

## THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF PREADOLESCENTS WORLDWIDE AND IN ROMANIA IN DATA AND STUDIES

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**Abstract:** *In this particular paper we aim to bring to the forefront a series of researches on the social and emotional well-being of preadolescents in different parts of the world: the European, Asian, African, North American, South American and Australian spaces. This paper also emphasizes the way in which the similarities and differences among cultures are both present in the research of the social and emotional well-being of children and preadolescents. A not inconsiderable minority of young people suffer from anxiety disorders, depression and other mood disorders and behavioural problems. Others have low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity. Given the harmful consequences of such disorders / difficulties, both in preadolescence and in later adult life, the appropriate authorities and the decision-makers should pay attention to the mental and emotional health of preadolescents so that they can develop sound strategies of prevention and intervention to raise awareness and prepare for these challenges. In this paper we will take into account, of course, Romania's situation regarding the social-emotional well-being of children. The selection of studies was made based on the accuracy of the data, the importance at a national and international level and the relevance for the present piece of work.*

**Key words:** *social and emotional well-being; mental health; behavioural problems; preadolescents; worldwide cultures.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to bring to the forefront a series of researches on the social and emotional well-being of preadolescents in different parts of the world: the European, Asian, African, North American, South American and Australian spaces. We will take into account, of course, Romania's situation regarding the social-emotional well-being of children. The selection of studies was made based on the accuracy of the data, the importance at a national and international level and the relevance for the present piece of work.

The history of public health has indicated the social mobilization as the key factor that has made governments (national and global) responsible for health. In this regard, the community concerned with public health is encouraged to continue to advance health promotion strategies, but also to actively reassume its historic role of supporting social mobilization by producing evidence on the negative aspects of the effects of globalization, as well as on the positive impact that fair policies have on health. In this way, one can contribute to the achievement of the goal of local and global governance and, therefore, the determinants factors of health can be approached (Sanders, 2006).

Moore, Diener and Tan (2018) have reviewed the researches indicating the fact that a higher level of positive affect helps to form better qualitative social relationships for the persons concerned and for those around them. By better relationships they refer

to those relationships that are experienced as more pleasant, closer, supportive and long lasting. Also, numerous studies are reviewed and confirm each other, namely that not only good relationships produce positive effects, but also positive effects can lead to good relationships. According to the three, certain implications derive from the fact that positive affect leads to quality social relationships. First of all, increasing positive affect and decreasing negative feelings can substantially improve people's social relationships, and such interventions could be useful in both clinical and organizational background. Reducing the level of depression and other negative states is likely to lead to both increases in positive affect and improved social relationships. For example, increasing the positive affect of employees has the potential to improve the relationships within the organization, with colleagues, collaborators and customers.

Although unpleasant and rather avoided, discussions about emotional difficulties and poor mental health are still necessary. According to Cowie and his colleagues (2004), mental health disorders can be divided into two main types: internalization disorders and externalizing disorders. Internalization difficulties are those conditions in which the persons internalize their problems and become either anxious or depressed, or develop a tendency to lament or an eating disorder. Preadolescents and adolescents with externalizing disorders, such as conduct disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), show visible behavioural problems for those around them. These two terms, the authors continue, are, to some extent, equivalent to the educational terms of emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is noted that drug and alcohol use can be both the result of emotional difficulties and the cause of additional difficulties.

In 2003, the World Health Organization published a paper to create an environment that is favourable to emotional and social well-being in schools. According to the organization, a healthy school environment that increases the level of social and emotional well-being is the one that is warm, friendly and rewards learning; promotes cooperation and not competition; facilitates open and protective communication; considers it important to provide creative opportunities; prevents corporal punishment, intimidation, harassment and violence, by encouraging the development of procedures and policies that do not favour corporal punishment and promote non-violent interaction on the playground, in the classroom and between staff and students; promotes the rights of boys and girls through equal opportunities and democratic procedures (World Health Organization, 2003).

The satisfaction with life among preadolescents and adolescents also refers to various important emotional, social and behavioural constructions. Moreover, the study of life satisfaction and social and emotional well-being has been increasingly claimed in recent decades. Proctor and his team (2009) state, based on the speciality literature, that there is a pressing need for research among preadolescents and adolescents from different cultures. They also note that most of the previous researches on youth satisfaction with life in the United States have been conducted in the United States, and most of the evaluation measures have been created and validated through North American samples. Therefore, future researches should aim to assess the ability of life satisfaction measures to transcend specific cultures and groups.

