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# Subjective well-being among Romanian students: Analysis of the potential for cross-cultural comparisons

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The purpose of this study is to identify the level of well-being and how it differs among university students. The concept of well-being is an integral, multifaceted and multifunctional notion. Therefore, it has to be analysed from several perspectives. However, in-depth accounts of psychological well-being has to explore people's sense of whether their lives have purpose, whether they are realising their given potential, what is the quality of their ties to others, and if they feel in charge of their own lives. In order to assess the level of well-being, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) was utilised. Participants for this study were 60 first-year students, with 30 students from humanities, and 30 students from sciences. To test the third hypothesis, 15 males and 15 females were invited to participate. Results reveal a higher level of well-being among the sciences students. According to gender, males displayed higher level of well-being than females. This work strengthens the conceptual foundations of well-being among university students.

**Keywords:** academic environment, happiness, mental well-being, university students, well-being

The concept of well-being is considered relevant based from numerous studies; it is a concept which influences and is influenced by various psychological processes. There are many-sided correlations that can be made between well-being and a series of psychological concepts regarding work satisfaction, positive thinking, and orientation towards an objective. The question of how well-being should be defined is not yet entirely solved, which 'has given rise to blurred and overly broad definitions of well-being' (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern & Seligman, 2011). At large, the concept of well-being usually involves several dimensions such as physical, psychological, emotional, social or material (McLeod & Wright, 2015).

One area of positive psychology analyzes subjective well-being (SWB), people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives. Progress has been made in understanding the components of SWB, the importance of adaptation and goals to feelings of well-being, the temperament underpinnings of SWB, and the cultural influences on well-being. Representative selection of respondents, naturalistic experience sampling measures, and other methodological refinements are now used to study SWB and could be used to produce national indicators of happiness (Diener, 2000). As such, SWB carries on throughout the lifespan (Pilao, Relajo, Tubon, & Subida, 2016). Meanwhile, according to Avram and Cooper (2008), well-being can be defined as a concept that encompasses not only the physical and mental health of an individual, but also his social health; the last one refers to both his health and his life experiences (life satisfaction, joy etc.) and, in terms of work-life, it refers to the experiences regarding his work (his satisfaction towards work, colleagues or salary).

Although often regarded as simply 'positive functioning in life' (Keyes, 2009), the concept of well-being is far more complex and dynamic. Forgeard et al., (2011) advocates that, 'some researchers have preferred to ignore the multifaceted nature of well-being and equate it with one construct (often life satisfaction), leading to the unfortunate omission of other important aspects of well-being'. For instance, the notion of well-being is more and more often associated with motivation, the latter one being 'an important lever in the process of individual self-adjustment' (Panisoara G. & Panisoara I., 2010). Furthermore, this should be taken into consideration along with mental health: whether students' mental health is indeed deteriorating, or whether increased service usage is the result of enhanced health-seeking behaviour and reduced stigma.

Waters, Stewart-Brown and Fitzpatrick's (2003) study on the agreement between adolescent self-report and parent reports of health and well-being showed that 'adolescents were much less optimistic about their health and well-being than their parents, and they were only in close agreement on aspects of health and well-being they rated highly'. Thus, teenagers are more likely to be sensitive to mental health problems, pain and the impact of their own well-being on family activities. Meanwhile, Lee and Yoo (2015) examined how family, school, and community factors are related to children's subjective well-being. They used the data from the pilot study of the International Survey of Children's Well-Being for analysis. They used multiple regression and multilevel methods in the study. We find that family, school, and community lives all significantly affect the levels of children's subjective well-being. They also find that family, school, and community lives of children are important predictors of subjective well-being even after controlling for the country-specific cultural and contextual factors. They find that the economic variables of GDP (gross domestic product) and inequality are not significant factors predicting children's subjective well-being. Rather it is the nature of children's relationships with immediate surrounding environments, such as frequency of family activities, frequency of peer activities, and neighbourhood safety, are most consistently related to the levels of children's subjective well-being across the nations.

