The Relationship between Interpersonal Relationships and Subjective Experience of Happiness among Active Elderly in Korea

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Abstract

To explore the relationship between interpersonal relationships and happiness of elderly for their happy old age, this study analyzes how the factors in sociology of population affect the elderly's interpersonal relationships and happiness. The ultimate purpose of this study is to look for practical alternatives that could improve the quality of life of the elderly. In order to examine the degree of daily interpersonal relationships and happiness of elderly men and women in a community, a non-probability sampling survey has been conducted at welfare centers and senior citizen centers in three districts in B city. The result showed that there is a difference in interpersonal relationships and feelings of happiness depending on the elderly's age, sex, job status, the presence or absence of a disease, leisure life, and whether they live with family or alone. Therefore, this study supports the successful life of Korean elderly by analyzing the factors related to their happiness, which will make a contribution to a healthy life of local communities. It is also designed to provide basic data for the elderly welfare practice plans that contributes to the quality of life of all Koreans by improving the interpersonal relationship and happiness of the elderly men and women.

Keywords: Happiness, Elderly, Interpersonal Relationship, Whether to Live Alone, Successful Old Age

1. Introduction

From 2020, a change in population flow is predicted in Republic of Korea. As baby boomers are incorporated into the elderly population, with the explosive increase of the elderly population in the future, the number of deaths is greater than the number of births, which raises the natural decline of the population. By 2050, four out ten Korean citizens will be elderly.

Due to the rapid process of population aging, there were 8,026,915 elderly people aged over 65 which accounted for 15.5 percent of population as of December 2019 according to the resident registration statistics of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security in 2019. By

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2025, it will exceed 10 million people comprised 20.3 percent of overall population, and Korea will be a super-aged society, and by 2067 it reaches 46.5 percent. As a continuous increase is expected, a variety of Korean-style welfare policies for the elderly are required in preparation for the future society[1].

In particular, the composition ratio of the 65-69 and 70-74-year-olds, which is the initial age group of the aged 65 or over, has decreased since 2019 while the composition ratio of the 75-year-old and older has been on the rise. Thus, multilateral responses must be discussed for the second group of aged population for their expanded old age due to the increase in life span and early retirement.

Furthermore, the old-age support ratio in Korea was 20.4, and 4.9 of the working-age population was supported for one elderly person aged 65 or older in 2019. As the number of elderly people aged 65 or older increases due to the low fertility rate and aging population, the growth in the old-age support ratio is expected to increase rapidly, exceeding the working-age population to 100.4 in 2065. This shows that national measures related to financial planning are urgently needed.

On the other hand, the number of elderly households (head of household aged 65 or older) accounted for 4,388,000 in 2019, comprised 21.8 percent of the total households in Korea, which is expected to increase continuously to 47.9 percent by 2045. More importantly, research shows that the proportion of single-person households is the largest at 34.2 percent. Thus, associations among organizations and practical support plans are required for the elderly who live alone.

In addition, in a self-survey conducted in 2018, the percentage of the elderly people who think their health is 'not in good condition' was 43.5 percent. The rate of negative perception on subjective health status of this group was very high. The current rate of increase or decrease in health insurance medical expenses is 14.7 percent which is 2.8 percent higher than the overall rate (11.9 percent). As the health care cost continues to increase, the government needs to find mid- to long-term solutions[2].

In fact, the previous studies show that longevity in old age is affected by subjective satisfaction and happiness in life during the lifetime of elderly. In *Age and Aging* researchers at the Duke-NUS Singapore Medical School studied the relationship between happiness and longevity by conducting a follow-up survey with 4,000 people aged 60 or older, and they found that the mortality rate decreased by as much as nine percent each time the happiness score increased by one point.

In general, the likelihood of dying of the elderly who found their lives happy was 19 percent lower than people who did not. The association was consistently found among men

and women, and the young-old (Aged 60-79) and the old-old (Aged 75 or older). The study showed that even a small increase in happiness has a positive effect on longevity of elderly[3].

Comparing the subjective satisfaction and happiness of life of people around the globe by age, the level of happiness is the lowest in the middle-aged in their 40s and 50s, and it increases after that. As shown in Picture, the graphs make a smile curve which is similar to the shape of a smiling mouth. The results of the study on the feelings of happiness of people in the world show that eliminating futile expectations for an uncertain future and an ambition that troubles them is a common secret for making old age comfortable and happy.

