



What Makes a Child Happy?

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ABSTRACT

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The study examines self-rated happiness of 1382 eight-year-old children living in five different cities and provinces in Vietnam. The results show that Vietnamese children have moderate level of subjective well-being (mean 5.975 out of a scale from 1 to 9). This level is on average higher than their caregiver's self-reported happiness (mean 4.461). Child and parent demographic characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, health status, educational attainment or intellectual capabilities, as well as child time use have little relationship with child happiness. The two most important predictors of child subjective well-being are household expenditure (a proxy for economic conditions) and caregiver's well-being. Furthermore, children living in rural areas report significantly lower level of happiness. The results of this study suggest that improving households' material conditions and caregivers' subjective well-being may be meaningful to child happiness.

KEYWORDS:

children
subjective well-being
happiness

1. INTRODUCTION

“The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies in which they are born”.

UNICEF (2007), in their report, affirms child well-being as one of the most important goals of every country. In Vietnam, children have been a great concern of families, schools, the government, and the society as a whole. The 2013 Constitution states that “Children are protected, cared for and educated by the State, family and society; have the rights to be involved in children's issues.” In 2016, the Law on Children came into effect, replacing the 2004 Law on Child Protection, Care and Education. This is a comprehensive legal document on children, fully stipulating children's rights, and responsibilities of families, schools, society, organizations and the State in ensuring the implementation of children's rights. In addition, the Vietnamese government has implemented many policies and programs to enhance children's welfare and well-being.

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Recently, more attention has been paid to “listening to children's voice”, which means endorsing their perspectives and participation, in issues related to them. In research on child well-being, there has been a shift from adults' to children's perspectives, and emergence of the subjective perspective (Ben-Arieh, 2010a; Ben-Arieh, 2010b). For example, although child well-being indicators have been traditionally based solely on objective measures, in more recent developments, they have been complemented with subjective perspectives (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Studies also find that parents do not always understand children's daily lives very well, therefore, studies on children necessarily involve them, at least as the primary source of information (Ben-Arieh, 2010b). Besides, while child indicators were traditionally forward-looking (measuring children's future success), they now focus more on children's current state (Ben-Arieh, 2010b).

This research aims to investigate the level of Vietnamese children's subjective well-being and their correlates. Using data on eight-year-old children in five regions in Vietnam, the research examines how child characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, health status, intellectual capabilities, and time use, as well as household and community characteristics, such as parental age, parental education, caregiver's subjective well-being, household expenditure and wealth, and rurality affects child happiness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining child subjective well-being

Well-being refers to “any evaluation of a person’s situation” (Gasper, 2002). Despite the large amount of research on child well-being, the concept is still poorly defined (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2014).

Subjective well-being can be defined as “people’s cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives” (Diener, 2000). Contrary to the objective component of well-being, which are measured with observable facts or reported behavior, the subjective component is based on individuals’ personal values, views, and assessments of the circumstances of their lives (Land et al., 2007). Subjective well-being has several components: life satisfaction (global judgments of one’s life), satisfaction with important life domains (e.g., marriage or work satisfaction), positive affect (prevalence of positive emotions and moods), and low levels of negative affect (prevalence of unpleasant emotions and moods) (Diener et al., 2009). Subjective well-being and happiness are often used interchangeably in research (Diener et al., 2009). Child subjective well-being concerns “how children and young people assess their lives, in particular how satisfied or happy they are with aspects of their lives or their lives overall” (Axford et al., 2014).

Measuring child subjective well-being

Many scales of subjective well-being have been developed and used in children research. A number of studies use a single-question scale to assess respondent’s overall happiness. The most commonly used scale is the Faces Scale, which was developed based on Andrews and Withey (1976). The Faces Scale includes simple face drawings, expressing different levels of emotions from very sad to very happy. Respondents are asked to choose the face that most closely matches their feelings of happiness. The Faces Scale has been found to be particularly suitable for assessing children’s perceived well-being (Holder & Callaway, 2010).

