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Personality, school, and family: What is their role in adolescents' subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a multidimensional approach to subjective well-being in adolescence. Multiple factors regarding personality, family, and school are examined in relation to Greek adolescents' subjective well-being. The participants of the study were 714 adolescents and their parents (302 boys and 412 girls) attending Junior High School (average age = 14.6, SD = .05) and High School (average age = 17.4, SD = .07). The results showed that specific personality, family, and school factors can be used as predictors of subjective well-being. This study is largely explorative in an effort to enrich a limited database regarding adolescents' subjective well-being and as an impetus to research in-depth the specific domain. The findings are significant since not only do they provide an insight into adolescents' subjective well-being but they also have potential implications for the better practice of school psychologists.

Subjective well-being refers to the way a person feels about himself/herself and his/her way of living; it is mainly about how and why people experience their lives in positive ways (Gilman & Huebner, 2003) and is specifically defined as “a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life” (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002, p. 63). In recent decades subjective well-being has become an area of increasing interest among researchers since it is considered to be a prerequisite for the promotion of people's mental health (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Hatzichristou, Lykitsakou, Lampropoulou, & Dimitropoulou, 2010; Karademas, 2006). These research efforts are of significance since they can highlight ways to promote people's well-being and sense of happiness, especially in children and adolescents (Gilman & Huebner, 2003).

There are different conceptual definitions and theoretical approaches to subjective well-being and various models have been proposed in the relevant literature regarding its structure and context. The most commonly accepted approach refers to the dual synthesis of subjective well-being, which is consisted of two independent components: the emotional and the cognitive (Diener & Diener, 1998, 2000; Huppert & Whittington, 2003). The emotional component includes the long-term frequency of positive and negative affect, while the cognitive component includes the appraisal of life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 2000; Huppert & Whittington, 2003).

Several studies have verified, through multiple analyses, the existence of a positive and a negative aspect of the concept, suggesting the necessity of differentiating the two facets of subjective well-being (Grob, 2000; Karademas, 2006; Lampropoulou, 2009, 2008). The important issue to consider here is whether all variables that seem to relate to subjective well-being are equally associated with both aspects of it. Studies have suggested that there are certain predictors that are linked either to positive or negative well-being, while other factors are linked directly to both negative and positive well-being (Karademas, 2006, 2007; Lampropoulou, 2008).

Many approaches to investigating subjective well-being have been attempted in an effort to understand and interpret the way in which it is influenced by internal and external factors. Most of these were focused mainly on adults, factoring demographics such as

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age and gender in addition to personality. The majority of the findings suggested that age and gender are not significantly implicated in subjective well-being. However, results vary when studying subjective well-being across the age-span since some elderly people showed an increase, while others showed a decrease, in their level of subjective well-being (Carstensen, 1998; Diener & Suh, 1998; Ehrlich & Isaacowitz, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Furthermore, some studies have reported no differences in subjective well-being between men and women whilst others suggested that women experience all feelings in a more intensive way (Argyle, 2001; Diener & Diener, 1996; Diener & Lucas, 1999; Sherrard, 1997).

The aforementioned findings mainly refer to adults. In relation to adolescents, the available data suggest that the differences between adults and adolescents are comparatively small (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000). In particular, it is argued that adolescents, like adults, seem to have rather more positive than negative feelings regarding their lives. In addition, age and gender do not seem to have a significant relationship with levels of subjective well-being and no important differences are reported (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Huebner, Drane et al., 2000; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000).

The role of cultural differences should be highlighted, though, since studies in Mediterranean countries indicate that girls and older adolescents are less satisfied with their lives in comparison to boys and younger adolescents (Lampropoulou & Hatzichristou, 2002; Lampropoulou, Georgouleas, & Hatzichristou, 2004; Neto, 1993; Verkuyten, 1996). In addition, studies in diverse country settings suggest that there are differences in reported subjective well-being. For example, children in some countries - such as Spain or Romania - reported a higher level of well-being across all aspects of life in comparison with other countries such as Ethiopia, South Africa or the United Kingdom (Rees & Main, 2015; Rees, Andresen & Bradshaw, 2016). These findings suggest the mediating role of culture in subjective well-being levels.