However, the graph of Korea is similar to that of Russia in a way that the level of happiness among citizens gradually decreases with age. The OECD's highest level of elderly poverty rate (49.6 percent) proves that the financial hardship of elderly in Korea is clearly an important cause of unhappy old age. Moreover, in Korean society, where many interactions with neighbors have disappeared, the feeling of social isolation among the elderly, who rarely see their children, is also an important reason for the Korean elderly's unhappiness. Overall, financial difficulties and emotional hunger are the main factors of their unhappiness[4].

According to 'Research on the Development of Happiness Index' by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, the average score of the happiness index was 6.329 as a result of surveying the satisfaction level of 36 sub-indices in seven areas, including the value and goal of life, with 1,000 people aged 20 or older across the country.

On the other hand, the respondents in their sixties or older, who had the lowest happiness index with 6.05 points, had the lowest scores in the areas of subjective happiness (6.11 points) and life satisfaction (6.02 points). It shows that the elderly suicide rate, which is four times the average of the member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the elderly poverty rate, which is unquestionably the highest among the OECD countries, are closely related[5].

As social ethics in modern society consider activity and productivity contributed to society as a virtue, many people who are facing the change of retirement and old age are obsessive about their activity and productivity creating a "super-senior syndrome[6]."

An American psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, divided the stages of human self-development into eight stages and argued that it is essential for individuals to complete the developmental tasks given at each stage successfully in order to establish a healthy personality[7]. In old age, the last stage of the development, people should have ego-integrity and satisfaction feeling that they have lived to their best even if it was not fully satisfying. Moreover, the goal of old age should be organizing individuals' lives between what they gained and lost from their past and

perceiving it from a balanced point of view regardless of external success[8].

Whereas the average life expectancy has increased and the era of 100-year lifetimes is coming, our older generation has never drawn a picture of their own retirement in a leisurely manner, nor have they prepared themselves for it. They mainly focus on achieving the remarkable industrialization and supporting their children and parents, which made hard for them to plan for their old age and retirement. Another reason is that due to rapid population aging, social and cultural infrastructures for the elderly population are not sufficiently prepared.

The British research, presented in *Social Science and Medicine*, was conducted with 2 million people from 80 countries to examine the link between happiness and age, and the researchers found that the happiness curve of one's whole life was u-shaped.

Happiness index of individuals is high in childhood, lowest in their forties, and rises again as they age. Moreover, when they turn 70 years-old, happiness index recovers as much as they felt in childhood. Researchers have announced that the results are consistently the same in developed countries, developing countries, and underdeveloped countries regardless of socioeconomic status, presence of children, marital status, and changes in occupation or income, which supports their theory that there is a correlation between happiness and age.

However, Koreans' feelings of happiness peak in their twenties, and as they get older, the proportion of people who think their lives are miserable increases, according to the poll cast by the Munhwa Ilbo[9]. It clearly shows the crisis of the elderly in Korean society.

Over the past 40 years, Koreans have overcome two big financial crisis and experienced a remarkable growth. Although Korea has become wealthy, it is not easy to find people who think they are happy. A slang word 'hell joeson' (meaning Korea is like hell) is even popular in Korean society. In a survey conducted by an international organization to analyze global happiness index, Korea ranks lower than countries with similar economic levels, which shows a typical 'paradox of growth and happiness.'

The unfortunate situation of Koreans in their sixties and older is much more pronounced in comparison to the four countries, and Korea is the only country experiencing a decline in happiness with age in the graph[10].

Likewise, the results of the Munhwa Ilbo survey in 2008 and the Hankook Ilbo survey in 2016, which was conducted several years later, consistently show that not only happiness of the elderly in Korea is much lower than that of the elderly around the globe, but also the feeling of happiness decreases with age.

[Fig. 1] Trend of Happiness Index by Age in Each Country, 2016

Source: Telephone and internet poll of approx. 2500 people by Hankook Ilbo, Korea Research International

By looking at these results, we must consider what they suggest about Korea's elderly welfare policy in preparation for the upcoming super-aged society. In this inevitable situation, this is an important national issue that needs to be seriously discussed across society.

In a recent survey in the "2020 World Happiness Report" published by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Korea ranked 61st which was seven places down from last year. Korea had been ranked around the 50th for five years from 2016, but it was pushed back to the 61st this year.