More complicated measures of child subjective well-being include multiple questions to assess different dimensions of children’s lives and happiness, for example, the Child and Adolescent Wellness Scale (Copeland et al., 2010), Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Survey (Huebner, 2001), School Children’s Happiness Inventory (Ivens, 2007)... In addition, several multi-question scales originally designed for adults have been adapted for children, such as the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Herzberg, 2002), Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, Short Form (Hills & Arygyle, 2002)... Studying a number of different scales, Bradshaw et al. (2010) find significant overlap between them and high correlation between their results.

Most studies use children’s self-assessments, although some studies also use parents’ or friends’ reports. Self-assessment results are considered relevant and valid because happiness is a personal and subjective concept. While many studies show that the assessment made by parents or friends coincides with the results of children’s self-assessment (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Myers & Diener, 1995; Sandvik, 1993; Harker & Keltner, 2001), others find the contrary (Ben-Arieh et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2008; Guzman et al., 2009). Therefore, it is still unclear whether the judgment of children’s relatives and friends can be seen as accurate.

Level of child subjective well-being

Studies often find high levels of happiness in children. The Children’s World Report 2020 survey conducted on 10-year-old children in 35 countries around the world shows that children rated their own happiness at a high level, of which the highest was in some Southern European countries (8.8-9.4 on a scale of 0-10), the lowest in some Asian countries (7.6-7.9) (Jacobs Foundation, 2020). A study on 35 countries in Europe, Russia, and North America document that 87.1% of 11-year-old girls and 88.1% of boys score themselves above the midpoint on the “life satisfaction ladder”, but these figures for 15-year-olds are only 77.4% and 84.5%, respectively (Bradshaw et al., 2007). In all OECD countries, more than 80% of children aged 11, 13, and 15 report the same thing (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

Adolescents in Santa Maria, Brazil have the average happiness score of 5.24 on a scale from 1 to 7 at the age of 12 and 5.38 at the age of 14, two years later (Ortiz et al., 2021). Finnish ninth graders rate their happiness at an average of 5.01 on the same scale, and 89.1% of the surveyed students report a level of happiness of 4 or higher (Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2014). Other studies document that 90% of Canadian children and 94% of Northern Indian children rate themselves as being happier than the midpoint (Holder & Coleman, 2008; Holder et al., 2012). In Nigeria, 81.6% of children aged 10-14 report that they are “a very happy person”, as against “a not very happy person” (Okwaraji et al., 2017). Similarly, at least 88% of Australian primary students report to be in the three happiest categories (scores 5-7 on a scale from 1 to 7) (O’Rourke & Cooper, 2010).

Kang et al. (2017) find that Korean children, on average, rate their happiness at 3.64 on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest). However, other studies in Korea documents that elementary and secondary school students report low levels of happiness. Specifically, a large-scale study finds that their average happiness score is 26.77 on a scale from 7 to 49 (Lim & Lee, 2019). In another study conducted in Suwon city, when asked if they usually feel happy in their life, male students give an average score of 3.09 and female students 2.87 on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very agree”) (Kwon, 2019).

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According to the Children's World Report 2020 (Jacobs Foundation, 2020), Vietnamese children have the lowest level of happiness (7.6) among the surveyed countries. Nguyễn Thị Mai Hương and Đào Lan Hương (2019) survey 257 middle and high school students aged 11-18 in Bac Ninh and document an average self-rated happiness of 20.09 on a scale from 5 to 35 points, equivalent to the average "not sure whether satisfied or not satisfied".

Correlates of child subjective well-being

There are substantial differences between adult and child subjective well-being (Holder & Callaway, 2010). For example, adult happiness is influenced by many factors such as marriage (Efklides et al., 2003), partner (Stull, 1998; Kohler et al., 2005), children (Efklides et al., 2003; Hansen, 2012; Kohler et al., 2005; Myskylä & Margolis, 2014) and work (Argyle, 2001; Pham & Nguyen, 2023), these factors do not affect child happiness. Therefore, children tend to be influenced by other factors, such as personality. In fact, many studies have shown that correlates of happiness change with age (Chaplin, 2009; Chaplin et al., 2020; Holder & Callaway, 2010).

