



Peer attachment and class emotional intelligence as predictors of adolescents' psychological well-being: A multilevel approach



Nekane Balluerka^{*}, Arantxa Gorostiaga, Itziar Alonso-Arbiol, Aitor Aritzeta

University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to analyze whether gender, age, peer attachment, and class-level emotional intelligence could predict adolescents' psychological well-being by applying a multilevel approach. The sample comprised 2182 secondary school students from the Basque Country (northern Spain) (from 118 classrooms, 51.6% girls), aged between 12 and 18 years. A two-level model (with students nested into classes) was used to analyze the influence of three level-one covariates (gender, age, and peer attachment) and one level-two covariate (class-level emotional intelligence) on the positive affect component of psychological well-being. The results showed an overall decrease in well-being as adolescents grow older, and an increase linked to a higher peer attachment. Furthermore, class-level emotional intelligence showed a positive relationship with students' well-being. This group-level covariate also strengthened the effect of peer attachment on the well-being. The advantages of using a multilevel approach for predicting mental health and psychological adjustment are discussed.

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Like adults in the workplace, most adolescents spend a considerable amount of time of the day in a classroom. Apart from learning academic-related contents, in this setting adolescents also acquire life skills and personal and emotional competences. Parental attachment has often been studied to help to explain adolescents' psychological well-being. Secure attachment with parents is associated with several well-being outcomes, such as higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (e.g., Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Gomez & McLaren, 2007), higher emotional and social competence (e.g., Laible, 2007; Muela, Balluerka, & Torres, 2013; Muela, Torres, & Balluerka, 2012), and higher emotion regulation (e.g., Allen & Miga, 2010). However, the specific role of peers at the individual and group-level has received less attention, despite the associations found between peer attachment and self-esteem (Gallarin & Alonso-Arbiol, 2012) and the results of other studies indicating that the quality of peer relationships is also relevant to adolescents' development and adjustment (for an overview see Allen, 2008). Due to adolescents' growing tendency to affiliate with their peers (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994) and to get more involved in peer group activities (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004), the impact of the emotional support adolescents receive from their peers on their psychological well-being is undeniable. Nevertheless, the influence of adolescents' perceptions of

^{*} Corresponding author. Social Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Methods Department, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Avda. de Tolosa n° 70, 20018 San Sebastián, Spain. Fax: +34 943015670.

E-mail address: nekane.balluerka@ehu.eus (N. Balluerka).

emotional bonds with individual peers and of the group emotional climate is still an understudied area, especially in terms of the positive affect component of psychological well-being. Witherspoon, Schotland, Way, and Hughes (2009) demonstrated the value of applying a multilevel approach to examine adolescents' well-being, given the relevance of the independent and joint effects of variables located in different contexts. To date, this approach has not been applied when studying the peers' emotion-related sphere.

The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by jointly investigating the emotional support an adolescent may perceive at both an individual level (i.e., peer attachment) and group level (i.e., group emotional intelligence) in the classroom context. We assess adolescents' positive affect component of well-being, testing different models that look at predictive variables at both an individual and group level, as well as at the interaction between variables at these two levels.

Psychological well-being in adolescence

A current concern in the area of adolescents' mental health is the search for conditions that improve adolescent well-being, beyond the mere reduction/elimination of psychiatric symptoms (Huppert, Baylis, & Keverne, 2004). Subjective or psychological well-being is regarded as one of the most relevant psychological characteristics associated with mental health (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011).

Psychological well-being can be conceived as a multidimensional construct that includes both emotional and cognitive elements (Salami, 2011). It is understood to be a self-evaluation involving both positive and negative affect, along with a more cognitive element of the evaluation an adolescent makes of his/her satisfaction with life (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Ryan, 2013; Ronen, Hamama, Rosenbaum, & Mishely-Yarlap, 2014). Most researchers have examined the negative aspects of psychological well-being (e.g., Moksnes & Espnes, 2012), but the investigation of its positive aspects is no less important (Alonso-Arbiol, Abubakar, & Van de Vijver, 2014). This latter approach, examining the element of positive affect, is the one adopted in the present study.

Adolescence is a period marked by notable changes of a physical, cognitive and socio-emotional nature; at an emotional level, mood changes and emotionally charged events are common at this stage of life (Rosenblum & Lewis, 2003). Thus, in a context in which adolescents start distancing themselves from their parents, they may benefit from the emotional support they receive from peers, in order to enhance the positive affect aspect of their subjective well-being (Allen, 2008).

Peer attachment and psychological well-being

Several authors have observed links between attachment security of adolescents and different aspects of their psychological well-being. For instance, peer attachment in adolescence is associated with well-being outcomes such as self-esteem (Gallarín & Alonso-Arbiol, 2012; Gomez & McLaren, 2007) and life satisfaction (Abubakar et al., 2013; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004). These studies back up a line of research that bases adolescents' psychological well-being, at least partly, on the emotional support obtained from peers.

The theory of attachment emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships between children and their primary caregivers in shaping individuals' views of themselves and of the world around them during the early stages of life (Bowlby, 1969). Early patterns of interaction with attachment figures become organized into generalized patterns by the time a person reaches late adolescence (Bowlby, 1973). In adolescence, the exploration is more likely to focus on an individual's emotional and cognitive autonomy (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994), and this is also a time when attachment functions begin to be transferred; close friends become attachment figures for adolescents even if they maintain strong attachment relationships with their parents (Abubakar et al., 2013; Gallarín & Alonso-Arbiol, 2013; Kerns, Tomich, & Kim, 2006). Nelis and Rae (2009) stressed the importance of peer attachment and explored the role and functions of peers as attachment figures in adolescence. At this developmental stage, peers start fulfilling attachment functions of proximity seeking and safe haven (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005); support is provided when adolescents' attachment system is activated and teens start feeling reluctant to return to parents for comfort at those times of distress.

Peer attachment is understood as being a specific bond established with one or a few peers, as opposed to other dimensions of friendship quality, such as conflict resolution, conflict betrayal, help and guidance, and companionship and recreation (Parker & Asher, 1993). While friendship quality has been observed as being related to well-being in adolescents (e.g., Tomé, de Matos, Camacho, Simoes, & Diniz, 2014), these authors underline the fact that provision of satisfaction of basic (emotional) psychological needs —peer attachment— is somehow behind the association between quality friendship and happiness. Likewise, according to Tomé and associates, classmates' support also contributes to well-being.

Class emotional intelligence and psychological well-being

Although group Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a well-known construct in the field of work and organizational psychology (Härtel, Ashkanasy, & Zerbe, 2009), research on group emotions, and specifically on group EI, is still scarce. The class-type EI examined here represents a group-level emotional trait that is based on subjective emotional experiences shared by the class members. It may be defined as "The perception of the students about the way in which their class pays attention to and values the feelings of classmates, is clear rather than confused about the emotions felt in the class and uses positive thinking to repair negative moods in the class." (Balluerka, Aritzeta, Gorostiaga, Gartzia, & Soroa, 2013, p. 112). Class EI differs from classroom

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