In the recent years, the researches in the field of well-being, and especially in the field of social and emotional well-being, have sought to transcend national borders. Recalling that emotional well-being also includes subjective well-being, we note that, in 2019, Newland *et al.* conducted a multilevel analysis of subjective well-being among children, preadolescents and adolescents in 14 countries. Their study tested an ecological model, based on relationships, of the subjective well-being of children aged 9

to 14, from 14 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America and South America. The children filled in the *Children's Worlds* survey, a measure of self-reporting of contextual and well-being indicators (Newland *et al.* used the data provided by the first stage of the project). The multilevel modelling was used to predict children's well-being (life satisfaction and self-image) at two levels, *child* (age, gender, home context, family relationships, relationships with friends / colleagues, school environment, relationships with teachers and neighbourhood quality) and *country* (gross domestic product and income inequality). The strongest predictors of children's life satisfaction were gender (girls had lower life satisfaction), age (older children reported lower satisfaction), home background, and quality of family relationships. The results also indicated that most of the variance in the subjective well-being of children was attributed to child-level factors, as opposed to country-level factors. While 83% of the variation in children's life satisfaction was attributed to individual and micro systemic factors at the child level, 17% was attributed to factors and variance at the country level. Likewise, 89% of the variation in children's self-image was attributed to factors at the child level, while 11% was attributed to factors and variance at the country level (Newland *et al.*, 2019).

The above-mentioned project was also the subject of Rees and Main's (2015) manuscript, *Children's views on their lives and well-being in 15 countries: An initial report on the Children's Worlds survey, 2013-14*. According to the two, in principle, children seem more satisfied with family and friendships than with other aspects, such as school and the local area (for example, the average scores for the satisfaction with "family life" were higher than for satisfaction with "student life" in 13 of the 15 countries, with the exceptions being Ethiopia and Nepal, where the satisfaction with "student life" was higher). In any case, these exceptions illustrate the fact that one of the main values of the survey is to explore variations in well-being among countries and subgroups of the population. There was also a substantial diversity in the least common activities. For example, the children in Turkey spend the most time reading for pleasure, but the least time helping with household activities; the children in the UK, on the other hand, spend the most time alone and the least time doing their homework. At the same time, children's knowledge of their rights and their views on the observance of these rights by adults varied widely among countries. In most countries, most children seem to know what their rights are, but in four countries - the United Kingdom, Germany, Israel and South Korea - only a minority of children seemed to know. Moreover, children's trust in the respect that adults feel for their rights has ranged from 33% in South Korea to 84% in Norway (Rees & Main, 2015).

## 2. The European space

In the **United Kingdom**, a group of researchers examined the link between the family's early social-economic disadvantage and children's aspirations, along with the emotional and behavioural issues. It seems that the social-economic disadvantage predicted problems both directly and indirectly, by its association with a low level of good presence / prestige and intrinsic aspirations. Thus, children who aspire to more prestigious professions have fewer emotional and hyperactivity problems, and those with rather extrinsic aspirations have fewer emotional difficulties. Both girls and especially boys with seemingly intrinsic aspirations, presented several problems in the relationships with friends / colleagues (Flouri *et al.*, 2016).

A report was written in 2018 by members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the National Assembly for Wales about the support for mental and emotional health for children, early-adolescents and adolescents from **Wales**.

According to the document, the support shown for the mental and emotional health of children and young people in Wales has been limited for a long time. To put an end to this limitation, the authors recommend that the Welsh government should consider emotional well-being, resilience and early intervention a stated national priority. Following a survey on Welsh secondary school students, 50% of students surveyed said that the school provided them with information (or that they knew where to get information) about emotional well-being and mental health; 19% of the young people who responded to the survey benefited from school counseling (because there are no counseling services anywhere nearby, they called in the hope that others would not find out about their anxiety); 52% of the young people who responded to the survey said that their school is good or very good at helping them cope with exam stress, peer bullying and pressure; 65.9% of the participants said they would like the school to teach them more about how to take care of their emotional well-being and mental health (Neagle *et al.*, 2018).

In the **Italian context**, Manna and her team (2016) conducted a study on a group of preadolescents aged 11 to 14 in secondary school. Looking at the relationship between self-esteem, depression and anxiety, the researchers found that the effects of self-esteem on the depressive and anxiety symptoms were significantly greater than the effects of anxiety and depression on self-esteem. At the same time, gender has been positively associated with anxiety and self-esteem: girls tend to report higher levels of anxiety than boys. Age was also positively associated with depression; thus, older preadolescents tend to report higher levels of depression than younger preadolescents.

