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REVIEW ARTICLE

FACTORS AFFECTING LIFE SATISFACTION IN OLD AGE

ABSTRACT

As the elderly population is expected to increase gradually, enhancing their physical and mental health has become one of the most crucial goals today. Through such enhancement, they can contribute to society rather than creating difficulties for their families and society. Accordingly, studies on this issue are given importance. In these studies, life satisfaction, as an important determinant of life quality, is concentrated upon, since elderly people are considered to be a risk group in terms of mental health, which is affected by life satisfaction. The concept of "life satisfaction" means wellness with reference to dimensions like happiness, peace, self-confidence etc. In other words, "life satisfaction" is the result obtained by the comparison of expectations, with whatever is at hand. Thus, an individual's level of life satisfaction comes onto the stage as it influences the condition of being mentally healthy and the process of maintaining relationships with the society.

Key Words: Adult; Aged; Quality of Life; Questionnaires.



DERLEME

YAŞLILIKTA YAŞAM DOYUMUNU ETKİLEYEN FAKTÖRLER

Öz

Pek çok toplumda giderek artacağı beklenen yaşlı nüfusun toplumla bütünleşerek aile ve toplum için sıkıntıdan ziyade topluma katkı sağlayabilmesi için fiziksel ve zihinsel sağlığının yükseltilmesi amaçlanmakta ve bu konudaki çalışmalara ağırlık verilmektedir. Yaşam kalitesinin önemli bir belirleyicisi olan yaşam doyumunun üzerinde durulmasının nedeni ise, yaşlıların ruh sağlığı açısından risk grubu olarak kabul edilmesi ve yaşam doyumunun da ruh sağlığını etkileyen çok önemli bir etmen olarak görülmesidir. "Yaşam doyumu" kavramı, mutluluk, huzur, kendine güven vb. açılardan iyi olma anlamına gelmektedir. Diğer bir deyişle yaşam doyumu, bir insanın beklentileri ile, elinde olanların karşılaştırılmasıyla elde edilen durum ya da sonuçtur. Bireyin yaşamdan aldığı doyum düzeyi, ruhsal yönden iyi olma durumu ve toplumla ilişkilerini devam ettirme sürecini de etkileyerek; sağlıklı yaşlanma için önemli bir olgu olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Erişkin; Yaşlı; Yaşam Kalitesi; Ölçekler.

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INTRODUCTION

Old age is a natural and an inevitable period of life. Owing to the developments in areas of diagnosis and treatment, our mortality rate has declined and life expectancy has increased. Currently, policies and programs about old age are concentrated on increasing general health rather than increasing life expectancy. The basic goal is not to add years to life, but to add life to years. When it is considered that elderly population grows faster in developing countries like ours, studies aiming to enable the elderly to be healthy and to stay economically active are not luxurious, but have become necessary. Otherwise, it is impossible for the young productive population, which is less in quantity, to meet the economic, social and emotional needs of the much more populated elderly. Therefore, World Health Organization brought the term "active aging" to the agenda. Active aging can be defined as increasing life expectancy, productivity and life quality by using opportunities for physical, mental and social well-being in the most efficient way throughout life (1).

As the elderly population is expected to increase gradually, enhancing their physical and mental health has become one of the most crucial goals today. In this way, they can contribute to society, rather than creating difficulty for their families and society. In our country, the average human life for women is 71.5, whereas it is 66.9 for men and the current ratio of the elderly which is about 8% will be 22.8% by the year 2050 (2). When these numbers are taken into account, the need to analyze and introduce factors affecting life quality in the period of old age is unignorable. In such analyses, life satisfaction, as an important determinant of life quality, is concentrated upon, since elderly people are considered to be a risk group in terms of mental health, which is affected by life satisfaction. As a matter of fact, many gerontologists share the view that the level of satisfaction is the basic subject in elderly people's extended life spans. A low score of life level is regarded as an indicator of serious problems in social relations, mental and physical health.

Life satisfaction has a long research history in social gerontology as well. Despite this long history, findings of the researches on this issue are far from being definite, consistent and convincing. Theoretically speaking, life satisfaction is related to the level of participation in social activities, change in participation in social activities, arrangements in the individual's life, important life events, age, gender, retirement, education level, income level, health condition, marital status, family life and societal life (3).

