional stage of development, external events, intrapersonal characteristics, and coping may interact differently. This may lead to different outcomes with respect to adolescent well-being reports compared to those of adults (Hess & Copeland, 1997).

The overarching goal of this study was therefore to investigate the interrelationships among life events, global self-concept, and dimensions of positive subjective well-being among adolescents. In this study, life events referred to both positive and negative events as well as major events (e.g., death of family member, divorce) and minor events (i.e., daily hassles, daily uplifts). Global self-concept referred to an overall evaluation of one's personal characteristics and behavioral competence (Gresham, Elliott, & Fernandez, 1993; Rosenberg, 1965). The dimensions of subjective well-being included life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect.

This study thus tested the hypothesis that life events and a broad-band intrapersonal variable, global self-concept, would make nonredundant contributions to adolescents' positive well-being reports. Self-concept reports were entered prior to life events measures in a series of hierarchical multiple-regression analyses in order to determine if life events would explain additional variance in well-being reports, above and beyond that of this stable, powerful intrapersonal predictor. Furthermore, based on the aforementioned research on stress in adolescence, we hypothesized that minor, everyday events would contribute additional variance over and above that of major life events.

Finally, we were also interested in examining the possibility of differential relationships among the specific types of events (e.g., positive major, negative minor), self-concept, and the subjective well-being variables. Evidence of differential patterns of association would provide additional support for the tripartite model of positive well-being among adolescent students.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 92 students in grades 9 through 12 attending a private high school in a metropolitan area of a southeastern state. The sample consisted of 45 males and 47 females. A total of 29 participants were 9th graders, 27 were 10th graders, 26 were 11th graders, and 10 were 12th graders. Ninety participants were Caucasian and two were African American. Individual SES data were not obtained; however, students were known to be primarily of middle and upper SES status. This sample provided data for another research study (Huebner & McCullough, in press), but these results have not been published previously.

Measures

Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS: Huebner, 1991a). The SLSS is a measure of global life satisfaction consisting of seven items (e.g., Life is going well; I wish I had a different life) that are rated on a 6-point scale (ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). The scale is based on the theory that children's global life satisfaction can be accurately assessed by a child's evaluations of his/her overall life satisfaction without reference to specific domains, such as family, friends, or school. The scale is considered to be appropriate for use with students in grades 3 through 12 (Huebner, 1994).

Research supports the reliability and validity of the SLSS (see Bender, 1997, for a review). Coefficient alphas have been reported to be in the .80s (Gilman & Huebner, 1997; Huebner, 1991a, 1991b). Terry and Huebner (1995) reported a 2-week test-retest coefficient of .76. Convergent validity has been demonstrated through correlations with other life satisfaction scales (Dew & Huebner, 1994; Huebner, 1991a), parent reports (Dew & Huebner, 1994; Gilman & Huebner, 1997), and teacher ratings of classroom behavior problems (Huebner & Alderman, 1993).

The SLSS was scored by summing students' ratings across the seven items that make up the scale. Two of the seven items were reverse scored prior to summation. The sum of item scores resulted in a total raw score representing students' overall life satisfaction.

Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES: Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987). The 100-item short form of the APES was used to assess life events experienced by adolescents. The event types that were investigated included the following categories: (a) positive events (e.g., talking or sharing feelings with friends), (b) negative events (e.g., restrictions at home), (c) daily events (e.g., taking care of younger siblings, talking on the phone), and (d) major events (e.g., death of a family member, parent getting remarried) experienced by adolescents. The items excluded from the short form of the APES were determined by analyses that identify events confirmed at such low or high base rates that they lose the ability to aid in the prediction of adjustment (Compas, 1997, personal communication).

In developing the original APES, open-ended lists of daily events and major life events were generated by over 600 adolescents, ages 12–20. Three separate forms were then devised according to the age of adolescents (i.e., younger, middle, older adolescence). The APES has been shown to have adequate reliability and validity (Compas et al., 1987). Test-retest reliability over 2 weeks ranged from .77 to .85 for the total number of events, from .74 to .89 for weighted negative events,

and from .78 to .84 for weighted positive events. Interrater reliability was reported as 82% for event occurrence, 87% for desirability ratings, 90% for impact ratings, and 91% for frequency ratings for older adolescents.