Furthermore, the recent WAVE study (Well-being of Adolescents in Vulnerable Environments), which examined the well-being of teenagers who develop in unhealthy environments, proved that 'toxic environments breed behaviours and threats that compromise adolescent health and well-being' (Blum,

2014). As such, young people, both males and females, who grow up in vulnerable environments live with persistent fear, an increased feeling of compulsion, less social capital and more environmental distress.

A correlation has also been made between teenagers' well-being and their future financial earnings. A research developed by the University College of London showed that, in order to have more chances of being wealthy at adulthood, adolescents should learn to be happy. Analysing information from around 15,000 teenagers and young people, the study concluded that those teenagers who showed a higher level of happiness and contentment managed to earn more money than their less satisfied peers, once they started to activate in the labour market (Dos Santos, 2013). Moreover, findings from one study (Piqueras, Kuhne, Vera-Villaruel, Van Straten, & Cuijpers, 2011) mainly support the relationship between happiness and health outcomes through the two pathways previously mentioned. They also underscore the importance of that some healthy behaviours and person's cognitive appraisal of stress are integrated into their lifestyle for college students. Additionally, highlight the importance of taking into account these variables in the design of strategies to promote health education in university setting.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

University students in the US are showing increasingly higher rates of diagnosis for a range of mental health conditions, potentially putting their academic success at risk. Based on a national sample, self-reported diagnosis of several mental health conditions are increasing among university students. This examination of a variety of mental health issues can aid university health professionals to engage institutional stakeholders regarding the resources needed to support college students' mental health (Oswalt et al., 2018).

For the past decades, it has been widely recognised that the concept of well-being is an integral, multifaceted and multifunctional notion, and therefore it has to be analysed from several perspectives: a person has well-being if there is one in accord with his own being, a man has welfare if he understands and is aware of the good things in his life is a human being if he has the opportunity to realise his potential as a human being and a human being has well-being if society creates and creates conditions and gives him opportunities to manifest and realize his potential. Human well-being is characterised by a number of determinants which is closely related to the level of economic development of the environment in which it lives (Alatartseva & Barysheva, 2015). However, Universities can provide an inclusive environment for those experiencing mental health issues to engage in sport and physical activity and provide 'real world' opportunities for students to enhance their personal and professional development (Bond, 2017). To allow current and the next generation of students to reach their full potential, universities need to be aware of the growing concern about the mental health of students. As well as having a responsibility with regards to the well-being of their students, universities also have a health-promoting role to play within the local community that they serve.

Specifically, the study aims to identify if: (1) there is an optimal level of well-being at the students from the University of Bucharest; (2) there are differences regarding well-being between the humanities students and the sciences students; and (3) there are differences regarding the level of well-being depending on gender among the students.

## METHODOLOGY

The WEMWBS (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale) is intended to measure mental well-being and was developed by a panel of researchers from the Universities of Warwick and Edinburgh. It is designed to measure the level of well-being, what some people refer to as 'happiness', which encompasses a feeling of comfort and an efficient functioning. Considering the international interest in the concept of mental well-being and in its contribution to every aspect of human life, the experts from

the two Universities focused their attention on this concept and, after a series of validity studies and psychometric researches, they developed this questionnaire which contains 14 items, with the possibility of selecting an answer from five available options.

In order to carry out this study we selected 60 first-year students from the University of Bucharest: 30 students from humanities and 30 students from sciences. For the third hypothesis we selected an equal number of boys and girls ( $N= 30$ ), all of them being students of the University of Bucharest. Before being tested, the participants were briefly instructed on how to fill out the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

The data collected were introduced and processed using the software for statistical analysis SPSS. In order to identify the level of well-being at all the students selected for this study, we applied the  $t$ -test and descriptive statistics for the differences between the two groups.