Participation in Leisure Activities

Leisure can be defined as the time which is spared for palatable hobbies and sports excluding the individual's job and duties, i.e. compulsory activities.

The shift of activities in the old age has been the focus of psychological welfare studies for a long time and a significant relationship was found between activity level and psychological welfare (4). For example, according to studies conducted by Şener, Terzioğlu and Karabulut (3), it was stated that the level of participation in leisure activities, positively affects life satisfaction to a large extent. In the study which was carried out to determine the effects of participation in 6 groups of activities chosen by Warr et al. (5), it was found that participation in all activities elevates life satisfaction. Nonetheless, in Chen's (6) study it was concluded that activity types do not have an effect on life satisfaction.

Activity level affects individual's psychological welfare because of at least three reasons. The first of these is that activities generally provide the accomplishment of personal goals. Appointing goals and fulfilling them are enormously significant in the development of good mental health, self confidence and the feeling of sufficiency. Secondly, the outputs obtained from these activities also shape psychological health positively. Thirdly, the output of activities may have different and more than one effect on the well-being. For instance, participation in sport activities might provide benefits in developing social relations and some other practical benefits besides improving health (5).

Role Change

In every society there are role expectancies that a culture ascribes to certain age groups. Individual's perception and evaluation of these roles constitute his "I", in other words his identity. Some views convey that success of the elderly individuals in certain social activities influences the individual's portrait of his personality positively. In turn, the positive perception of the self-portrait is the basic condition of his or her satisfaction in life and thus aging successfully and healthily. The changes occurring in the individual's working life, family life and other positions in society in the old age give way to changes in the roles like being a parent, spouse or a friend and loss of some certain roles. The loss of identity (role) along with authority, respectability and productivity cannot be easily replaced. Some contradictions that appear as a result of this can impinge on women's and men's emotions in a negative way and this, in turn, may damage life satisfaction (7).



Many studies have been carried out to answer why old age is regarded as loss of role. Since there is a decline in roles during aging, there is also a decline in the participation of the elderly in social life. Thus, he or she drifts away to loneliness. In the studies conducted on the effect of role loss on life satisfaction and the variables influencing this fact, the findings show that loss of role alone does not affect the level of life satisfaction. In such a research, this subject has been tried to be explained through the concept of "stress" pressure. It is expressed that the imbalance between the perceived demands stemming from perceived environment and the ability to answer these demands create stress. Consequently, this stress level affects level of life satisfaction. It is also crucial to note that loss of role influences level of life satisfaction differently in relation to the variable of gender. Accordingly, loss of role decreases the level of life satisfaction for men more than for women (8).

Gender

The relationship between life satisfaction and gender has been the focus for many researches. However, the findings of these studies vary. Some research results state that although women express more negative emotions than men do, women are more satisfied with life (8). In other studies, it was pinpointed that the relationship between gender and life satisfaction is either weak or life standard does not show a significant difference in relation to gender (9). On the other hand, several factors that affect life satisfaction can be shown. In Chou and Chi's (10) study, it was found that while age, financial distress and depression are the most significant determinants of life satisfaction for women; education and financial distress are the most important determinants of life satisfaction for men.

Health

Health is an important factor that contributes to life quality. World Health Organization defines health not only as having no diseases or disability but also as physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being as a whole. This definition underlines that psychological, physiological and social factors are indispensable parts of health. Many studies reinforce this emphasis. In fact, in Pinquart's (11) study, it was found that there is a close relationship between the individual's expressed physical health condition and psychological welfare. In the same way, in Palmore and Kivett's (9) analysis, it was maintained that there is a strong relationship between perceived health and life satisfaction. Moreover, Markides and Martin's (4) study shows that health and activity levels are the most significant determinants of life satisfaction.

As can be seen from the research findings, the life satisfaction of the elderly whose health is not in a good condition or who perceives his or her health as bad is less than those whose health is better. Besides, health condition affects life satisfaction more in some groups and some health problems have more negative effects on life satisfaction. To be more specific, the life satisfaction of the elderly, who cannot continue their life activities and relationships because of visual or physiological disabilities, are affected by the health condition more negatively than those who have treatable chronic diseases (12). This situation should be considered seriously in researches. Although less in number, there are studies which show that there is no relationship between health and life satisfaction. For example, Glass and Jolly (13) conducted a research to determine the factors affecting life satisfaction in the women of old age. The findings of this study showed that health is not an effective factor for life satisfaction. This result stems from the fact that those who are treatable or in a good health condition are dominant within the elderly population chosen for this study.

