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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Happiness among Young Adults Living in Poverty in South Korea

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#### ABSTRACT

Given the increasingly unstable labor market, South Korean young adults are facing a variety of difficulties. This study investigates health, financial, psychological, and social factors affecting happiness among South Korean young adults in poverty. Using a sample of 722 young adults in poverty receiving welfare benefits, multiple regression analysis results indicate that financial stress, employment hope, perceived health condition, social capital, family support, and resilience are significantly associated with happiness level. Particularly, the psychological and social factors are strongly associated with happiness. These findings highlight the necessity and importance of intervention to empower psychological strengths and social relationships to improve happiness among vulnerable young adults in poverty.

*Keywords:* Happiness, young adults in poverty, young adults in South Korea, multiple regression analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Happiness has long been an important theme in various academic fields<sup>1-3</sup>). The studies regarding happiness have investigated the determinants of happiness primarily among children or adolescents<sup>4-9</sup>), the elderly<sup>10</sup>), or adults in general with no specific age group<sup>11-14</sup>).

However, relatively little attention has been paid to happiness among young adults and the limited research that has been done has focused on college students<sup>15-21</sup>), overlooking young adults who have not received higher education. Research on the happiness of young adults began in the mid-2010s, and has examined financial, employment-related, family-related, and psychological factors as determinants of happiness<sup>22-25</sup>). All these studies targeted young adults in general.

In developed countries, risk of poverty among young people has increased due to deepening labor market instability and the prolongation of COVID-19. In particular, there was a high correlation between individual labor market experiences and its potential deleterious consequences<sup>26,27</sup>). Poverty among Korean youth is not limited to economic aspect, but they are experiencing multidimensional and overlapping deficiencies such as education, jobs, and housing<sup>28</sup>). Young adults have emerged as one of the most vulnerable groups over the past decade in South Korea because of the increasingly unstable and flexible labor market. They are more likely to work in temporary, part-time, or platform-based work, compared to the previous generation that has already entered the labor market<sup>29</sup>). The difficulty in achieving a secure job is accompanied by financial, psychological, and social difficulties<sup>29,30</sup>). Particularly, young adults from disadvantaged families tend to be more vulnerable due to the lack of resources to rely on. In fact, previous studies have reported that young adults from low-income families experience more physical, psychological, and behavioral problems<sup>31-33</sup>), and are a higher risk of involvement in crimes<sup>34,35</sup>). Meanwhile, national comparative studies have reported that the happiness level of South Koreans is the lowest for all age groups compared to their counterparts in other countries. South Korean children and teenagers aged 9 to 17 are the least happy<sup>36</sup>) and adults also showed the lowest happiness level<sup>37</sup>) among their peers in all other OECD countries. Although demographic trends suggest that the number of young adults in poverty is rapidly increasing under COVID-19<sup>28</sup>), their happiness has rarely been studied. Research has mainly been conducted to verify factors that affect the happiness of college students and young adults in Korea<sup>38-41</sup>). The few empirical studies about happiness among young adults in poverty have examined a specific theory about happiness or only local living subjects<sup>42,43</sup>).

Taken together, the previous studies on happiness have overlooked young adults, especially vulnerable young adults such as in poverty and without higher education<sup>15,18,21</sup>). In this respect, the current study empirically investigates the factors affecting happiness of young adults in poverty in order to provide policy and practical implications for enhancing the happiness of impoverished young adults experiencing multiple difficulties. This study aims to foster a better understanding of the factors associated with happiness among impoverished young Korean adults, thereby stimulating active discussions for the development of effective policies and practical interventions to enhance happiness among young adults living in poverty.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Defining happiness

Of the extent studies on happiness have tried to unveil the nature of happiness<sup>44-55</sup>). The concept of happiness seems as varied as the number of scholars. For example, the bottom-up theory of happiness considers that happiness is the sum of pleasant and unpleasant experiences<sup>56</sup>). In other words, the more often individuals are exposed to a pleasant external environment, the happier they are<sup>57</sup>). Similarly, the objective list theory explains that actual valuable conditions such as professional achievements and material comforts determines happiness<sup>58</sup>). On the other hand, happiness can be spurious depending on one's personality and traits, rather than affected by external environments<sup>46</sup>), according to the top-down theory. The integrated theory suggests that both external environments and individual personalities affect happiness<sup>52</sup>). This theory has strength as it can collectively explain that happiness can be affected by both external environments and individual personalities. Particularly for young adults in poverty, their happiness can be affected by both personal characteristics, such as gender, age, educational status, and wider socio-economic environments, including the place of residence, welfare system and labor market within the country of residence. Therefore, the current study adopts the integrated theory and examines the effects of various factors, encompassing both internal and external elements, on happiness among South Korean young adults in poverty.