[Fig. 2] Ranking of Happiness 2019

Finland ranked first, with a score of 7.809 out of 10, and also ranked as the happiest country in the world for the third consecutive year. It has been known that the reason Finland can maintain its first place is their solid social safety network and a close welfare system. In particular, despite the spread of Coronavirus Disease-19 to countries around the world, individuals in Finland showed the strong will to help each other among local communities, and the vibe helped improve the happiness index, according to CNN's analysis.

In the *World Happiness Report*, it is said "a high trust society quite naturally looks for and finds co-operative ways to work together to repair the damage and rebuild better lives" adding "This (the willingness of their neighbours and their institutions to work in harness to help each other) delivers a heightened sense of belonging, and pride in what they have been able to achieve by way of mitigation." (Picture: The countries ranked high by happiness. From the left, the color of the bar graph indicates points on gross domestic product, social support, life expectancy, social freedom, tolerance, corruption, and anxiety about the future, respectively)[11].

Due to the aging of the population, people are more interested in the feeling of happiness in old age which has been prolonged in modern society. Unlike in the past, as expectations and interest in elderly's happiness are increasing today, the way to pursue health in old age is also changing. In the past, efforts were made for longevity, which was, "living a long life," but in modern times, interest has shifted to "living well and healthy."

It is a very important task in preventing and solving the elderly problems to prepare a foundation for the elderly to spend a satisfactory and happy retirement while adjusting to the changing environment. Therefore, among the elderly issues, the first task to be examined should be finding out how happy the elderly are in their lives and what factors influence those feelings of happiness.

Especially, with the retirement age getting younger and the life after retirement getting longer, there is still a dearth of research on the early stage of old age that starts after retirement and on happiness and quality of life of the old-old people who are in their last stage of life[12].

In early old age, people experience a series of critical issues such as retirement, loss of income, boredom, illness, independence of children and death of acquaintances, and their psychological well-being is greatly threatened by emotional feelings such as anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and depression. Furthermore, they also face major changes in the life cycle and social participation.

Factors influencing the quality of life of the elderly in these two different periods vary including health status, family relations, economic conditions, marital status, gender, and social

connections, which are different for each age group.

Unlike Western individualistic culture where self-esteem and autonomy of individuals are highly related to life satisfaction, in a collectivist culture such as Korea, it is important to establish a harmonious relationship in the group to which an individual belongs. Moreover, the social evaluation and recognition of the surrounding groups considering themselves as harmonious and amicable members of society greatly contributes to the criterion for the pursuit of happiness.

In 2011, Oerlemans, Bakker and Veenhoven conducted a study of Dutch elderly people to analyze 'what activities' make them feel happier in their daily life, and found that the level of happiness increased when the elderly were engaged in social activities among daily activities in five categories (social activities, physical activity, relaxing activities, cognitive activities, housework activities).

In particular, research found that the exchange reciprocity experience of giving and receiving small and big help with people around has an important effect on the quality of life in old age. It shows that this is an opportune time to conduct a study on the influence of social relationships or interpersonal interaction experiences in old age on happiness or subjective well-being.

In current society, the elderly population tends to be treated as one category based on age, but recent studies have shown that the elderly are not the same group, but a very heterogeneous group showing different characteristics according to gender, class, and age. It is reported that the effects of these characteristics on happiness may be different.

Especially, there is a dearth of research on how the elderly women, the dominated group of old age, and men are different, what differences they have in interpersonal relationships and happiness, and lastly, what actions need to be taken in order to improve their happiness level.

Therefore, this study supports the successful life of Korean elderly by analyzing the factors related to their happiness, which will make a contribution to a healthy life of local communities. It is also designed to provide basic data for the elderly welfare practice plans that could contribute to the improvement of happiness and quality of life of all Koreans by improving the interpersonal relationship and happiness of the elderly.

2. Research Methods and Results

This study analyzes how the factors in sociology of population affect elderly's interpersonal relationships and happiness to explore the relationship between elderly's interpersonal relationship

and happiness. The purpose of this study is to find practical alternatives that could improve the quality of life and happiness of elderly men and women.

In order to conduct the study, a non-probability sampling survey method was used to examine the degree of daily interpersonal relationships and happiness of the elderly men and women in the local community. A total of 62 respondents (42 male and 20 female) were surveyed at N welfare center in J district, M senior citizen center in Y district, and K senior citizen center in D district.

The collected residence data on the people surveyed appeared that there were 21 people in district Y, 4 people in D district, 31 people in district J, and 10 people in other areas. Apart from data on four people who had not responded, researchers analyzed the data on 62 people. The demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in [Table 1] .