Cognitive Skills

The most obvious cognitive changes that occur together with the old age, although not obvious as in the dementia syndrome, however having an impact on the elder individual, are memory, ability to learn, general and practical intelligence, concentration functions of visual perception, psychomotor and top level functions (14).

There has been great number of research on the changes of the cognitive skills and psychological conditions of the elderly. The results of these research show there is more than one type of change in terms of their cognitive skills. For instance, some researchers have come up with the fact that the latter period of life is not when the mind entirely collapses, on the contrary, is the exact appearance of "collective intelligence" increasing parallel to the age. On the other hand, some researches show that as the individual gets older, use of language, memory, concentration and other skills appear to decrease functionally, and giving products that require creativity is harder, despite the mental protection of creativity (15).

In the old age, not in all cognitive functions a regression is observed. Some of them may not change owing to their own features or personal conditions. In addition, facts that determine the life quality such as socioeconomic standards, level of education, diseases, psychological condition and anatomic features can affect cognitive skills in the old age. For that rea-



son, not every old individual are in the same boat in terms of cognitive structure (16). The elderly without loss of cognitive skills become more satisfied with life, whereas the other with the loss are not this satisfied.

Personal Traits

Personality is the basic component of a human, and is also possible to be explained through both the psychological conditions such as happiness or satisfaction, and cognitive point of view dependant on an individual's self-perception (15).

Personal traits of the elderly are the most significant predictors of life satisfaction. In most of the studies conducted, the relation between the life satisfaction and conditions such as self-esteem, locus of control, sense of connectedness, physical health and financial resources, have been of high concern. Some studies have indicated that factors such as self-esteem, perceived physical health, and locus of control are associated with life satisfaction (17,18). Still other literature posits that financial security and a sense of closeness and connectedness with others predict life satisfaction (17).

Locus of control has been another widely studied construct in relation to life satisfaction among the elderly. Most research has focused on the relationship between internal, external, and chance locus of control and life satisfaction, and conclusions as to the nature of this relationship have been mixed. In an exploratory study conducted by Girzadas et al. (17), participants indicated that functional health status was positively associated with life satisfaction. Further, participants who scored high on chance locus of control also scored low on life satisfaction. Specifically, participants who reported poor physical health and who demonstrated a tendency toward believing their health outcomes were based on chance also showed relatively low life satisfaction. Results from other studies suggest that individuals with a tendency toward internal locus of control, particularly with regard to physical health, show higher levels of life satisfaction than those who show a tendency toward external or chance locus of control (19).

Conversely, some studies have indicated that older adults who demonstrate a tendency towards external locus of control have higher life satisfaction than those with an internal or chance locus of control (18). It may be that older individuals who are externally focused and who have developed trust in their health care provider actually demonstrate higher levels of life satisfaction than those who rely on themselves or even chance for health care decisions.

Marital Status

Marital status affects life satisfaction of the elderly people more than the life satisfaction of young people. Generally, the life satisfaction of the married is higher than the life satisfaction of the unmarried (12).

In studies where the relationship between the subjective welfare and marital status is analyzed, it has been concluded that there is a positive relationship between these two variables. It is a common fact that among women or men, those who are married are happier than those who are unmarried, widowed or living separately. As it is seen from research results, marriage is one of the basic factors affecting the increase and decrease of subjective welfare. To be more specific, marriage offers opportunities like being in a deep and sincere relationship and providing interesting, attractive and supporting social interactions as well as a large network of friends. These complementary relationships make it possible for individuals to face the challenges of life. All because of these, married people occupy the first ranks among those who are happy (20).

The negative effect of being widowed or divorced on subjective welfare has also been analyzed in a multifaceted way. Mastekaasa (20) found that whereas being a widow has a short term effect, being divorced has a long term and permanent negative effect. However, the effects of being divorced can be overcome by getting married again. According to the same study, divorced individuals who get into a relationship within a year after break up evaluate break up as a positive event. It has been determined that the psychological welfares of those individuals who cannot develop a relationship in the same period and who live alone are at a low level. All in all, marriage affects welfare in general because of the permanent effects of the family on individual life. Satisfaction acquired from marriage and family is one of the preconditions of welfare (12).