### 2.2. Determinants of happiness

Empirical studies on happiness have investigated the level of happiness or the determinants of happiness<sup>36,37,59-61</sup>). Studies exploring the determinants of happiness have proposed multiple factors affecting happiness in the general adult population.

First of all, financial factors are one of the most frequently discussed in regard to contributing factors to happiness. While some studies have reported a positive association<sup>62-64</sup>), others have found the positive association between income and happiness was only relevant for income up to a certain amount<sup>57,65-70</sup>). The previous literature has also demonstrated that financial factors such as savings, debt, and financial stress also have a significant influence on happiness; specifically, some studies identified a positive effect with savings<sup>71,72</sup>), whereas others found a negative effect with debt<sup>73</sup>) and financial stress<sup>74</sup>).

Psychological factors such as self-esteem<sup>14</sup>), grit<sup>75,76</sup>), resilience<sup>77</sup>), and hope<sup>78</sup>) have been reported as important determinants of happiness. Psychological factors contribute to happiness by alleviating stress caused by objective environment<sup>79</sup>) and promoting positive self-evaluation and constructive thinking about future. Studies have identified social factors such as social capital<sup>80-82</sup>), trust in one's society<sup>83</sup>), and relationships with family members<sup>84-86</sup>) and friendship<sup>16</sup>) as significant determinants of happiness.

While existing studies have explored various factors affecting happiness, little attention has been paid to impoverished young adults among happiness literature. Young adults living in poverty in South Korea often find themselves with inadequate family resources, compelling them to take up unstable jobs, and subsequently, enduring chronic poverty throughout their lives. Notably, approximately 90% of young adults residing in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, reported experiencing multi-dimensional poverty in at least one area, with about 42% indicating such poverty in three or more areas. This underscores the necessity for comprehensive interventions encompassing labor, housing, health, and social supports<sup>28</sup>). Moreover, the suicide rate among young adults aged 20-35 years old has been steadily increasing since 2017, with about 42%

admitting to having suicidal thoughts<sup>87</sup>). As the lives of young adults become increasingly challenging, examining the factors contributing to happiness among this group becomes crucial. Therefore, the current study focuses on young adults in poverty in the South Korean context, and examines the financial, psychological, and social factors have effects are associated with happiness.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and data collection

The study sample consists of 722 young adults in poverty participating in the Youth Hope Growing Account (YHGA) program, an individual development account (IDA) for young adults provided by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare. YHGA was launched in 2018 targeting young adults who aged 15 to 39 receiving subsidies from the National Basic Livelihood Security (NBLs), a public assistance program targeting individuals with income levels below the 30% of median income. The age range of young adults varies depending on the study, but according to the psychosocial development theory of Erikson, a mainstream developmental psychologist, it refers to the age range of 18-40<sup>88-89</sup>). This study used the secondary data collected from the “the First Panel Study on the Participants of the Youth Hope Growing Account (YHGA) Program in South Korea”<sup>90</sup>). Although the sample of this study is comprised of young adults who have participated in YHGA, Choi and colleagues<sup>91</sup>) reported no significant difference between participants and non-participants of YHGA in terms of gender, age, educational level, and employment status among young adults receiving NBLs through a t-test for analyzing the differences between two groups. Given no significant difference in their poverty status, it can be estimated that the sample of this study represents a population of young adults in poverty, with income below 30% of the median income. The original sample of “the First Panel Study on the Participants of the Youth Hope Growing Account (YHGA) Program in South Korea”<sup>90</sup>) were used for the analysis. A total of 722 subjects were used for the analysis.