Sanmartín and his colleagues (2018) studied the positive and negative affect as predictors of social functioning in Spanish children. Therefore, their aim was to analyze the relationship between positive and negative affect and the dimensions of social functioning (school performance, family relationships, peer relationships, homework and self-care) in children in **Spain**. The sample included 390 primary school students aged between 8 and 11 years. The short form of *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for children (PANAS-C-SF)* was also used along with *Child and Adolescent Social Adaptive Functioning Scale (CASAFS)*. The resulting findings showed that those who report high levels at all dimensions of social functioning also report significantly higher levels of positive affect than colleagues who report low levels. Students who report high levels of social functioning report significantly lower levels of negative affect than peers who reported low levels. Concordantly, an increase in positive affect increases the likelihood of high levels of social functioning, and an increase in negative affect decreases the likelihood of high levels of social functioning, excluding school performance.

In **Romania**, the implementation of the *International Project "Children's Worlds. An International Report on Child Well-Being"*, aims to contribute to increasing the well-being of the Romanian children. Within the project, three questionnaires were developed adapted to the second grade (8-9 years), the fourth grade (10-11 years) and the sixth grade (12-13 years), in order to capture the most important areas of children's lives. The project is in the third stage of data collection (2016-2019<sup>1</sup>), after stage 1 (2011-2012) and 2 (2013-2014). The results obtained so far have been unexpected: although Romania is among the poorest countries in the European Union, the average level of happiness in the case of children is not correlated with material well-being. Thus, according to the mentioned survey, Romania registered, one of the highest levels of subjective well-being (happiness) among the countries whose children participated

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<sup>1</sup> According to the official page of the project (<http://isciweb.org/>), the international data base will be achieved in 2020 and the public will have free access to information beginning with the end of 2021.

in the research. Another important finding of the study was that the best indicator for children's happiness is the possibility to spend their time as they wish (Bălătescu & Bacter, 2016).

### 3. The Asian space

The article *Child well-being indicators through the eyes of children in Turkey: A happy child would be one who...*, signed by Uyan-Semerçi and Erdoğan (2017), sought the most appropriate sequel to the title claim. In other words, based on the research to assess child well-being indicators from the perspective of the little ones, in order to monitor child well-being at a national level in **Turkey**, the aim of the article is, according to the authors' words, to show what priorities children have for each field, in order to be able to talk about "a happy child". Thus, 562 children from different age groups filled in the proposed questionnaire. Subsequently, 40 focus groups with approximately 10 children were organized to evaluate the questionnaire and give them the opportunity to add what they considered to be the missing dimensions on areas and indicators. The areas discussed were health; material well-being; education; risk and relationships. The results obtained provided some clues as to how children in Turkey think a happy child would be: the one who feels fit and strong; the one who has a positive mood; the one who can go on trips and does not wear old clothes; the one who has a room and a table in his house; the one who has high grades at school and has a clean and spacious garden, where he can do sports; the one who lives in a family without risk of drugs, fights and violence; the one who pursues a hobby he likes; the one who spends his time with family and friends; and the one who is loved by his friends (Uyan-Semerçi & Erdoğan, 2017).

Carlsson and his team (2011) analyzed the factors that are correlated with the subjective well-being among preadolescents in **China**. An interesting finding was that the factors that affect the subjective well-being of the Chinese parents do not also influence the subjective well-being of their preadolescents, nor there is a significant correlation between the subjective well-being of preadolescents and the well-being of their parents. The results of the study also showed that factors such as the number of close friends, the absence of harassing / intimidation bullying, spending time with parents and discussions with them are positively correlated with the subjective well-being of the preadolescents. Another interesting finding is that the well-being of the Chinese preadolescents does not seem to be correlated with their school performance.

In **Bangladesh**, Hossain (2013) was concerned with the relationship between the academic achievement and the behavioural problems in upper secondary school students. The study involved 1208 respondents: students from urban areas (9th grade), teachers and experts, from whom data were collected through a questionnaire, interview guide and focus groups. According to the obtained results, the inattention due to hyperactivity is dominant, while the "problems" with friends / colleagues - recorded the lowest score. Emotional difficulties are also more prevalent among girls; on the other hand, the prevalence of inattention due to hyperactivity is higher among boys. Correlational analysis indicates that students' academic achievement has a negative and significantly considerable relationship with all attributes of behavioural problems (emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, hyperactivity-inattention, and peer friends and colleagues problems). Moreover, the inattention due to hyperactivity has the greatest association with academic achievement, while conduct problems have the smallest association.

Also in the Asian space, we note the study of Abdel-Fattah and his collaborators (2004), who were interested in determining the prevalence rate of emotional and / or

behavioural problems in male students in **Saudi Arabia**, while identifying possible factors of risk. Of the 1313 participants in the study, 109 (8.3%) were students experiencing emotional and / or behavioural difficulties. Among the social-demographic variables studied, the educational level and the mother's profession were associated with a higher risk of developing emotional and / or behavioural disorders. Also, the unwanted pregnancies, the history of meningitis, the accidents and the asthma showed an increased risk of emotional and / or behavioural disorders. We note, however, that the percentage of 8.3% of the children and adolescents surveyed and who faced emotional and behavioural difficulties (according to the parents' report) is lower than that reported in other countries.