Personality factors and social relationships are the factors that most influence child well-being. Many studies show that extraversion and neuroticism in children, as well as in adults, are closely related to feelings of happiness. Children often cite family and friend relationships as a source of their happiness (Chaplin, 2009; Erloff, 2008). These relationships are also good predictors of child well-being. For example, one study finds that kids who hang out with friends report higher levels of happiness than kids who do not (Holder & Coleman, 2009). On the other hand, children who experience changes in family structure, who are bullied and treated unfairly by adults tend to report lower subjective well-being (Gomez-Baya et al., 2022; Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Children's activities can also be a source of happiness. A number of studies indicate that recreational activities, such as vacations, sports, doing hobbies, watching television, playing video games, playing with friends, attending parties, and spending time with pets are pleasurable to children and contribute to their happiness (Eloff, 2008; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Kurniawati & Hong, 2015; Moore & Lynch, 2018; Pranoto & Hong, 2020; Thoilliez, 2011). Surprisingly, López-Pérez and Fernández-Castilla (2018) find a negative relationship between having leisure time and child happiness. The same study also finds that learning is associated with happiness among children (aged 9-10) but not adolescents (aged 15-16).

Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender of the child, age, marital status and occupation of parents, number of siblings have no or little influence on children's perceived happiness (Holder & Coleman, 2008). Some studies find

association between age, sex, and disability and child happiness (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2014) but these variables often explain only little variation in subjective well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2010). As for the income factor, many studies show that children are well aware of their family's economic condition, but family income does not significantly affect children's happiness. From a macro perspective, income per capita also does not explain the difference in children's perceived happiness across countries (Jacobs Foundation, 2020). Bradshaw et al. (2010) find that household poverty negatively affects child well-being, but to a very limited extent.

Studies on Vietnamese children focus on the influence of family relationships and school factors on children's perceived happiness. Nguyen and Dao (2019) document that psycho-social aspects in the family such as quality of family interaction, domestic violence or conflict have a significant influence on life satisfaction. Phan and Nguyen (as cited in Nguyen, 2019) show that school factors such as the support of friends and teachers, individual values in the group, and school results affect the sense of happiness of high school students. Among them, peer support has the highest predictive ability and academic performance has the lowest predictive ability for students' level of happiness at school. In particular, academic performance does not impact independently but must be through other factors. On the contrary, Le et al. (2018) find that academic achievements are often referred to by Vietnamese children as a source of (un)happiness. Truong et al. (as cited in Nguyen, 2019) show that children's assessment of the people they live with, the house and area they live in, relationships with friends, things they learn at school are consistently correlated with children's overall life satisfaction.

It can be seen that few studies have researched Vietnamese children's subjective well-being. Furthermore, these studies usually have a relatively small sample size and are not representative. For example, Nguyen and Dao (2019) study 257 middle and high school students aged 11-18 in Bac Ninh, Ngo and Le (2013) survey 165 students aged 6-11 in Vinh, Nghe An, Nguyen (2019) survey 156 third and fifth graders at Le Quy Don primary school, Hanoi.

Besides, most of the existing studies focus on what affect children's happiness at school. A few studies that research children's overall happiness consider only a few predictors such as family and school relationships, academic performance, but not other factors.

The current research aims to bridge this gap, using a larger dataset of Vietnamese children and rich information about the child's lives, including many factors not yet considered in previous research, such as child time use, intellectual capabilities, and caregiver's subjective well-being.

III. DATA AND METHODS

The study uses data from 1,382 children born between January 2001 and May 2002 in five provinces and cities including Lao Cai (Northern Midlands and Mountains region), Hung Yen (Red River Delta region), Da Nang (Central Coast region), Phu Yen (Central Coast region), and Ben Tre (Mekong Delta) collected by the Young Lives project (University of Oxford, 2019). The Young Lives project has been implemented by the Department of International Development, Oxford University (UK) since 2002 to present to research the lives of children in four countries: India, Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam. Data for this study are taken from the 2008 survey (round 3) of the project, when the children were eight years old. The original dataset includes 2,000 children. After discarding observations with missing data, the final sample includes 1,382 observations.