Frequency scores were used in this study. Four categories of events were delineated: positive daily events, negative daily events, positive major events, and negative major events.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS: Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS consists of two 10-item subscales: one designed to measure positive affect and the other designed to measure negative affect. The negative affect items include distressed, upset, hostile, irritable, scared, jittery, afraid, ashamed, guilty, and nervous. The positive affect items include interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point frequency scale (ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*).

Psychometric properties of the PANAS have been reported by Watson et al. (1988) for college students. Evidence of reliability and validity of the PANAS has also been provided for adolescents (Huebner & Dew, 1995). For the Negative Affect and Positive Affect scales, internal consistency reliability was reported as .84 and .85 respectively. The intercorrelation between the two subscales was $-.14$. Validity of the PANAS was supported by meaningful relationships with measures of other constructs.

Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS: Gresham et al., 1993). The 72-item SSCS was used to measure student's global self-concept. The SSCS was standardized on a sample of 1,835 elementary students and 1,370 secondary school students from 19 states who were closely matched to the U.S. student population in terms of special education population, gender, race, region, and community size. The SSCS consists of three content domains: Social, Academic, and Self-image.

The SSCS requires students to rate their degree of self-confidence with respect to important self-related behaviors (e.g., "I am proud of who I am."). Ratings of self-confidence are made on a 3-point scale: 2 = Confident, 1 = Not Sure, 0 = Not at All.

Based on the standardization sample, internal consistency of the SSCS Composite Score was reported as .91 for secondary-level students. Four-week test-retest reliability was reported as .84. Acceptable validity coefficients with similar measures (e.g., Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Tennessee Self-Concept scale) were also obtained.

Procedure

Parent consent and student assent forms were given to all 250 students in the high school. A total of 112 of the parent consent and student assent forms were signed and returned; 92 students completed the research project. The various instruments were administered by the principal investigator over 3 sessions in the school auditorium. In order to decrease the possibility of socially desirable responses, all students were assured of confidentiality.

Before administering the measures, students were asked to read the instructions attached to each questionnaire carefully. The principal investigator was available during all administration sessions to answer individual questions about the questionnaires. The order of the administration of measures was counterbalanced to reduce order effects. Demographic data (i.e., age, gender, race, and grade) were obtained on a student information sheet placed at the front of each packet of questionnaires.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

The mean response rating for the life satisfaction scale was 30.97 ($SD = 6.47$), which indicates a moderately high level of overall satisfaction with life among the student sample. Gilman and Huebner (1997) found a similar mean life satisfaction score with an early adolescent sample.

For the Positive Affect scale of the PANAS, the mean score for the sample was 35.69 ($SD = 6.13$), which reflects experiencing “moderate” to “quite a bit” of positive affect. The mean score for the sample on the PANAS Negative Affect scale was 22.98 ($SD = 7.04$), which reflects experiencing negative affect “a little.” These findings are consistent with previous research using the PANAS with an adolescent sample (Huebner & Dew, 1995). The mean self-concept (SSCS) score for the sample was 81.44 ($SD = 10.06$). This level of self-concept was comparable to that in the standardization data (Gresham et al., 1993).

For the Life Events scale, the mean number of negative daily events was 8.37 ($SD = 4.41$) and the mean number of positive daily events was 17.99 ($SD = 4.74$). The mean frequency of negative major life events was 6.31 ($SD = 4.37$) while the mean frequency of positive major events was 2.10 ($SD = 1.46$).

The intercorrelations among the life events, self-concept, and well-being variables are presented in Table 1. These provide the basis for the subsequent hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

As described earlier, event scores (i.e., positive daily, negative daily, positive major, and negative major) were computed for individual students based on the number of events reported by each student. The interrelationships of the life experiences, self-concept, and the subjective well-being measures were further analyzed by conducting three separate hierarchical regressions, one for each of the indices of well-being (i.e., positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction). In conducting the hierarchical regression analyses, three predictors were entered sequentially in the regression equations. The first variable entered was global self-concept. The second variable, which was composed of the set of *major* life events (positive and negative), was entered as a block in each equation. The third predictor block was composed of the *minor* daily events (positive and negative). The third block was entered after the second block on the basis of the presumed temporal order of occurrence of the events.

