

Exploring the relationship between cognitive well-being and affect among young adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship between an individual's cognitive appraisal of their lives and its relation to affect. Cognitive and emotional well-being plays an integral role in the way an individual perceives his/her life and its outcomes. Quantitative data was collected from 100 young adults between the ages of 18-24 using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et. al 1985) and Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (Watson et. al 1988). Analysis of data revealed that there was a significant difference in the level of cognitive well-being and positive affect between men and women. A moderate positive correlation was found between cognitive well-being and positive affect as well.

Keywords: *Affect, Cognitive Well-Being, Life Satisfaction*

Cognitive and affective well-being are quintessential contributors to the overall well-being of an individual. Subjective well-being concerns itself with the self report individuals provide on what they think constitutes a good life, and how they evaluate their own experiences that sums up their life satisfaction. These evaluations could be in two ways. Firstly, they may be in the form of cognitions, i.e. the conscious judgments people give about specific aspects of their lives, or their level of life satisfaction in totality. Secondly, it could be in terms of affect, i.e. the kind of emotions experienced by an individual and how it affects their lives. Cognitive well-being and affective well-being constitute the essence of subjective well-being. The study of these constructs is imperative to understand how people harbor notions about their lives and the kind of affect associated with it. Research has focused on the how people evaluate their lives in positive or negative terms, and the factors that contribute to a good life.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

Diener (1984) proposed that SWB has three components, namely life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. SWB is 'a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life' (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). Evaluations can also be in terms of one's physical

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health. Happiness is a related concept that has come to be associated with Subjective well-being. Happiness is commonly used with respect to SWB as "satisfaction of desires and goals" and "preponderance of positive over negative affect" (Diener, 1984). Subjective well-being is a "global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria" (Shin and Johnson, 1978). It can be understood in accordance with Bentham's (1789) definition that talks about happiness as the "sum of pleasures and pain". The components of subjective well-being are independent of each other and thus, measured separately (Lucas et al. 1996). High level of life satisfaction and predominance of positive affect over negative is considered to indicate a high degree of SWB.

The affective and cognitive aspects of SWB correlate positively with one another, as reported in various research (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002; Lucas et al., 1996; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). SWB helps to understand the quality of an individual's life. Although SWB is necessary for a good life, it is not sufficient and the study of related constructs thus, proves essential. The findings however, have been inconclusive and varied across researches and demands more attention. Whereas some studies report that men have higher levels of SWB (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009), others have reported women having higher levels of SWB (Fujita et al., 1991). The fact that SWB has three components affects the direction and magnitude of gender differences (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Diener, 1984).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction along with satisfaction of specific life domains are the cognitive components of SWB (Diener, 2000). It is the way in which an individual evaluates their life, and may be assessed by assessing mood, self-concepts, satisfaction with relations and so on. It is fairly stable over time (Cummins, 1998). Life satisfaction is understood as an individual's cognitive judgment of comparisons on the basis of compatibility of their own living conditions with preset standards (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985). Also known as the perceived quality of life, it is the cognitive appraisal of an individual's life as a whole. It is based on how well an individual's goals, needs and wishes are met in life. High life satisfaction is associated with a good level of adaption and optimal mental health in youth, whereas low life satisfaction is related to social, psychological and behavioral problems. Eid and Diener (2004) reported that although factors like current mood can have an impact on scores of life satisfaction, the effects produced are small compared to stable changes. With regards to the stability over the years, Fujita and Diener (2005) showed that it remains fairly stable with only minor fluctuations.

Although men and women were reported to have similar levels of life satisfaction in many pioneering researches (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), a study by Ahmen, Shirazi and Ahmed (2011) on students of Aligarh Muslim University showed that women had a higher level of life satisfaction. Similar results were found by other researchers across the globe as well (Tay, Ng, Kuykendall, and Diener, 2014; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). Younger women reported higher levels of life satisfaction as compared to men in a study conducted by Inglehart (2002). The findings however, have been largely inconclusive. Diener et al. (1999) and others (Huebner et al. 2004; Casas et al. 2007) showed that demographic variables like gender are seen as weak predictors of life satisfaction or happiness. Antaramian, Kamble and Heubner (YEAR) also reported no gender differences in life satisfaction among Indian sample.

Affect

Affect refers to the moods, emotions, and feelings which a person has, and is a combination of both positive and negative. Whereas high positive affect (PA) is denoted through a high level of enthusiasm, energy, confidence and so on, a high degree of negative affect (NA) is denoted by negative emotions like anger, guilt, disgust and contempt (Watson & Clark, 1984). The presence of positive affect does not imply the absence of negative affect and vice versa. Both these constructs are independent of each other, which means that an individual could be high in both PA and NA and hence, should be measured separately (Bradburn and Caplovitz, 1965). Affect has been found to be somewhat stable over time and situations (Naragon & Watson, 2009).