The characteristics of sample are reported in Table 1. More than half (62.7%) were female, and about two-thirds of respondents (66.1%) had no specific religion. Most respondents were high school graduates (49%) or college graduates (45.7%). About two-thirds of respondents (63.7%) were working part-time. They were, on average, 24.76 years old and lived with 2.86 family members.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (n = 722)

	N/Mean(min-max)	%(SD)		N/Mean(min-max)	%(SD)
Gender			Religion		
Male	269	37.3	No religion	477	66.1
Female	453	62.7	Have religion	245	33.9
Education level			Type of working hours		
Lower than middle school graduates	35	4.8	Part-time worker	460	63.7
High school graduates	357	49.4	Full-time worker	262	36.3
College graduates and above	330	45.7	Age	24.76(17-39)	4.24
Number of families living together	2.86(1-10)	1.53	Health condition	5.57(0-10)	2.50

## 3.2. Measures

### 3.2.1. Happiness

This study measured the dependent variable using the happiness scale<sup>92)</sup> validated in Korean. The scale consists of two factors and nine items: (1) cognitive elements (3 items) and (2) emotional elements—positive (3 items) and negative emotions (3 items). It employs a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = all the time. The happiness level was calculated by subtracting the sum of negative emotions from the combined score of cognitive elements and positive emotions. The scale's reliability was .88 in the original online survey and .86 in the original interview survey. In this study, it was .86.

### 3.2.2. Financial factors

The study employed both objective and subjective indicators of financial factors. Objective indicators used in this study include working hours (full time=1, part time=0), income, personal savings, and debt. The study used the InCharge financial distress/financial well-being (IFDFW) scale<sup>93)</sup> to measure financial stress as a subjective indicator. All of the monetary variables (income, savings, and debt) were log transformed in the analyses. IFDFW consists of seven items measured on a 5-point scale, where higher scores indicate higher levels of financial stress. The Cronbach's alpha was .96 in the original study and .87 in this study, indicating excellent internal consistency.

### 3.2.3. Psychological factors

The study considered psychological factors such as self-esteem, grit, resilience, and employment hope as determinants of happiness. The present research adopted the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)<sup>94)</sup>, the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S)<sup>95)</sup>, the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale<sup>96)</sup>, and the Korean Employment Hope Scale (K-EHS)<sup>97)</sup> to measure psychological strengths. The RSE scale consists of five items for positive self-esteem and five for negative self-esteem. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = all the time). The Cronbach's alpha of the original study was .92 and .87 in this study. Grit refers to a sense of relentlessness or courage that plays a decisive role in creating success and achievement. The study used the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S)<sup>95)</sup> to measure grit, which consists of 8 items on a 5-point scale. The Cronbach's alpha of the original study was .79 and .83 in this study for the Grit-S scale. To measure the level of resilience of South Korean young adults in poverty, the current study utilized the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale<sup>96)</sup>, consisting of two items: "I adapt to change well" and "I'm in good shape even after experiencing difficult things." The scale measured on 5-point Likert scale, with a higher score indicating higher resilience. The Cronbach's alpha was .89 in the original study and .71 in this study for the resilience scale. The Korean Employment Hope Scale (K-EHS)<sup>97)</sup> was adopted to assess the level of hope related to employment prospects. The scale consists of 4 factors and 17 items. Respondents rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = all the time. The original Cronbach's alpha was .94 and .95 in this study.

### 3.2.4. Social factors

The study included family relationships and social capital as the social factors affecting happiness. The present research measured family relationship using the dimension of family support from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)<sup>98)</sup> comprising three dimensions and 12 items: support from family (4 items), friends

(4 items), and significant others (4 items). Respondents rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5=all the time. The Cronbach's alpha was .91 in the original study and .92 in this study. The study also utilized social capital scale developed by Lee and Ko<sup>99</sup>). The scale is a four-factor, 20-item construct comprising trust (4 items), network (5 items), social participation (6 items), and norm consciousness (5 items). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not at all to 5=all the time). The Cronbach's alpha was .87 in the original study and .84 in the current study.

### 3.2.5. Control variables

The study considered demographic characteristics such as gender, educational level, religion, age, number of family members living together, and health condition as control variables. Gender, educational level, and religion were treated as binary variables. Respondents who are male, college graduates or higher education, and those with a specific religion were coded as "1," while those who are female, with a high school education or lower, and those with no religion were coded as "0." The study used one question with an 11-point Likert scale ranging 0 = very bad to 10 = very good to measure a health condition perceived by respondents.

### 3.3. Analyses

First, the study used descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations to analyze the primary variables and their relationships. In addition, the study tested the normality of the data using the values of skewness and kurtosis. Given the data's normal distribution, a multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the association between multiple predictors and happiness, while controlling for demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, age, and number of families living together.

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + u$$

Y is the happiness level,  $X_1$  is the demographic factors (e.g. gender, religion),  $X_2$  is the economic factors (e.g. working hours, income),  $X_3$  is the psychological factors (e.g. self-esteem, grit),  $X_4$  is the social factors (e.g. family support, social capital), u is the error term; and  $\alpha$  is the intercept. After conducting listwise deletion for handling the missing data, a sample of 685 young adults in poverty was used for the final analysis.

