



## Parent, school and peer-related correlates of adolescents' life satisfaction

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 April 2010

Received in revised form 5 July 2010

Accepted 6 July 2010

Available online 12 July 2010

#### Keywords:

Social support

Parents and peers

Satisfaction with life

Adolescence

### ABSTRACT

The main goal of the present study was to examine social correlates of adolescents' life satisfaction and to explore gender differences in the role of parent, school and peer-related variables. Using a sample of 881 high school students in Szeged, Hungary ( $N=881$ , ages 14–20, 44.6% female), findings supported the claim that parents continued to be an important correlate of adolescents' well-being. Talking about problems with parents was an universal correlate. In addition, our results confirmed that being happy with school and good academic achievement were associated with adolescents' overall well-being in both girls and boys. However, while boys might benefit more from parental support and joint activities, such as having dinner together, life satisfaction among girls was associated with the number of caring friends and acceptance of parental values. These findings underline the need for using a gender perspective when analyzing youth life satisfaction.

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### 1. Introduction

As a subjective well-being indicator, life satisfaction assesses an individual's quality of life based on their own criteria (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The literature on adolescents' life satisfaction demonstrates the need for further research across cultures (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Therefore, we investigated certain correlates of adolescents' life satisfaction, such as social network and socio-demographics, in an unusual sample of youth, among Hungarian high school students. The main goal of the present study was to better understand youth life satisfaction as a key indicator of subjective well-being.

The relationship between sociodemographics (e.g., age, gender, and SES) and life satisfaction was often found to be weak, although several studies noted some associations (Proctor et al., 2009). Gender particularly seems to be an important correlate since gender differences in well-being begin to increase during adolescence due to psychosocial and biological-hormonal changes (Piko, 2001). In addition, there are gender differences in the risk and protective factor structure of adolescent health behavior, health and well-being (Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2002). For example, the level of life satisfaction was found to be lower in girls as compared to boys in a previous study of youth (Neto, 1993). However, further research is needed to explore gender differences in the structure of correlates of adolescents' life satisfaction including domains of socialization, such as parents, peers and school.

Among social correlates, social supports from parents, relatives, and peers play a significant role in adolescents' life satisfaction

(Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Del Bove, & Caprara, 2007). In the process of socialization, social support may represent an important psychosocial asset for youth's healthy development. Whereas social network is an important correlate of youth's life, there is a significant restructuring of their social relationships, namely, adolescents tend to orientate towards peers and spend less time with parents (Allen et al., 2006). During adolescence, youth tend to develop peer-based activities that may affect their behavior and well-being (Keresztes, Piko, Pluhar, & Page, 2008). However, studies confirm that parents and the family remain important agents of socialization, although their role changes to a less directive way of parental monitoring (Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2001). Family may have an impact on adolescents' subjective well-being through secure attachment, communication, or joint activities (Joronen & Astedt-Kurki, 2005), such as having dinner together (Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2002). From a developmental psychopathology perspective, vulnerability stems from the controversy that establishing autonomy goes together with the task of maintaining positive relationships with parents and developing close peer relationships (Allen et al., 2006). In relation to psychosocial adjustment, the quality of attachment to parents has been found to remain a key protective factor (Scharf, Mayselless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004).

Another aspect, the relationship between youth's life satisfaction and the family's socioeconomic status is well-documented (Wilson, Henry, & Peterson, 1997). Higher family SES usually increases adolescents' well-being (Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2007). As a recent review paper argues, the different explanations for social inequalities in health are related to each other through the mechanism of socialization that involves the intergenerational transfer of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Siahpush & Singh, 2000). Socioeconomic background may influence social interaction between parents and

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children leading to cognitive and psychosocial differences in children; for example, parents from higher social classes engage in more conversation with their children (Kroenke, 2008).

Besides family and friends, school is an important domain of socialization influencing adolescents' well-being, among others, through social support from teachers and satisfaction with school (Karademas, Peppas, Fotiou, & Kokkevi, 2008; Van Ryzin, Gravelly, & Roseth, 2009) or good academic achievement (Creed, Mueller, & Patton, 2003). School-related protections are also considered to be important to understanding the risk–mental health relationship. School has a significant effect on adolescent psychosocial development, for example, school climate and attachment to a school and its teachers, particularly since youth spend a great deal of time in school (Simons-Morton, Davis Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999; Somersalo, Solantaus, & Almqvist, 2002).

The drastic increase of morbidity and mortality rates in the transforming Central Eastern European countries, characterizing the last decades, offers a unique opportunity to analyze the role of psychosocial processes that contribute to well-being in this region. As previous research results argued, the quality of social relationships and trust in both families, schools and larger social groups might serve as a protection against deterioration of health and well-being (Skrabski et al., 2003). Socialization during adolescence is a key process in developing appropriate social skills and successful ways of adaptation (Karademas et al., 2008; Van Ryzin et al., 2009).

