



Research report

Eating habits and subjective well-being. A typology of students in Chilean state universities ☆

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to distinguish and characterize university student typologies according to their life satisfaction and satisfaction with their food-related life. An online survey was applied between June and August 2013 in five state universities in Chile, to 369 university students (mean age = 20.9 years, SD = 2.27). The survey included the Health-related Quality of Life Index-4 (HRQOL), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Satisfaction with Food-related Life Scale (SWFL), as well as questions about the place of residence, importance of food for well-being, frequency of meals in the place of residence and the frequency of consumption of eight food groups. A cluster analysis was used to determine student typologies. Three typologies of students were distinguished with significant differences in the average scores of the SWLS and SWFL scales, self-perception of health, days with mental health problems, number of days of health-related incapacity, place of residence, socioeconomic status, importance of food for well-being, frequency of breakfast and dinner in the place of residence, frequency of consumption of meat, milk, fruits and vegetables. It was found that most students with higher levels of life satisfaction and satisfaction with food-related life live with their parents, eat at home more frequently, report fewer health problems, have healthful eating habits and consider food very important for their well-being. Although it is necessary to promote or improve the campaigns that foster healthful eating in the entire university population, these campaigns must be specifically targeted to students who do not receive direct support from their families.

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Introduction

While adult life satisfaction has been studied extensively, life satisfaction in younger people (late teens and early 20s) has only received attention more recently (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Research on satisfaction with food-related life has also emerged of late (Grunert, Dean, Raats, Nielsen, & Lumbers, 2007) and has been mainly circumscribed to adult samples, while knowledge regarding satisfaction with food-related life in youths and the variables that affect them is still scarce. Recent studies support that food is one of the important domains of life that affect an individual's life

satisfaction (Grunert et al., 2007; Schnettler, Crisóstomo et al., 2013; Schnettler, Miranda et al., 2013; Schnettler, Peña et al., 2013), suggesting that satisfaction with food-related life is positively related to overall life satisfaction.

This relation is associated to healthful eating behaviours and family interaction around food. Researchers have concluded that adults who eat more frequently with their families eat more healthfully and are more satisfied with their life and their food-related-life (Schnettler, Peña et al., 2013). However, these variables have not been studied in younger populations. Although there are several studies linking family meals and healthful eating habits in children and adolescents (Franko, Cousineau, Rodgers, Roehrig, & Hoffman, 2013; Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hanna, & Story, 2007; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003; Nicklas, Reger, Myers, & O'Neil, 2000; Videon & Manning, 2003), the relationships between eating and well-being in young adulthood are less

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explored (Arnett, 2000). Some research results associate eating disorders with low levels of life satisfaction in young people (Halvorsen & Heyerdahl, 2006). Grant, Wardle, and Steptoe (2009) found a positive relation between a healthful diet and greater life satisfaction in university students in various countries. An exploratory study conducted with university students in southern Chile suggested that family support is associated with better eating habits, better health and greater satisfaction with life and food-related life (Schnettler, Denegri et al., 2013).

Given that some researchers have concluded that life satisfaction is age-sensitive (Clench-Aas, Bang, Dalgard, & Aarø, 2011; Gerstorf, Ram, Röcke, Lindenberger, & Smith, 2008) it can also be expected that satisfaction with food-related life will change over the years. Regarding life satisfaction, while adults are increasingly concerned about avoiding negative experiences and focusing on health-related aspects (Clench-Aas et al., 2011), younger people focus on pleasant experiences (McMahan & Estes, 2012). For example, young people mistakenly believe that life satisfaction decreases with age, which can lead to hedonist and unhealthful behaviours, such as an unhealthful diet, in order to make the most out of life during youth (Garry & Lohan, 2011). Boelsma, Brink, Stafleu, and Hendricks (2010) and Ares, De Saldamando, Giménez, and Deliza (2014) have linked food and well-being in adults, which in turn associates to physical health, body functioning, intellectual capacity, positive emotions and social contact and relationships. Therefore, studying the relationship between life satisfaction, satisfaction with food-related life and eating habits in young people can provide important input to make a positive impact in their adult life. However, to our knowledge, the psychometric properties and the relation between the Satisfaction with Food-related Life scale (SWFL) (Grunert et al., 2007) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) have not been assessed previously with university students.