## 4. Results

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics of the primary study variables. The average level of happiness was 12.90 (SD = 8.46). As a result of testing the normality of the data using skewness and kurtosis, the study found evidence of normality with the absolute values of 8 or less<sup>100</sup>) for all study variables.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	N
Happiness	12.90	8.46	-15-38	-0.16	0.58	722
Total income	4.58	1.43	0-6.8	-2.23	4.88	722
Personal savings	1.91	1.67	0-5.3	0.12	-1.40	721
Debt	3.00	3.35	0-9.5	0.34	-1.69	686
Financial stress	3.54	0.83	1-5	-0.39	-0.04	722
Self-esteem	3.22	0.33	1-5	-0.35	7.25	722
Grit	3.21	0.63	1-5	0.10	0.34	722
Resilience	4.96	1.72	0-8	-0.10	-0.12	722
Employment hope	3.63	0.68	1-5	-0.20	0.85	722
Family support	3.27	1.02	1-5	-0.41	-0.14	722
Social capital	2.84	0.49	1-5	0.31	1.79	722

The study conducted a correlation analysis to examine the strength of relationship between happiness and independent variables (Table 3). Except for the correlation between the happiness and total income, happiness and personal savings, the other study variables were correlated with happiness, as expected.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of the study variables (n=722)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1)	1										
(2)	-.037	1									
(3)	.055	.314**	1								
(4)	-.106**	.139**	-.035	1							
(5)	-.437**	.073*	-.138**	.331**	1						
(6)	.141**	.010	.055	.078*	.134**	1					
(7)	.434**	.017	.010	-.049	-.254**		1				
(8)	.448**	.006	-.004	.043	-.115**	.227**	.466**	1			
(9)	.580**	-.042	.016	.040	-.133**	.245**	.494**	.563**	1		
(10)	.397**	.010	.034	-.043	-.149**	.047	.205**	.234**	.394**	1	
(11)	.498**	.025	.098**	-.068	-.174**	.174**	.337**	.351**	.498**	.399**	1

Notes: (1) Happiness, (2) Total income, (3) Personal savings (n=721), (4) Debt (n=686), (5) Financial stress, (6) Self-esteem, (7) Grit, (8) Resilience, (9) Employment hope, (10) Family support, (11) Social capital.

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that financial, psychological, and social factors explain about 57.5% variance for happiness ( $F = 55.522, p < .001$ ). Financial stress, resilience, employment hope, family support, social capital, and perceived health condition appear to be significantly associated with happiness. Financial stress turns out to have a significant negative association with happiness ( $\beta = -0.281, p < .001$ ) among financial factors, which indicates that the higher financial stress individuals perceive, the less happy. Employment hope ( $\beta = 0.250, p < .001$ ) and

resilience ( $\beta = 0.097, p < .01$ ) appear to be positively associated with happiness, demonstrating that the more hope for employment and resilience individuals have, the happier they are. Social factors such as family support ( $\beta = 0.110, p < .001$ ) and social capital ( $\beta = 0.162, p < .001$ ) also turn out to be positively associated with happiness. Out of control variables, perceived health condition is positively associated with happiness ( $\beta = 0.238, p < .001$ ), indicating that the healthier individuals perceive themselves, the happier they are.

Table 4. The results of multiple regression analysis among low-income young adults (n = 685)

	B	S.E.	$\beta$
Financial factors			
Type of working hours (full-time worker=1)	-0.016	0.465	-0.001
Total income	0.027	0.161	0.004
Personal savings	-0.082	0.139	-0.016
Debt	0.044	0.073	0.017
Financial stress	-2.863	0.296	-0.281***
Psychological factors			
Self-esteem	0.896	0.695	0.035
Grit	0.755	0.427	0.056
Resilience	0.479	0.158	0.097**
Employment hope	3.114	0.455	0.250***
Social factors			
Family support	0.914	0.242	0.110***
Social capital	2.798	0.543	0.159***
Control variables			
Gender (men=1)	0.162	0.457	0.009
Religion (have religion=1)	0.189	0.459	0.011
Educational level (college and above =1)	-0.319	0.450	-0.019
Age	-0.099	0.054	-0.049
Number of families living together	0.159	0.143	0.029
Health condition	0.802	0.091	0.238***
Constant	-9.439	3.034	
<i>F</i>		55.522***	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.586	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.575***	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



## 5. Discussion

Despite the plethora of happiness studies conducted with children and adolescents<sup>6-8,101</sup>, young adults have been overlooked in happiness research. Young adults have recently emerged as a vulnerable generation along with the difficulties of achieving decent and stable jobs. In particular, young adults living in poverty tend to face multiple risks mainly due to the lack of family economic resources. In addition, because South Koreans have been reported to have the lowest happiness levels for all age groups compared to other countries<sup>36,37,60</sup>, this study focuses on South Korean young adults in poverty and examines the various predictors of happiness.