The information used in this study includes socio-demographic information of the child and family such as the child’s gender, ethnicity and health status, parents’ age and education, and monthly per-capita expenditure and assets of the household, whether the household is living in rural or urban areas. In addition, information about children's time use is also collected. The children and their main caregiver were asked to rate their overall happiness on a scale from 1 to 9, with 1 being the lowest and 9 being the highest level of happiness. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multivariate regression methods to find the level of happiness and factors affecting children's happiness. The ordinary least-squared regression model is as follows:

$$Child\ well-being_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1Female_{ij} + \beta_2Kinh\ ethnic_{ij} + \beta_3Health_{ij} + \beta_4PPVT\ test\ score_{ij} + \beta_5Hours\ of\ study_{ij} + \beta_6Hours\ of\ study\ squared_{ij} + \beta_7Hours\ of\ sleep_{ij} + \beta_8Hours\ of\ work_{ij} + \beta_9Parental\ age_{ij} + \beta_{10}Parental\ age\ squared_{ij} + \beta_{11}Parental\ education_{ij} + \beta_{12}Caregiver's\ well-being_{ij} + \beta_{13}Real\ expenditure_{ij} + \beta_{14}Wealth\ index_{ij} + \beta_{15}Rurality_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

The level of subjective well-being of child *i* in cluster *j*, the child’s self-rating of their overall happiness is regressed on a number of child, household, community characteristics, and an error term ϵ . Child characteristics include child gender, ethnicity (Kinh ethnic or other), child self-rating of their overall health on a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 being “very poor” and 5 being “very good”), the number of correct answers in a PPVT test administered by the survey team, a proxy for intellectual capabilities. Child time use variables include *hours of study*, the number of hours the child spends on learning activities such as in-class lessons, extra classes, and homework, *hours of sleep*, and *hours of work*, the number of hours the child spend on chores, paid and unpaid economic activities. The survey also collect data on the number of hours spent on leisure activities. However, to avoid

multicollinearity, leisure time is not included in the final model.

Household characteristics include parental age, which is the average of father’s and mother’s age, parental education, which is the average of father’s and mother’s highest level of education on a scale from 0 to 5 (with 0 being “none”, 1 “primary school”, 2 “junior high school”, 3 “senior high school”, 4 “post-secondary or vocational school”, and 5 “university or higher”), main caregiver’s well-being on a scale from 1 to 9, monthly household real per-capita expenditure (in million dong), and a wealth index on a scale from 0 to 1. The model also controls for rurality and cluster fixed effects. Summary statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Child characteristics</i>				
Child well-being	5.975	2.199	1	9
Female	0.487	0.500	0	1
Kinh ethnic	0.861	0.346	0	1
Health	3.178	0.698	1	5
PPVT test score	92.270	26.942	27	187
Hours of study	7.661	1.712	0	13
Hours of sleep	9.706	1.028	0	14
Hours of work	0.945	1.167	0	9
<i>Household characteristics</i>				
Parental age	35.376	5.625	23	57
Parental education	1.818	0.751	0	4
Caregiver’s well-being	4.461	1.399	1	9
Real expenditure	0.462	0.316	0.409	4.746
Wealth index	0.595	0.178	0.008	0.95
<i>Community characteristics</i>				
Rurality	0.835	0.371	0	1

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the factors affecting child happiness. Child characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, health status and intellectual capabilities seem to have little effects on their happiness. The results are consistent with previous studies which find little evidence of a relationship between child demographic characteristics and subjective well-being (Holder & Callaway, 2010).

Among child time use variables, only number of hours spent on work is marginally statistically significant. The effect is also not very large in magnitude. One additional hour of work per day reduces child happiness by 0.072 points ($p < 0.1$). This suggests that excessive work is not beneficial to child well-being, but to a limited extent. In Vietnam, like many developing countries, children may take on various

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responsibilities from a young age, from chores in the household to economic activities such as agricultural work or support for family business. The main motivation for children's participation in the labor market is the desire for income (Bourdillon, 2014). Therefore, there is a possibility that the negative relationship between work hours and child happiness is driven by poverty or material deprivation. Literature on child labor also asserts that it is harmful to children and can hinder their development (Bourdillon, 2014). Work may make children tired, undermine their health, make them perform worse at school, or even prevent them from attending school, break down social networks and emotional bonds (Bourdillon, 2014). Not only economic activities outside the household but also chores are detrimental to child health and happiness (Lloyd, 2013). All of these could lead to a negative impact of work on child well-being.