Table 1 illustrates the  $t$ -test results for independent groups. We can observe that there are statistically significant differences between the two groups, thus displaying a higher level of well-being. In reference to the second hypothesis, we divided the subjects into two groups: humanities vs sciences students and we interpreted the results using the  $t$ -test. We can notice here the value of  $p = .176$ , which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Therefore, we can state the students in sciences have a higher level of well-being. This level of mental well-being at the sciences students may be influenced by a number of factors that can be investigated by future research.

Table 1  
*T*-test for Independent Samples for Humanities vs Sciences Students

<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SE</i>	CI	
					Upper	Lower
1.89	1.92	58.00	4.00	2.09	- 0.17	8.17
	1.92	53.54	4.00	2.09	- 0.18	8.19

$p > .05$

Table 2 illustrates the results  $t$ -test for independent samples, but this time the differences were analysed according to gender. The value of  $p = .667$ , which indicates a proper value for accepting the third hypothesis, according to which there are differences regarding the level of well-being of students according to gender.

Table 2  
 Independent Samples *T*-Test

<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SE</i>	CI	
					Upper	Lower
8.02	1.12	138.00	2.43	2.17	6.71	1.86
	1.12	113.17	2.43	2.17	6.72	1.86

$p > .05$

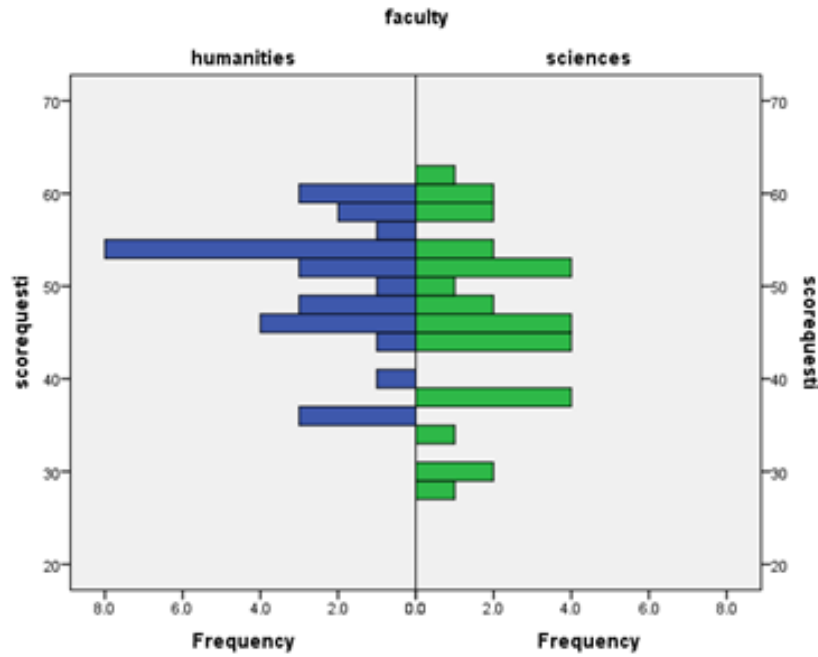


Figure 1. Histogram showing the difference between humanities and sciences students