Among the participants, 67.7 percent (42 people) were male, and 32.2 percent (20) were female. The reason is that elderly women have negative attitude towards observations and surveys. At the time of the survey, the number of couples who live together was the highest at 48.3 percent (30), and the proportion of the elderly who live alone was 33.8 percent (21) whereas the proportion of the couple who live together with their (grandchildren) children was 9.6 percent (6). In addition, the proportion of the elderly who live with (grandchildren) children without a spouse was 8.064 percent (5). Approximately 32.2 percent (20) of the participants had a job at the time, and 67.7 percent (42) were nonworking.

With regard to age, the proportion between 61 and 65 years old was 25.8 percent (16 persons), 20.9 percent (13) for 66 and 70 years old, 14.5 percent for 71 and 75 years old (9), 25.8 percent for 76 and 80 years old (16) and 12.9 percent for over 81 (8).

As for the presence or absence of disease, 37.0 percent (23 people) answered "yes" to the question, and 62.9 percent (39) said "no". However, as a result of analyzing the propensity of respondents during the actual survey, it is important to note that even if the elderly are ill, they do not take it seriously unless it is a real serious problem because they think that it is normal for elderly to live with illness

Regarding leisure time, 74.1 percent (46 people) of the elderly responded that they have regular leisure time, and 25.8 percent (16) responded that they do not have leisure time. As a result of a survey examining the amount of time the elderly spend alone with the categories divided into 1 to 2 hours, 3 to 4 hours, 5 to 9 hours, and more than 10 hours, 35.4 percent (22 people) of the participants answered 1 to 2 hours, 22.5 percent (14) answered 3 to 4 hours, and 11.2 percent (7) answered 5 to 9 hours, 30.6 percent (19) responded more than 10 hours.

In addition, as a result of a survey analyzing with whom the elderly spend most of their

time, "spouses" accounted for the highest ratio with 48.3 percent (30 people), 12.9 percent (8) answered "children", one person (1.6 percent) responded "grandchildren", 12.9 percent (8 people) said "friends", 8.0 percent (5) answered "neighbors", 4.8 percent (3) said "co-workers", and lastly, 11.2 percent (7) answered that they are not with anyone and usually alone.

[Table 1] Research Subject

Variable	Classification	N(%) 62(100%)
Gender	male	42 (68%)
	female	20 (32%)
Members living together	couple	30 (48%)
	Living alone	21 (34%)
	Couple + (grandchild) children	6 (10%)
	iving alone + (grandchild) children	5 (8%)
job	have	20 (32%)
	none	42 (68%)
age	61~65	16 (26%)
	66~70	13 (21%)
	71~75	9 (14%)
	76~80	16 (26%)
	81 years old or older	8 (13%)
disease	have	23 (37%)
	none	39 (63%)
Leisure life	do	46 (74%)
	I don't	16 (26%)
Alone time	1~2hour	22 (35%)
	3~4hour	14 (23%)
	5~9 hour	7 (11%)
	10hour over	19 (31%)
Being mainly together	Spouse	30 (48%)
	Children	8 (13%)
	Grandchildren	1 (2%)
	Friend	8 (13%)
	Neighborhood	5 (8%)
	Colleague	3 (5%)
	Alone	7 (11%)

[Table 2] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men by Age

The men aged 66 to 70 have higher interpersonal satisfaction, whereas the men aged 61 to 65 have higher level of happiness.

[Table 3] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women by Age

The women aged 61 to 65 have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 4] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men by Job Status

Working elderly men have higher interpersonal satisfaction whereas the elderly men who do not work have higher level of happiness.

[Table 5] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women by Job Status

Working elderly women have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 6] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men based on Family Composition

The single men who live with (grandchildren) children have higher level of interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 7] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women based on Family Composition

The category of "married couples with (grandchildren) children" have higher level of interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 8] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men based on Illness

The men with illness have higher interpersonal satisfaction whereas the men with no illness have higher level of happiness.

[Table 9] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women based on Illness

The women with no illness have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 10] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men based on Leisure Time

The men who have leisure time have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 11] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women based on Leisure Time

The women who have leisure time have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 12] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men based on the Amount of Time Spent Alone

The men in the "1 to 2 hours" category have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 13] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women based on the Amount of Time Spent Alone

The women in the "1 to 2 hours" category have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

[Table 14] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Men based on the People they Spend Most of their Time with

The men in the "alone" category have higher interpersonal satisfaction whereas the men in the "children" category have higher level of happiness.