Household and community characteristics seem to be more important determinants of child happiness. Although the effects of parental age and education are not statistically significant, caregiver's happiness and household expenditure are strong predictors of child happiness. One point higher of caregiver's happiness is associated with one 0.422 points higher of child happiness ($p < 0.01$). The positive relationship between caregiver's and child's subjective well-being is consistent with previous studies. For example, Headey et al. (2014) finds a two-way link between parent and child happiness in German families, which is attributed to intergenerational transmission of values and behaviors related to happiness. Another study also finds that psychological well-being is contagious within Chinese families (Chi et al., 2019). However, while positive aspect of well-being was almost fully transmitted among all family members, the negative aspect of well-being (i.e., psychological distress) was transmitted only from fathers to adolescent children. Studying 1,419 pairs of Korean parents, Kang et al. (2017) find that parents' stress and depression negatively affect child's subjective well-being. The current results provide more evidence for the claim that parental well-being is critical to child well-being (Newland, 2015).

Household expenditure is a good predictor of child happiness. One million dong extra of monthly per-capita expenditure raises child happiness by 0.409 points ($p < 0.05$). Wealth index is also positively related to child happiness, but the effect of wealth index is not statistically significant in this model because of the strong correlation between expenditure and wealth. This is consistent with a number of research finding a positive relationship between material possessions and subjective happiness among adults (Ma & Ma, 2021) and children (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Chaplin, 2020; Erloff, 2008), although others do not find such a relationship.

The current result can be seen as evidence of the link between objective well-being and subjective well-being. Household expenditure can be seen as a proxy for material circumstances, an important component of objective well-being, and objective well-being can shape subjective well-being (Axford et al., 2014). It should also be noted that the results may reflect the fact that the Young Lives Survey oversamples children in poor families, and for these children and their household, improvements of economic conditions may have a large impact on their well-being. Besides, poverty may be seen not only as an income status, but also as a social status, and poverty may lead to social exclusion (Fattore et al., 2016; Redmond, 2014). As Redmond (2008) observes with respect to children's perspectives, "it is usually not poverty per se that hurts, but the social exclusion that accompanies it."

Table 2: Regression Results

(Dependent variable: Child well-being)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error
<i>Child characteristics</i>		
Female	0.053	0.088
Kinh ethnic	-0.175	0.259
Health	-0.009	0.072
PPVT test score	0.001	0.002
Hours of study	0.116	0.091
Hours of study squared	-0.006	0.007
Hours of sleep	0.043	0.077
Hours of work	-0.072*	0.037
<i>Household characteristics</i>		
Parental age	-0.043	0.113
Parental age squared	0.000	0.001
Parental education	0.129	0.153
Caregiver's well-being	0.422***	0.059
Real expenditure	0.409**	0.179
Wealth index	0.756	0.489
<i>Community characteristics</i>		
Rurality	-0.771***	0.171
<i>Observation</i>	1,382	
<i>R2</i>	0.259	

* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are clustered at cluster level. Estimations control for cluster fixed effects.

Regarding community characteristics, children living in rural areas seem significantly less happy than their urban peers, with their self-rated happiness being on average 0.756 points lower. This may reflect rural children's lower living standards and disadvantages in access to various basic services, which

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lead to negative consequences for child well-being. These results are, in part, consistent with previous studies on Vietnamese children, which also find higher levels of life satisfaction among urban children in comparison with their rural counterparts, although these effects are found only among children aged 10 and 12 but not children aged 8 (Ngo, 2020).

V. CONCLUSION

The study examines self-rated happiness of 1,382 eight-year-old children living in five different cities and provinces in Vietnam. The results show that Vietnamese children have moderate level of subjective well-being (mean 5.975 out of a scale from 1 to 9). This level is on average higher than their caregiver's self-reported happiness (mean 4.461). Child and parent demographic characteristics, as well as child time use have little relationship with child happiness. The two most important predictors of child subjective well-being are household expenditure (a proxy for economic conditions) and caregiver's well-being. Furthermore, children living in rural areas report significantly lower level of happiness. The results of this study suggest that improving households' material conditions and caregivers' subjective well-being may be meaningful to child happiness.

VI. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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