Besides testing cultural generalizability of previous findings with an unusual sample from the Central Eastern European region, the main goal of the present paper is to examine a set of social correlates (parental, peer and school-related) of youth's life satisfaction in one research model. As a previous study revealed, despite any differences across cultures in lifestyle practices the role of social correlates of adolescents' behavior and well-being might be universal (Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Therefore, we hypothesize that there may be associations between youth's life satisfaction and these parent, school and peer-related variables in a sample of Hungarian adolescents even if there may be differences in their relative significance. In addition, since there are well-documented gender differences in the functioning of social networks or school achievement (Piko, 2001), we also expect gender differences in the structure of these correlates.

## 2. Subjects and method

Data were collected among high schools students ( $N=881$ ; ages 14–20; Mean = 16.6 years, S.D. = 1.3 years, 44.6% female; response rate of 97.9%) in 2008 in Szeged Hungary. Five schools and classes were randomly chosen from a list of all high schools. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Besides students' oral consent, written parental permission was obtained before data collection. Trained graduate students distributed the questionnaires to students in each class, after giving the necessary instructions. Students completed the questionnaires during the class period.

Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Students indicated how strongly they agreed with each of the five items and responses ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The final scale had a range of 5–35 and was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 with the current sample.

Measures of Perceived Social Support developed by Turner and Marino (1994) were used to assess levels of satisfaction with the support experienced by youth as provided by their mother and father. Satisfaction was measured by the amount of agreement youth had with six items, e.g., "I feel very close to my father/mother". The final scales were coded from 6–24 and reliable with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.92 (father support) and 0.91 (mother support). Filial piety (e.g., "Even if I don't like the way my parents are acting, I must always respect them") was measured in relation to adolescents'

acceptance of their parents' values (Unger et al., 2002). The respondents were asked to evaluate each of the five statements using a 4-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; and 4 = strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha was 0.61.

Seven validated questions were chosen from previous surveys (Kann, 2001; Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2002) to assess parental and school-related variables. First, we asked students, how often they talked to their parents about their personal problems (where 1 = never talk with my parents, 2 = hardly ever, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most of the time, and 5 = always). We also asked them how often they eat dinner together with their family. As to parental monitoring, we asked them whether their parents knew where they were when they were going out with friends. Then, we asked them whether their parents set a curfew in these cases. Responses varied from 1 = never to 5 = all of the time. In addition, we asked students how happy they were with school and responses ranged from 1 = very unhappy to 4 = very happy. The high academic achievement variable was a self-report measure ranging from 1 = mostly D's and F's to 7 = mostly A's. In addition, an ordinal variable assessed how often students talked with teachers about their personal problems. Finally, the number of friends who shared common interest and number of friends who really took care of the person were also requested using two open-ended questions (National Survey on Drug Use, 2002).

Since social structure in Hungary is based on a dual-earning system, both father's and mother's educational level were measured. A four-level classification of education was used to measure father and mother schooling: 1) primary education; 2) apprenticeship; 3) General Certificate of Education, i.e. high school level; and 4) University or college degree. In addition, a subjective evaluation of socioeconomic status (SES) was used. The subjective SES indicator asked adolescents to respond to the following question: "How would you rate your family's socioeconomic status?" The answer categories included: 1) lower; 2) lower-middle; 3) middle; 4) upper-middle; and 5) upper class.

## 3. Results

Chi-square and Student's *t*-tests were used to examine gender differences in life satisfaction and its influencing factors. Tables 1 and 2 provide these data. Girls received more parental control ( $p<0.001$ ) and social support from mother ( $p<0.05$ ) and reported more frequent talking about problems with parents ( $p<0.001$ ). Girls reported higher academic achievement ( $p<0.001$ ) and were happier with school ( $p<0.001$ ), whereas boys reported more friends ( $p<0.001$ ) and they talked about problems with teacher more often ( $p<0.001$ ). There were no gender differences in levels of life satisfaction ( $p>0.05$ ).

Table 3 presents multiple regression estimates for boys and girls separately including parent, peer and school-related variables. Social support from parents, having dinner with family, talking about problems with parents were significant correlates for boys. For girls, talking about problems with parents was positively and parental monitoring variables were negatively associated with their life satisfaction. SES self-assessment and father's schooling (for girls) were also significant predictors. Among school-related variables, being happy with school and good academic achievement were significant. In addition, the variable indicating the number of friends who really took care of the person was significant for girls.

## 4. Discussion

This study provides further information on correlations between youth's life satisfaction and a set of social and sociodemographic variables. Findings suggest that despite the lack of gender difference in levels of life satisfaction, boys and girls may differ in the structure of its correlates.

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