Although gender differences in affect are inconsistent, many suggest that women report a higher level of positive affect and thus, higher SWB. Women also tend to experience higher levels of negative affect (Lucas and Gohm, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 2003). Although women tend to experience greater levels of anxiety and mood disorders as compared to men (Grant & Weissman, 2007; Eaton et al., 2012), the strong intensity of their positive affect balances this, resulting in a similar level of subjective well-being as men. Thompsen et al. (2005) reported that young women experienced a high level of anxiety and sadness because of ruminating more than men perhaps because women feel responsible for the emotional tone in relationships and lesser in control of their emotions (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001).

Present Study

The present study was conducted with an aim to gain further insight into what constitutes a good life. Although life satisfaction and affect have been widely studied, the reason to explore these constructs in detail was twofold. Firstly, the studies conducted with these variables have been largely inconclusive with respect to the gender differences. Secondly, there is a dearth of research examining the gender differences and relationship between the variables in the Indian context and amongst young adults. To delve further into these, gender differences in life satisfaction and affect respectively, were studied. It was also considered imperative to study the relationship between life satisfaction with positive and negative affect (resp).

Hypothesis

H1: There will be significant gender differences in life satisfaction among men and women

H2: There will be significant gender differences in affect among men and women

H3: There will be a significant relationship between life satisfaction and affect

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 100 young adults aged between 18-24-year-old (mean age = 21yrs, SD=2.16), equally divided between men (50) and women (50). The participants were Indian nationals pursuing graduation/post-graduation. They could all comprehend English with ease.

Instruments

Cognitive well-being was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). It was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin (1985). SWLS has been frequently used across cultures in studies of Subjective well-being. It is a 5-item measure of one's evaluation of their satisfaction with life in general, as a self-report questionnaire. The items are rated on

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a 7-point Likert type rating scale. Responses are summed for an overall score. Cronbach alpha for the scale is 0.76.

Affect was measured using the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). It was developed by David Watson, Lee Anna Clark and Auke Tellegen (1988). The scale consists of 20 questions to measure two dimensions, i.e. positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) respectively on a Likert type rating scale with 10 questions each. Positive and negative affect are treated as separate dimensions. A 5-point rating scale is used to indicate the mood state. Cronbach alpha ranges from 0.90-0.96 for PA and 0.84-0.87 for NA.

Procedure

Informed consent was taken from the individuals participating in the study. Confidentiality of data was assured. After collecting the demographic details, PANAS was administered followed by SWLS. The data was analyzed using t tests and Pearson's correlation.

RESULTS

Data collected via the questionnaires was analyzed using t test and Pearson's correlation. Results for Life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect are presented below:

Table I. Test of means of Life Satisfaction (LS), Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) with respect to Gender

Variable	t value	p value	Mean		SD	
			Men	Women	Men	Women
Life Satisfaction	-2.68	0.008**	24.56	26.18	3.07	2.97
Positive Affect	-3.39	0.001**	29.2	32.14	5.04	3.49
Negative Affect	-0.76	0.45	19.14	20.2	7.71	6.11

Significant difference at ** $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$ based on t statistics

Data analysis from Table I showed that there was a significant difference in the level of life satisfaction among men and women [$t(98) = -2.68$, $p < 0.01$]. Women reported having higher life satisfaction (26.18) as compared to men (24.56). A significant difference was also found in the level of Positive Affect between men and women [$t(98) = -3.39$, $p < 0.01$]. Women reported having higher positive affect (32.14) as compared to men (29.2). No significant differences were found in negative affect. Although women had a slight higher mean (20.2) as compared to men (19.14), the difference in the level of NA was not significant.

Table II. Correlation between Life Satisfaction (LS), Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) in total sample (N=100)

	LS	PA	NA
LS	1		
PA	0.498**	1	
NA	-0.30**	-0.22*	1

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

The data analysis revealed that life satisfaction has a significant moderate and low (resp) correlation with positive affect (0.498, $p < 0.01$) and negative affect (-0.30, $p < 0.01$). Although correlation between positive and negative affect (-0.22, $p < 0.05$) is significant, the strength of the correlation is low.

Table III. Correlation between Life Satisfaction (LS), Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) in Men and Women separately (N=50)

Men				Women			
	LS	PA	NA		LS	PA	NA
LS	1			LS	1		
PA	.53**	1		PA	.35*	1	
NA	-.30*	-.47**	1	NA	-.37**	.12	1

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

It was found that the scores of men were more strongly correlated for life satisfaction and positive affect (.53, $p < 0.01$) as compared to women (.35, $p < 0.01$). With respect to negative affect, the correlation obtained between life satisfaction and negative affect was slightly higher for women (-.37, $p < 0.01$) as compared to men (-.30, $p < 0.05$). However, the correlation between PA and NA was significant for men (-.47, $p < 0.01$) and not significant for women (.12).

