
Interview with Kyung-Hyun Suh¹

by Annamaria Di Fabio²

1. **Starting from your meaningful Invited Keynote Lecture on happiness... could you summarize what is happiness and how does happiness change during the course of life?**

Happiness, within the framework of positive psychology, often refers to *Subjective Well-Being*, comprising three components: life satisfaction, frequent positive emotions, and infrequent negative emotions (Diener, 1984).

However, in my keynote address at the 7th Academic Convention of the Asian Psychological Association (APsyA) titled «From Anticipation to Appreciation: How Age and Culture Shape Happiness», I emphasized that happiness is not a fixed state — it changes across the lifespan and is deeply influenced by cultural and developmental contexts.

In youth, happiness tends to be fueled by *hope and future expectations*, even in the absence of current life satisfaction. Adolescents and young adults often derive joy from what life might become (Suh, 2012).

With aging, happiness gradually shifts from anticipation to *appreciation*. Older adults find contentment in what is already present — relationships, health, and meaning — rather than striving for more. This life-phase shift is supported by increased life satisfaction and the use of strategies such as *downward comparison*, which helps preserve self-worth and emotional balance.

In this way, how individuals experience happiness over the course of life reflects both their temporal focus — looking ahead to the future or valuing the present moment — and their psychosocial maturity.

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2. Which cultural difference exists in happiness? What are the main differences in happiness between Eastern and Western countries from your point of view?

Cultural context significantly influences the way happiness is understood and pursued. In individualistic Western societies, happiness is frequently associated with *personal success, autonomy, and the pursuit of pleasure* (Shin et al., 2018). Meanwhile, collectivistic Eastern cultures like Korea prioritize *social harmony, emotional moderation, and interdependence*, sometimes placing less emphasis on individual gratification (Suh & Koo, 2008).

In Korea, subjective well-being levels remain relatively low despite notable economic growth. This pattern may be explained by cultural factors such as *persistent upward social comparison* even into later adulthood, restrained emotional expression, and a highly competitive, performance-oriented social climate (Diener & Suh, 2003).

Furthermore, Eastern philosophical traditions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism emphasize contentment and moral self-cultivation as pathways to happiness. Ancient sayings like *finding joy in simplicity* and *contentment is true wealth* reflect a worldview that values acceptance and inner peace over ambition or material gain. These perspectives offer valuable intercultural insights into happiness as a way of being, rather than merely doing or having.

3. What strategies and priorities should applied psychologists, in Korea and around the world, embrace to address emerging challenges in health and well-being?

In Korea and many other countries, applied psychology has developed mainly in clinical, counseling, and health fields. Yet, unlike the United States where licensing systems are well-established, psychologists in these regions often *lack formal legal recognition*. To address this, international cooperation is needed to strengthen professional standards, establish licensure systems, and elevate the role of psychologists globally.

Applied psychologists today must respond to global challenges such as rapid technological change, demographic

shifts, and *AI-driven job disruptions*. In Korea, an aging population and intense social competition have heightened labor market stress, especially among youth. In this landscape, applied psychology plays a vital role in career assessment and guidance — supporting individuals in adapting to change, securing *decent work*, and maintaining psychological resilience and well-being.

Health psychology also plays an essential role in promoting sustainable well-being as work-related stress and lifestyle-related illnesses increase. By bridging psychological science and public health, it supports prevention and healthier living. To build a sustainable future, both physical and mental health must be prioritized — with psychology at the core. In today’s rapidly changing and unpredictable world, reinforcing the profession’s foundations and expanding its role in education, healthcare, and employment is essential for lasting societal impact.

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