[Table 15] Interpersonal Satisfaction and Happiness of Elderly Women based on the People they Spend Most of their Time with

The women in the "alone" category have higher interpersonal satisfaction whereas the women in the "children" category have higher level of happiness.

[Table 16] The Level of Happiness of Elderly Men based on Interpersonal Satisfaction

On the basis of the average 30 points of interpersonal satisfaction, people in the "30 points or more" category showed higher happiness than people in the "30 points or less" category.

[Table 17] The Level of Happiness of Elderly Women based on Interpersonal Satisfaction

On the basis of the average 30 points of interpersonal satisfaction, people in the "30 points or more" category showed higher happiness than people in the "30 points or less" category.

3. Discussion and Suggestions

To explore the relationship between interpersonal relationships and happiness of elderly for their happy old age, this study analyzes how the factors in sociology of population affect elderly's interpersonal relationships and happiness. The ultimate purpose of this study is to find practical alternatives that could improve the quality of life and happiness of elderly.

This study supports the successful life of Korean elderly by analyzing the factors related to their happiness, which will make a contribution to a healthy life of local communities. It is also designed to provide basic data for the elderly welfare practice plans. Moreover, it is aimed to contribute to the improvement of happiness and quality of life of all Koreans by improving the interpersonal relationship and happiness of the elderly, who will occupy the majority of the Korean society.

The following are the main findings of the study;

First, regarding interpersonal satisfaction and happiness of the elderly men and women by age, the interpersonal satisfaction of the middle-age seniors was high in case of men, and a big difference was found within the elderly women since the interpersonal satisfaction of the early-age elderly women was high. In terms of happiness, the early-age elderly people have higher happiness levels.

With regards to job status, working elderly men have higher interpersonal satisfaction whereas nonworking elderly men had higher happiness. On the other hand, the level of interpersonal satisfaction and happiness was high for nonworking elderly women.

Even with regards to cohabitation, the elderly men residing with (grandchildren) children have higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness, while the elderly women who live with their married children have higher interpersonal relationships and happiness.

In terms of existence of illness, the elderly men with illness had high interpersonal satisfaction, which is unusual, and the level of happiness was high among the men with no illness. In case of women, the elderly women with no illness had high interpersonal satisfaction and happiness.

The same results found in surveys regarding leisure time that both men and women who have regular leisure time had high interpersonal satisfaction and happiness. Moreover, with regards to time spending alone, two groups had higher interpersonal satisfaction and happiness

when they spent less time alone. Lastly, the elderly men and women who spent most of their time alone had high interpersonal satisfaction whereas the elderly who spent most of their time with (grandchildren) children had high happiness levels.

As a result, the elderly people who have high interpersonal satisfaction show high level of happiness. Thus, the result proves that elderly people can have high levels of interpersonal satisfaction and happiness by spending time alone, having leisure time with family, and engaging in social activities. Therefore, it is necessary to seek ways to expand the areas securing elderly's leisure and relationship participation activities.

Furthermore, as physical and emotional health are the key factors that raise happiness among elders, it is important to develop a health managing program that tracks their health consistently and to provide emotional support through counseling for the elderly living alone.

Elderly people may feel like their subjective health condition is not well if they are not able to have medical services when needed. It suggests that we should pay attention to activities that support local health centers and volunteer organizations so that they can receive appropriate medical services in a timely manner.

The elderly men and women who participated in surveys felt a great sense of happiness when family relationships were stable and their health behavior and subjective health level were good. Compared to other age groups, people in old age are vulnerable to physical health due to the decline in physical physiological functions. It was confirmed that health behavior, subjective health level, and family relations had a great influence on their health.

Based on these results, it is necessary to provide the elderly with opportunities for lifelong and personalized education by expanding the enactment of welfare for the elderly at the national level. Furthermore, programs of the elderly education-related institutions currently in operation should function according to the characteristics of the elderly.

An increase in life expectancy demands interests in happiness of the elderly and the demand grows rapidly. Along with these social changes, various services are being developed to support the elderly's health and life assistance to ensure their health and stable lives, but it is difficult to satisfy the needs of various elderly people.

Therefore, there is an urgent need of development of service and program that can increase the level of happiness of the elderly more effectively, and customized services should be provided by reevaluating the system and programs of elderly-related social services.

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