Education Level

As suggested by Meeks and Murrel (21), education and external factors influence life satisfaction. Education offers advantage for a healthy aging and life satisfaction to the individual throughout his life. As the education level increases, the individual is influenced less by external factors. In due course, his level of life satisfaction becomes higher.

The findings of Glass and Jolly (13), Grace and Wong (22) studies also support this fact and show that education has a positive effect on life satisfaction.



Income (Economic Conditions)

One of the factors influencing life satisfaction in the old age is the economic condition. Along with the loss of role and the loss of status in old age, the insufficiency of social security services brings economic problems with itself. This insufficiency decreases the life qualities of elderly individuals. Consequently, this lack also reduces the level of life satisfaction, because it affects their health and accommodation conditions, activities, and their identity representations negatively (7).

Research findings show that income level plays an important role in life satisfaction and that there is a significant positive relationship between income and the life levels of the elderly (6, 22). Yet, this situation differs among the elderly people. For example, financial problems have a more negative effect on the psychological welfare of women than on the psychological welfare of men (12).

On the other hand, Glass and Jolly (13) pursued a research to designate the factors affecting life satisfactions of elderly women. This study showed that income is not an effective factor in life satisfaction of the elderly women. Parallel to this study, Markides and Martin (4) observed that while health and activity influence life satisfaction directly and significantly, income condition influences life satisfaction indirectly. Increase in income level might be contributing to the increase of life satisfaction indirectly as it also increases participation in activities and benefiting from health services more.

Age

One of the factors affecting life satisfaction is age (6). Although the results of earlier researches show there is a negative relationship between happiness and age in later researches, it was realized that such relationship does not exist (9). Moreover, in some studies, it was found that this relationship is weak and in some others it was noticed that there is a positive relationship between age and life satisfaction when variables like health and income are taken under control (6). In line with these, there are studies showing that the welfare of the elderly is as much as or higher than the welfare of young people. For example, in the studies of Campbell (7) the conclusion that life satisfaction of the elderly is higher than other age groups' life satisfaction was shared.

In earlier studies, although weak, a negative relationship was found between age and life satisfaction. However, when factors, which come along with aging, like degradation of health, physical insufficiency (disability), decrease in financial resources, death of the partner, retirement, loss of friends, dec-

rease in leisure activities despite of the increase in spare time are integrated into analysis, it was seen that the negative relationship between age and life satisfaction disappears (12). In Grace and Wong's (22) study, it was stated that the elderly people experience big changes that affect their life satisfaction to a great extent. For example; in the age group of 55-69, the old-aged people who are experiencing empty nest syndrome, loss of regular income, problems with establishing relationships with other elderly, usage of spare time and adaptation problem especially after retirement, express low level of life satisfaction. On the other hand, those who are in the age group of 70-79 and who created a life style specific to retirement by adapting themselves to many issues after retirement affirm high level of life satisfaction. Yet, this level decreases again due to increases in important health problems. Therefore, it is plausible to assert that the level of life satisfaction of the elderly people is changing in relation to other reasons stemming from aging rather than the age itself. Consequently, it can be added that these factors should be analyzed in detail as to come to a judgment concerning the relationship between age and life satisfaction.

Social Relationships

One of the factors affecting compatibility with the old age and life satisfaction in the old age is social relationships. According to some social institutions, aging appears with the individual's withdrawal from the external world physically, psychologically and socially and with the individual's concentrating more on his own life. Of course, not all elderly people withdraw from the external world; there are also elderly people who have active and happy lives. It has been observed that the life satisfaction, health and moods of elderly people who do not shift their interests away from the society or who takes it away a little bit are high (3).