#### 4. The African space

Concerned about the prevalence and the predictors of emotional and behavioural difficulties among the adolescents in **Egypt**, Mowafy and his team (2015) called for a questionnaire survey to collect data from 476 students aged 13 to 17 years in the rural environment. The developed research showed that 18.5% of the participating students had behavioural problems, the highest proportion being in the category of emotional difficulties, followed by behavioural problems, hyperactivity problems and, lastly, the peer friends and colleagues relationships. The students from private schools, enrolled in secondary education, with separated or dead parents and often punished had a higher risk of having behavioural abnormalities than the others. The researchers' recommendation for the Egyptian teachers (but which, incidentally, is valid for any teacher), is to communicate correctly with the adolescent students, through adequate prior training.

#### 5. The North American space

The research of Wang, Pomerantz, and Chen (2007) compared the effects over time of parental control and support for autonomy on the functioning of preadolescents in the **United States** and China. Thus, 806 American and Chinese seventh grade students (mean age = 12.73 years) participated in a six-month longitudinal study. The children reported information on psychological control by parents, support for psychological autonomy, behavioral control, and their own emotional and academic functioning. There were similarities between cultures, because over time, psychological control by parents predicted a decrease in the emotional functioning of preadolescents; on the other hand, the support of psychological autonomy by parents predicted improved emotional and academic functioning of preadolescents, and parental behavioral control predicted improved academic functioning of children. An important difference found between the two countries was that the beneficial effects of parents' support for psychological autonomy were generally stronger in the United States than in China.

Jose *et al.* (1998) compared self-reported stress, coping strategies, and depression among 270 Russian preadolescents and 270 **American** preadolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 years. The findings showed that Russian and American preadolescents reported equal levels of major stress in life, but Russian preadolescents reported higher levels of stress in daily life. It was also observed that Russian preadolescents showed a greater tendency to call for social support and coping strategies aimed at solving problems compared to American preadolescents. However, the study found that Russian preadolescents are more depressed than American ones, although both Russian and American preadolescents cope with stress in similar ways.

## 6. The South American space

In South America, several researchers were interested in studying for the first time in **Peru** the psychometric properties of the *Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (PANAS-C)* in a sample of preadolescents from Lima. They concluded that positive and negative affect as constructs are less distinct in toddlers and that they become more clearly defined as children grow, possibly due to a greater ability to classify emotional experience (Casuso *et al.*, 2016).

## 7. The Australian space

Prior and his colleagues (1999) considered the situation of the preadolescents in **Australia**. Thus, the researchers were interested in the nature and correlations of the preadolescent psychological disorders in the Australian Longitudinal Temperament Project (ATP). Among the results obtained, we note the problems of internalization of the preadolescents, which we mentioned in the first part of this paper. According to the study of Prior *et al.* (1999), internalization disorders were the most common, and 44% of the cases presented multiple problems.

Also in Australia, Gregory and Brinkman (2015) discussed in their report, The Australian Student Wellbeing Survey how key aspects of social and emotional well-being are measured. They say that while literacy and numeracy will remain the foundation of the education systems, it is now recognized that students' social and emotional skills and their general well-being are equally essential for learning and identifying opportunities throughout life. Preadolescence, marked by the onset of puberty and transition to high school, represents a difficult period and is often characterized by transformations in peer-to-peer social relationships with adults. The lack of continuity in social relations, the lack of support and involvement in activities poses a particular risk for students during this period, so it is important that schools understand the value of the concept of well-being of their students. The ten social and emotional constructs that are currently measured in South Australia are, according to the report, happiness, sadness, worries, life satisfaction, involvement, optimism, perseverance, empathy, pro-social skills and self-esteem. The general premise behind it is that students' well-being is changeable and that programs and policies within the Department of Education and Child Development can be evaluated for their ability to improve students' well-being. Therefore, it is important to measure those aspects of the students' well-being that are both significant and changeable.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the similarities and differences among cultures are both present in the research of the social and emotional well-being of children, preadolescents and adolescents. While most cultures would rather portray preadolescents as a group of "moody" and difficult individuals, some of them face serious mental and emotional problems that go beyond the ordinary stereotypes. Thus, a not inconsiderable minority of preadolescents and adolescents suffer from anxiety disorders, depression and other mood disorders and behavioural problems. Others have low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity. Given the harmful consequences of such disorders / difficulties, both in preadolescence and in later adult life, the appropriate authorities and the decision-makers should pay attention to the mental and emotional health of preadolescents so that they can develop sound strategies of prevention and intervention to raise awareness and prepare for these challenges (Zaff *et al.*, 2002).

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