DISCUSSION

The present study was aimed at investigating how cognitive and affective domains of subjective well-being are related to each other and differ with respect to gender. Life satisfaction is a key indicator of what one deems well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Individuals react in different ways to the same situations, and evaluate their conditions based on experiences and expectations. The debate on factors contributing to life satisfaction has been extensive, with personality differences at the forefront of the explanations. The first hypothesis which says that there will be a significant difference in the level of life satisfaction among men and women was accepted. Women reported a slightly higher level of life satisfaction as compared to men. These findings are in sync with previous researches (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Moksnes and Espnes, 2013). Joshi (2010) in her study on SWB in IT employees in India found that women had a higher level of life satisfaction as compared to men. The judgment of life satisfaction is based upon situational or circumstantial factors. Differences in the experience of life satisfaction result due to the way an individual values the outcomes they get (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). Thus, predictors of life satisfaction depend on the priorities an individual places in their lives, which differs for men and women. However, previous researches have yielded contradictory results. Whereas Haring, Stock, and Okun (1984) reported higher life satisfaction in men, Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan (1989) reported higher life satisfaction in women in their meta-analysis. Studies on youth and adolescents specifically, have yielded mixed results. Many studies have also reported no differences in the level of life satisfaction among men and women (Chui and Wong, 2016; Huebner et al., 2004).

Positive affect and negative affect were explored as independent components of SWB (Schimmack, Bockenholt, & Reizenzein, 2002; Diener, 1984). A significant difference was found in positive affect in men and women, indicating that the second hypothesis was accepted. Women reported a higher level of positive affect. Although there were no significant differences in the level of negative affect among men and women, the mean score for women was slightly higher than for men. Similar results have been found in earlier researches where women have reported experiencing positive affect with a stronger intensity, perhaps due to the gender stereotypes that operate and shape the notions of emotions in both

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genders (Brody and Hall, 1993; Wood, Rhodes and Whelan, 1989). Social context and personality explanations are also used to explain why women experience more intense positive and negative affect (Noeln-Hoeksema and Rustig, 1999). Men have a tendency to rate themselves lower on the emotional scales due to conformity to gender norms and lesser expression of emotion (Etherton, Lawson, & Graham, 2014).

Literature suggests that gender differences in affect points towards women experiencing a high level of unpleasant affect (Brody and Hall, 1993), which was not the case in the present study. But these differences are less clear when the unpleasant emotions are seen externally. Differences in feeling and expressing emotion can be attributed to socialization rather than biology (Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002). Punishment of negative emotions like fear, sadness, anger in boys and reinforcing the same in girls also attributes to differences in the intensity and expression of emotion (Garside and Klimes-Dougan, 2002). High levels of positive affect and life satisfaction seem to mitigate the impact of the negative stressors in life for women.

The third hypothesis which states that there will be a significant relationship among life satisfaction and affect was accepted. Overall, a significant positive correlation was found between life satisfaction and positive affect, and a significant negative correlation was found between life satisfaction and negative affect in the present study. The correlations found were moderate and low respectively, but in sync with previous researches done with these variables. Similar results were found by Cheng (2004), Tversky and Griffin (1991). Singh and Jha (2008) found life satisfaction to be significantly correlated with positive and negative affect respectively. Linley and Maltby (2010) also reported that life satisfaction was significantly correlated with positive and negative affect. The correlation for PA was moderate, and was low for NA. People with positive SWB reported higher life satisfaction. In context of gender, it was seen that the correlation between life satisfaction and positive affect was stronger for men as compared to women. With respect to negative affect, the differences were lesser. A small but significant negative correlation was found between positive affect and negative affect. With respect to gender, the strength of the correlation between these variables was stronger for men than for women.

Association between cognitive and affective well-being varies across samples (Eid and Diener, 2004). Rise in the number of studies on SWB has raised inquisitiveness about the gender differences in SWB as well. Demographic variables including gender have not been proven as effective predictors of SWB and happiness in some studies (Diener et al. 1999). Although many researchers have tried to investigate this question, the findings have been inconsistent. An in-depth inquiry into the matter would prove beneficial to understand the relationship between these variables especially in the Indian sample.

CONCLUSION

Significant differences were found in the level of life satisfaction and affect among men and women, wherein women reported higher scores on both factors. A significant positive correlation was found between life satisfaction and positive affect, whereas a significant negative correlation was found between life satisfaction and negative affect. Differences in SWB are often studied more in the western cultures, thus demanding a need for further inquiry in the Eastern cultures as well, to understand the cross-cultural generalizability and contributing factors (Diener & Suh, 2000). The age group of young adults has not been studied with respect to cognitive and subjective well-being in depth either, since most studies have been conducted on adolescents. The effects of culture can moderate the level of

affect with regard to gender. Positive affect contributes to many desirable personality correlates and with happiness. The variability in SWB can be seen by how some researchers report no gender differences, whereas others report higher life satisfaction and positive affect in women (Fujita et al. 1991). Gender differences in SWB could be attributed to psychological and biological differences in and how the meaning of a “good life” is understood by both men and women.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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