Life satisfaction level of the old-aged people is not only dependent on their aging, but also dependent on external conditions. It can be said that the life satisfaction level of the old aged who can cope with external conditions more effectively will be higher. It is also known that stressful events occurring in the elderly people's lives result from factors like degradation of health, income decrease or death of the partner. Further, the aging immune system makes the elderly more vulnerable to effects of stress. Thus, as the stressful events increase and the elderly individual's control feeling decreases, stress becomes more destructive. One of the most significant factors that enables the mitigation of effects of stress is societal support and societal relationships. In this respect, family and circle of



friends provide maintenance of social identity, emotional support, financial help, knowledge and service (7). However, in different cultures, expectations of the elderly from the society and their family may differ. For instance, in a study conducted in Africa, Ireland, U.S.A. and Hong Kong, it is declared that the participants from Asia and Africa agreed upon the benefits of care for the elderly by their children within the traditional understanding of family life and satisfaction in old age, whereas participants from America and Ireland consider close relations in family kins in old age as a problem (23). It is commonly acknowledged that this support is very strong especially in traditional societies, whereas it is more institutionalized in developed societies. In any kind of society, being isolated is a very devastating feeling for the elderly people. In due course, it can be asserted that social support and societal relationships are significant in preventing this negative feeling (7).

Social relationship networks and social support help the individual to be saved and secured against some disadvantages of aging. Not only do social relationships support the individual against the loss of role stemming from aging, but they also perpetuate feelings of self-value and social sufficiency. Social support can be thought in two ways. The first of these includes quantitative indicators like type and frequency of social relationship, whereas the second refers to the existence of support types like emotional and financial help. Both quantitative and qualitative sources of social support are directly related to life satisfaction among the elderly (6). Furthermore, quality and quantity of social relations differ between cultures. For instance, an intercultural comparative research by İmamoğlu and İmamoğlu (24) has found out that both in Turkish and in Swedish societies, social relations are vital to overcome worries about old age and loneliness. However, it has also indicated that the Turkish elderly give more importance to social relations in comparison with the Swedish elderly.

Sex in Later Life

Sexuality is a lifelong feature of life, but with increasing age the sexual responses wane and usually in the 60s and 70s the frequency of sexual activity is much reduced. However the notion of sexless older people is a myth: the elderly still have sexual dreams, fantasies, and hopes. As in every period of life, also in the later life period sexuality is a vital factor that has an impact on mental welfare, life satisfaction and lifetime happiness. The studies, for example, by Nicolosi et al., (25) show that sexual satisfaction is inversely related to depressive symptoms. The results of the study by Mulligan and Palguta

(26) indicates that those with sexual partners are much happier than others without one, who is in high desire for it. Of course human sexuality is much more than just an affair of the genitals, of intercourse, and procreation. Every one has an innate desire to love and be loved; but to give expression to these feelings requires an appropriate partner, and emotional deprivation occurs in many older people living alone (14). As a matter of fact by the World Health Organization, sexual health is defined as the integration of sexual life with social, intellectual, emotional and somatic perspectives, whereas the concept of love is defined as a positive interpretation of communication and personal changes (27).

The elderly consider being polite and friendly within the relations with the other gender to be more essential than sexual intercourse. To the sexual activities should be a composition of closeness instead of a desire. Love may mean, for an old individual, a strong motivation and a positive approach towards the life itself. In this case, life is more satisfactory and worth experiencing. Joys, hopes and courage to live become more important, enabling them to overcome depression and place the concepts of happiness and meaning to the utmost place in their life (15).

Retirement

Retirement highlights the end of a working process and the break from public life. According to a traditional definition, retirement is "handing over work and activities related to work". Retirement is a new social position for the individual, because the individual migrating to the status of retirement cannot maintain his accustomed order. He starts to experience changes in his relationships with his environment and his roles. In this way, retirement is welcomed with sadness. In inter-gender comparisons it is said that the man experiences this sadness more than the woman does. Researches have drawn attention the fact that there is not much alteration in women's life that comes along with retirement, because unlike men women's responsibilities concerning specifically home and family continue without much change after the age of 65 (12).

Retirement is seen by working peers, partner and family members as an event which is longed for and expected for years in order to pursue various activities. So, many people perceive retirement as being free by getting rid of work pressure, responsibility and time limitations. However, most of the people are not ready to experience this phenomenon. Typically, retirement plans are focused upon financial issues and time usage. Yet, ending work life changes and affects many factors. Each of these factors may influence both the adaptation to re-



tirement and success during the retirement period. With retirement individual roles, the value and importance that one gives to oneself and life style change. Alteration in one of these not only affects the other but also affects the lives of the retired person as well as other people around him. It is also important to underline that some of these changes might be problematic in the sense that they might create dysfunctionality for the retired individual (28). For instance, individuals who lose roles with retirement may feel useless and old and minimize their relationships with life rather than compensating this loss by acquiring new statuses. Such withdrawal from life may lead these people to experience problems in integrating to the social environment. This, in turn, affects life satisfaction.