The study of food as a life domain in university students is particularly relevant because the period of university studies usually entails a change of lifestyle and increasing stress (Antúnez & Vinet, 2013), and the students become responsible for their meals (Cluskey & Grobe, 2009; Verger et al., 2009). This critical stage in the development of eating habits will affect their future health and the health of their future families (Brown, Dresen, & Eggett, 2005). University students who live away from home engage in riskier eating behaviours because of the pressures of independence and hurried lifestyles (Barker & Galambos, 2007; Brown et al., 2005), resulting in poor nutrition (Li et al., 2012). Furthermore, an inadequate diet during the university years could result in unfavourable physiological consequences that may lead to diet-related chronic diseases (Winkleby & Cubbin, 2004), and have negative psychological and social repercussions (Hidalgo, Hidalgo, Rasmussen, & Montaña, 2011). Various authors have described the nutritional vulnerability of university students whose eating habits are characterized by excessive consumption of high fat foods, sugars and salt, fast food and soft drinks, skipping meals frequently, taking a short time to eat, snacking, and consuming insufficient amounts of fruit, vegetables and fibre (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2013; Guthrie, Lin, & Frazao, 2002), all of which are linked to unhealthful diets (Guthrie et al., 2002).

While the incidence of unhealthful eating behaviours among university students is well established, we know less about how such behaviours affect students' satisfaction with their food-related life and their overall life satisfaction. Some students may engage in unhealthful eating behaviours because of external pressures or lack of knowledge, but may be dissatisfied with their own behaviour, with negative consequences for their overall life satisfaction. Other students may enjoy their unhealthful behaviours because of sensory gratification or they feel that these behaviours fit their lifestyle. Insights into these relationships have important consequences for

attempts to induce students to healthier eating habits, as students who are satisfied with their food-related life will be more difficult to address than students who are not.

In this study, we focus on Chilean public university students' satisfaction with life and its relation to the food domain. Studying the relationship between satisfaction with life overall and in domains of importance to young people is relevant because high life satisfaction can help absorb the negative consequences of stress, psychological problems and various disorders (Proctor et al., 2009). In addition, since eating habits during the university years are linked to high prevalence of overweight and obesity (Aguilar-Ye et al., 2010; Hidalgo et al., 2011), diet-related chronic diseases (Winkleby & Cubbin, 2004), and negative psychological and social repercussions (Hidalgo et al., 2011), identifying variables associated to students' satisfaction with food-related life may contribute to the development of strategies to prevent these negative effects.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to distinguish and characterize university student types according to their life satisfaction, satisfaction with their food-related life, sociodemographic characteristics, general health and eating habits. Also, the psychometric properties and the relation between the SWFL and the SWLS were evaluated by use of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This methodology tests whether a particular factor model is consistent with the data (Lévy, 2006). In this study we address four hypotheses:

H₁: Life satisfaction is positively related to the students' satisfaction with food-related life.

H₂: Life satisfaction and satisfaction with food-related life are positively related to the students' healthful eating habits.

H₃: Life satisfaction and satisfaction with food-related life are positively related to the frequency of family meal times.

H₄: Life satisfaction and satisfaction with food-related life are positively related to the students' better general health.

Methods

Sample

A convenience sample comprised 369 students from five state universities located in different geographical areas of Chile (Universidad de Tarapacá, Arica; Universidad de Chile, Santiago; Universidad de Talca, Talca; Universidad de La Frontera, Temuco; and Universidad de Magallanes, Punta Arenas). The inclusion criterion was being a first-year or third-year student (enrolled in 2011 or 2013, respectively) at the aforementioned universities.

Procedure

The Ethics Committee of the Universidad de La Frontera approved the study protocol. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted with 30 students from the same university. Participants deemed the content of the questionnaire and its items as appropriate and clear. Undergraduate programme directors in each university signed authorization letters to conduct the research among their students. Participants were recruited through printed or e-mail invitation letters sent by the programme directors. This letter explained the online survey and the strictly confidential treatment of the information obtained. The survey link (QuestionPro, Inc) was sent to programme directors, who distributed it to students between June and August 2013. As an incentive, as stated in the invitation letter, students who answered the survey would enter a raffle to win one of two gift cards per university, each worth approximately \$200 USD. The participants read the informed consent in the survey front page and a PDF version of this document was available for

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