The results from the hierarchical regression analysis with life satisfaction as the dependent variable are reported in Table 2. The results indicated that self-concept significantly predicted reports of life satisfaction, accounting for 21.9% of the variance. Adding the second block of predictor variables to the regression equation demonstrated that major life events cumulatively added significantly to the predictability of life satisfaction; an additional 8.6% of the variance in life satisfaction reports was explained. The third block of predictor variables (daily events) added another 12.9% to the variance accounted for. Looking specifically at the categories of life events most strongly related to life satisfaction, only positive daily events related significantly to reports of life satisfaction.

Table 1
Correlations of Predictor and Criterion Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Positive Daily Events	—							
2. Negative Daily Events	-.02	—						
3. Positive Major Events	.46**	-.01	—					
4. Negative Major Events	.26*	.63**	.19	—				
5. Self-Concept	.22*	-.20	.23*	.01	—			
6. Positive Affect	.24*	-.33**	.15	-.01	.45**	—		
7. Negative Affect	-.13	.36**	-.13	.22*	-.13	.07	—	
8. Life Satisfaction	.39**	-.34**	.30**	-.22*	.45**	.44*	-.28**	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Life Satisfaction

Predictor	R^2	R^2 Change	F Value	Final Beta
<i>Block 1</i>				
Self-Concept	.22	—	21.90**	.32**
<i>Block 2</i>				
Positive Major Events	.31	.09	11.43**	.13
Negative Major Events				.18
<i>Block 3</i>				
Positive Daily	.41	.10	10.40**	.32**
Negative Daily				.16

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Results from the hierarchical regression analysis with positive affect as the dependent variable are reported in Table 3. Again, self-concept significantly predicted positive affect ($R^2 = .19$). Major life events did not significantly predict reports of positive affect over and above global self-concept. However, daily events accounted for an additional 8% of variance. Looking at the categories of life events individually, only negative daily events uniquely significantly related to positive affect.

Results from the hierarchical regression analysis with negative affect as the dependent variable are reported in Table 4. In this analysis, self-concept did not predict negative affect significantly, nor did major life events. However, daily life events significantly predicted negative affect, accounting for 22% of the variance above and beyond self-concept and major events. The beta weights for positive and negative daily events indicated that only negative daily events significantly predicted negative affect.

Analysis of Separability of Well-Being Variables

The Pearson correlations among indices of adolescent well-being, life events, and self-concept in Table 1 were examined to determine if the well-being measures exhibited unique nomological networks of relationships. Although life satisfaction was significantly correlated with positive affect ($r = .44$) and negative affect ($r = -.28$), the correlations were moderately strong. Negative affect and positive affect were not significantly correlated ($r = .07$). The correlations among the indices of well-

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Positive Affect

Predictor	R^2	R^2 Change	F Value	Final Beta
<i>Block 1</i>				
Self-Concept	.19	—	17.73**	.35**
<i>Block 2</i>				
Positive Major Events	.19	.00	5.78**	.08
Negative Major Events				.13
<i>Block 3</i>				
Positive Daily	.27	.08	5.67**	.17
Negative Daily				.30*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Negative Affect

Predictor	R^2	R^2 Change	F Value	Final Beta
<i>Block 1</i>				
Self-Concept	.03	—	2.18	—
<i>Block 2</i>				
Positive Major Events	.09	.06	2.54	-.10
Negative Major Events				.01
<i>Block 3</i>				
Positive Daily	.19	.10	3.44**	-.05
Negative Daily				.39**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

being indicate that positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction are related, but separable constructs. The separability of positive and negative affect is consistent with previous research findings (Diener & Emmons, 1985; Huebner, 1991c; Huebner & Dew, 1995).

Further support for their relative independence as constructs can be seen by the differences in the correlations among the three indices of well-being and life events. For example, the differential correlation between positive daily events and life satisfaction versus negative affect suggests that the well-being constructs have different correlates. Similar trends can be seen when comparing the correlations of life satisfaction, negative affect, and positive affect with other types of life events as well as global self-concept.

DISCUSSION

Similar to findings with adults, measures of adolescents' life events related significantly to their positive well-being reports. As hypothesized, environmental life events explained variance in well-being over and above that of a powerful intrapersonal variable, global self-concept. For life satisfaction reports, positive daily events appeared to be the most crucial unique contributor, whereas negative daily events appeared to be the most crucial unique contributor to reports of positive and negative affect.