Theoreticians have put forward that there are many conditions which ease the transition of an individual from one status to another. For example, if the newly achieved role is known well, if it brings valuable social purposes to the individual and if the requirements of the new role are compatible with the existing values, then the transition is easier. For that reason, individuals need to be educated starting from the age of 50 in order to get ready for retirement (3). In this context, what is important in old age is never being carried away by the feeling of uselessness. The best way for the individual to get rid of this idea of uselessness is to engage in things that make him happy, because the feeling of being useless, dysfunctional and weak is seen as a significant obstacle to be satisfied with their lives.

Conclusion

As a result, it can be said that there are many factors affecting life satisfaction in the elderly people. Life satisfaction level of the elderly people is not only dependent on their aging, but also it relies on their ability to adapt to changes coming along with aging. Such adaptability also requires the ability to cope with changes with minimum harm to their psychological and physical health. As aforementioned, it is known that elderly people's health and economic conditions, their education, level of participation in events and activities are important determinants of life satisfaction. In addition to these, the level of an individual's fulfilling expectations, successes, failures, social relationships, life style, adaptation to life style, level of accepting a situation also influence life satisfaction. In this context, it can be considered that life satisfaction level of those elderly who are able to cope with external conditions more efficiently will be higher.

Thus, it is necessary to help elderly individuals to maintain their lives as healthy and active by preventing them from being dependent, mere consumers. However, it should also be borne in mind that each age has characteristics of its own. In due course, this support should be in line with their strengths, inclinations and potentials.

As the population grows and the human life extends, the number of the elderly people will also increase. Therefore, the existing system will also enlarge its pressure on them. Decrease of income and increasing health problems are among the central problems faced during the old age, because it is becoming gradually harder for the state and the individuals to allocate resources for the existing health services. For that reason, the need to take precautions for preserving and making the elderly people's health better is growing as much the need to make rooted health reforms around the world. At the same time, determining strategies concerning the prevention of treatable diseases of the elderly people and improving their health will not only enable them to maintain their health and increase their life qualities, but also it will decrease their spending on health (28).

The gradual increase of the human life span, the increase of the elderly population's place within the whole population brought the issue of being healthy in the old age to the agenda. In that case, the maintenance of physical and mental independency of the individual after the ages of 60-65-75 and even 85 should be provided and attempts should be made as to preserve this independency for a long time.

For this end, several initiatives should be taken for supporting the elderly people in adapting to conditions of retirement. Among these initiatives a few can be listed as follows: spreading and increasing the quality of health services by the state and voluntary institutions, giving education about issues like financial security, financial planning, money return and investment, using spare time and forming appropriate social service and social network (22).

Inter-generational support is the basis of an ideal of a society that embraces all age groups. Inter-generational links are natural for everyone at the family and society level. Family is one of the major institutions that provides the improvement and maintenance of personal relationships. In return, such relationships ensure the individual to trust oneself, to feel love for oneself and for other individuals, to acquire an identity and a personal development, to develop social abilities and to adapt to the society. In due course, in order to increase the level of life satisfaction for the elderly people, inter-generational mutual relationships should be developed by es-



establishing multi-dimensional and effective communication. The importance of this relationship must be emphasized and strengthened.

Although the relationship between all these factors and life satisfaction are put forward by many researches, the findings vary a lot. The difference between research results might stem from inter-cultural and territorial differences. For instance, in some European countries family relationships, love and interest were found to be more effective on life satisfaction than in they are in North America (12). Due to inter-cultural differences, it is vital to give more emphasis on studies determining the factors influencing life satisfaction in Turkey owing to intercultural differences. Making policies for the elevation of elderly people's life quality by basing on these research results is of significance for creating happy old aged people in the society.

On the other hand, the differences between research results might also be deriving from the different statistical methods conveyed in researches. For example, although there has been found a dual significant relationship like life satisfaction and health, education, financial satisfaction; this relationship disappeared with the multi-variable models. For this reason, using multi analyses when determining the relationship between variables and life satisfaction will give more accurate results.

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