The multiple regression analysis of young adults in poverty revealed the significant impact of financial stress, employment hope, health condition, social capital, family support, and resilience on happiness. First, this study found that financial stress is the most powerful predictor of happiness, implying that the happiness level of disadvantaged young adults largely depends on their level of financial stress. This finding also concurs with previous studies<sup>74</sup> and suggests the necessity of policies—such as financial consultations, education, and allowances—to alleviate financial stress and enhance happiness. This study also found the positive impacts of psychological factors such as employment hope and resilience on happiness among South Korean young adults in poverty, which is consistent with prior studies<sup>77,78</sup>. These results indicate that happiness among young adults depends on their level of employment hope, which consists of psychological empowerment and motivation, setting realistic financial goals and moving towards them<sup>97</sup>, resilience, and the power to recover from failure<sup>102</sup>. These results suggest the importance and necessity of programs and services to enhance young adults' psychological strengths. As found in the existing literature<sup>80,81,83</sup>, social factors such as family support and social capital appear to be significantly associated with happiness in the current study. These results imply the necessity of community-based support to build and reinforce social relations, such as providing a space for young adults to gather in local communities. Additionally, for disadvantaged young adults who mostly lack family support, it seems vital to provide resources and information regarding employment, housing, finance, and relationships to supplement their insufficient family support. Out of the demographic factors, health condition appears to be positively associated with happiness, consistent with the previous studies<sup>4,14,103</sup>. These results suggest the necessity for health interventions such as regular checkups, exercise, and mental health care for young adults who are regarded as relatively healthy and not considered as primary targets of health-related programs.

Unexpectedly, the study's objective economic indicators—including income, savings, and debt—appear to have an insignificant association with happiness. These findings may result from the characteristics of the sample with little variation in economic factors because the study sample only consists of young adults in poverty receiving public assistance with an income below 30% of the median income. Whereas the objective indicators were not statistically associated with happiness, financial stress, a subjective indicator, appeared to be a significant predictor of happiness among young adults in this study. These results are consistent with the arguments of Diener and colleagues<sup>104,105</sup> proposing that individual perception is more crucial than objective situations in predicting happiness.

The primary limitation of the current study arises from its targeted survey respondents. The survey focused on young adults living below the poverty line receiving public assistance in South Korea. Thus, the research findings cannot be generalized to young adults of all income levels. Another limitation is associated with the study's use of cross-sectional survey data. Since developing happiness takes a long time, using a single survey data may restricts our understanding of the causalities of happiness. Also, resilience, employment hope, family support, and social capital may be significant to

happiness among overall young adult not only young adults in poverty. It is necessary to conduct comparative analysis of determinants of happiness between poor and non-poor young adults in future research. Lastly, the study does not deeply probe specific experiences related to happiness among young adults in poverty. Therefore, future research may need to examine the determinants of happiness through a longitudinal study and examine the diverse mechanisms in regard to happiness. Additionally, qualitative may be needed to understand how happiness of young adults is affected by multiple factors.

Despite these the study limitations, the present study is meaningful in that it proposes, through an empirical analysis, practical implications to improve the happiness of young adults in poverty. As South Korea has prioritized the policy of pursuing economic growth over the past several decades, individuals' happiness and quality of life have been frequently overlooked. However, given the country's economic prosperity and low level of happiness, now is the time to discuss happiness and implement potential strategies to enhance happiness.

The research findings also highlight the needs for practical implications to enhance young adults' happiness, including implementing policies and programs that can support their healthcare and economic self-sufficiency and alleviate current financial stress through financial consultations, financial education, and youth allowances. Additionally, the study also suggests practical implications to improve young adults' psychological strengths and to provide resources and information regarding employment, housing, finance, labor, relationships, and education. These findings are expected to promote further discussion on the happiness and quality of life of young adults and especially discouraged young adults.

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