Furthermore, as predicted, daily events contributed unique variance to the equations for all three indices of well-being, over and above major life events. Such a finding underscores the importance of considering everyday events as well as major events in understanding adolescent subjective well-being. Thus, the cumulative affects of minor events (e.g., fights with friends, doing poorly on an exam, enjoying a hobby, and helping other people) must be recognized.

This study also investigated the influence of a major intrapersonal correlate of positive well-being, that is, global self-concept. The current study demonstrated that self-concept was significantly related to positive affect and life satisfaction, but not negative affect. These findings suggest that an individual's global self-confidence is crucial to consider when predicting these positive dimensions of well-being. In summary, this study demonstrated the influence of both environmental variables and intrapersonal variables on adolescent's positive well-being judgments, thus indicating the need for complex interactional models of positive well-being in adolescence.

The multidimensionality of well-being has previously been supported in the adult literature, but little research has investigated the multidimensionality of well-being with respect to adolescents (see Huebner & Dew, 1996 for an exception). The findings of the current research extend beyond previous adolescent literature by demonstrating a pattern of different correlates for the three dimensions.

Although positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction were related, the components contained unique variance and demonstrated different correlates, thus providing strong evidence of the relative independence of these constructs.

The results of this study suggest implications for the promotion of positive mental health in adolescents. For example, psychologists need to be aware of multiple types of life experiences faced by adolescents, both everyday and major, to better understand adolescent resilience and subjective well-being. Given the findings of the current study, psychologists also need to ensure that information related to positive events, as well as negative events, is collected as part of the developmental history and background data in a multimethod, multidimensional assessment strategy. Using self-report questionnaires to gather information on the frequency and impact of life experiences in addition to individual interviews and teacher/parent reports may ensure a deeper understanding of adolescents' life experiences (see Compas, 1987). Prevention and intervention programs designed to enhance adolescents' subjective well-being should consider teaching coping skills aimed at dealing with the stresses of everyday experiences (see Goldstein, 1988) in addition to adapting to major life events, such as the loss of a loved one (Perschy, 1997). In addition, as Hess and Copeland (1997) noted, "coping skills training must take place over several different developmental stages with increasing information and opportunities for practice occurring over the course of a student's educational career" (p. 300).

Intrapersonal variables should also be considered when designing interventions to promote adolescents' positive subjective well-being. Findings of the current study suggest that interventionists would benefit from measuring levels of self-concept to understand students' well-being. Programs that incorporate components aimed at increasing students' levels of global self-concept and positive social interaction skills may facilitate efforts to increase adolescents' well-being (Huebner, 1995).

The multidimensionality of well-being in adolescence has additional implications for the assessment of adolescents' well-being as well as the design of interventions. One implication is that assessors should examine multiple indices of well-being rather than focusing on one component, such as negative affect. The separability of the dimensions of well-being demonstrates, for example, that the absence of negative affect does not guarantee the presence of positive affect or high life satisfaction. By investigating multiple components, a more complete understanding of subjective well-being can be gained. Furthermore, the finding of differential correlates of the well-being dimensions has implications for prevention and intervention. Although a particular intervention may influence one aspect of well-being, it may not impact upon another. For instance, positive affect and life satisfaction may increase as a result of intervention efforts designed to increase the experience of positive daily events, while negative affect remains unaffected. Findings of multidimensional indicators, including positive indicators, are consistent with expanded conceptualizations of well-being, such as those that differentiate "building health" from just "fighting sickness" (see Cowen, 1991). In this manner, wellness is viewed as more than simply the absence of psychopathological symptoms (Schlosser, 1990).

Limitations of this study should be considered. First, the generalizability of findings from the current study should not be assumed. Future studies should include more diverse samples so that participants are more representative of the racial and socioeconomic diversity found in the United States. Also, the current study was cross-sectional, thus causal statements cannot be made. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to understand fully the complex, reciprocal interaction of environmental and intrapersonal factors that influence adolescents' positive subjective well-being and adaptation to changes in life circumstances. If researchers can pinpoint specific skills, beliefs, and experiences that promote positive subjective well-being, more successful prevention and intervention programs may be developed for all youth, including at-risk youth. Finally, research should focus not only on adolescents' positive subjective well-being, but also on younger children to assess the interplay of developmental factors, environmental stressors, personality, and subjective well-being.

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