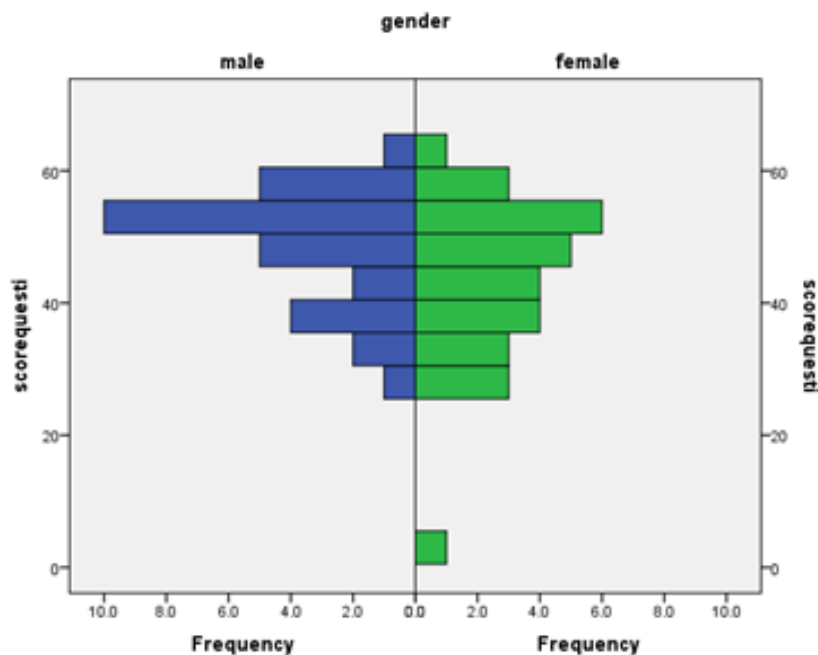


Figure 2. Histogram showing the difference between male and female students

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several studies have been conducted on well-being within academia (e.g., Rejojo, 2011) and we know that student wellbeing can be considered a major output indicator of quality of education. A positive classroom climate can contribute to a higher sense of wellbeing. Interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are an important aspect of the classroom climate. This study investigated how student wellbeing was predicted by student characteristics, interpersonal teacher behaviour and achievement (Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008). The same can be seen outside

Europe. One study examined the prevalence of mental health problems and general wellbeing amongst university students enrolled at one Australian university and explored academic stress and the likely impact on student mental health and wellbeing. The researchers specifically reports the results of measures included in a Student Wellbeing Survey conducted in 2009 at an Australian university (Andrews & Chong, 2011). Psychological distress is becoming an everyday experience for university students. Expecting students to deal with their distress on their own is not an effective approach for reducing this distress, nor is relying on counselling services or academic educators. Instead, addressing issues of distress – and well-being – is a job for the entire university (Brooke, 2017).

Fundamentally, schools should seek ways to elevate students' well-being. As Bonell et al. (2014) commented that the education policy in England increasingly encourages schools to maximise students' academic attainment and ignore their broader wellbeing, personal development, and health. Schools are now monitored on attainment in a narrow range of academic subjects. Participation in the National Healthy Schools Programme no longer benefits from governmental targets or funding. Ofsted reports no longer focus specifically on how well schools promote students' health or personal development. Personal, social, and health education (PSHE) remains a non-statutory subject and schools spend less and less time teaching it because of pressure to focus on academic subjects. The UK government recently proposed making the early year's foundation stage profile. At the same time, it wants to introduce mandatory academic tests in the first year of primary school (Bonell, Humphrey, Fletcher, Moore, Anderson, & Campbell, 2014).

It is of major concern to earlier researchers that interaction with students displaying behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse, as well as perceived issues such as anxiety and depression, is increasing. While universities do not expect academics to deal with students emotional problems, they have found that the academic is often the first port of call for students in distress. As academics, we have a strong belief in duty of care for our students, as do universities and other educational institutions. It is suggested that the issue of student – counsellor ratio in all universities is an issue that needs careful consideration (Douglass & Islam, 2009).

The potential to make cross-national comparisons is a crucial aspect of the increasing global interest in subjective well-being, not just among students but in general population. Such comparisons offer the prospect of greater understanding in differences and nuances in levels of well-being, as well as the factors contributing to it which can be helpful for future policy initiatives to elevate subjective well-being. The outcome of the study proved its importance inasmuch as the participants who were questioned showed a good level of well-being. This is essential for their state of mind correlated with their capacity of learning and working. The presence of well-being at this age indicates a proper development of positive thinking and optimism, characteristics that should lead a young person to a fulfilled life and to seeking professional success. Moral education improves the efficiency of different kinds of human activity and it fosters the individual development and attainment of such traits as self-determination, self-confidence, flexibility, tolerance, open-mindedness and well-being. Indeed the data from this study, offers new opportunities for international comparative research of adolescents' subjective well-being.

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