Personality characteristics, including locus of control, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem and optimism or depression, have also been a common variable in many subjective well-being studies (Ash & Huebner, 2001; Caprara, 2002; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Findings suggest a significant relationship between most of these variables and adolescents' satisfaction with life. Other studies indicate that a more synthetic approach should be adopted when investigating these concepts, taking into account not only the relationship between each factor with subjective well-being, but also the interrelationship among the personality variables (Diener & Lucas, 2000; Diener Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Fogle, Hueber & Laughlin, 2002).

Findings regarding the well-known personality model of "Big Five" (McCrae & John, 1992) - which supports the use of five broad dimensions in order to describe personality - reveal a relationship between that model and subjective well-being irrespective of age. In particular, neuroticism, which includes characteristics such as emotional instability, anger, anxiety, and aggressiveness, seems to have a significant correlation with the negative aspect of subjective well-being. Extraversion, which includes characteristics such as sociable, outgoing, talkative, energetic, is also positively related to the positive aspect of subjective well-being. Finally, other factors (openness to experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) have a lower but still significant relation to subjective well-being (Bostic & Ptacek, 2001; Karademas, 2006; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2001; de Beurs et al., 2005).

The five-factor model of personality has been used in many related studies since it adequately reflects the personality structure of adults (McCrae & Costa, 1999) and also that of children and adolescents (John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994). Despite the fact that personality seems to have a significant role in subjective well-being or in similar concepts (such as happiness), further research is required in order to fully understand these underlying relationships.

The gradual shift of interest from adults to children and adolescents has led to an examination of other domains in the development of subjective well-being, such as family and school. In the relevant literature, the importance of the family in the lives of adolescents is emphasized. It seems that when adolescents perceive the family relationships as warm and close, have a sense of autonomy, are clear about the rules and the limits set by the family and have a good communication with their parents, then, regardless of the family structure, they feel more satisfied and have a higher level of well-being (Flouri, 2004; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Joronen & Astedt-Kurki, 2005; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001; Rask, Astedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, & Laippala, 2003). Nevertheless, data from a longitudinal representative sample of over 13,000 children at the age of 11 in the UK revealed that family and socio-economic factors in early and middle childhood only partially explain the variation in children's subjective well-being (Rees, 2017).

School environment also plays a crucial role in adolescents' mental health and well-being. Current approaches in school psychology place a special emphasis on the social and emotional aspects of education (Elias, Arnold, & Hussey, 2002; Hatzichristou, 2011; Hatzichristou, Adamopoulou, & Lampropoulou, 2014). Extensive research has been conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning organization (CASEL, <https://casel.org>) regarding the importance of promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children. Findings indicate that positive school climate, close relationships and a sense of belonging in the school community are strongly related to students' sense of well-being, resilience, and social and academic adjustment (see also Hatzichristou et al., 2014; Huebner, Funk, & Gilman, 2000; Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & Mcknight, 2004). However, there are limited studies in the literature that examine directly the relationship between subjective well-being, school climate and students' perceptions of school as caring community and further research is needed.

One of the most recent research efforts refers to Children's Worlds and the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB), which is a worldwide research survey on children's subjective well-being (<http://www.isciweb.org>). The survey attempted to fill a perceived gap in existing research evidence on children's (aged 8 to 12) assessment of their lives and well-being. The study explored comparative research between countries regarding children's well-being in order to provide cross-cultural insights. The findings included: a) the identification of positive and negative aspects of children's lives in all participating countries, b) the variation across countries in children's experiences and attitudes regarding school, c) the low levels of satisfaction about body, appearance and self-confidence in some countries and d) the variation among countries regarding age and gender differences in relation to children's satisfaction (Rees & Main, 2015). The authors of the study pointed out the value of such comparisons, stating that "...

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