

FROM INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING TO COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE: A CULTURAL APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Wellbeing has been defined in relation to the quality of personal life and social relationships. The contexts in that people live, study and work may promote or undermine the subjective wellbeing due to potential opportunities or challenges. Higher education settings are academically stimulating and career-focused and, therefore, highly competitive. Nevertheless, higher education area is also a socially rich environment that provides constructive human interactions as a medium to enrich learning. A positive attitude contributes not only to personal wellbeing and deep learning, but also to individual and collective resilience in an era of dynamic changes and crisis. The psychological resilience is the ability to overcome the adversities of life, while the collective resilience is the ability of a group or a community to face challenges and internal or external tensions, arising as a result of political, economic, social or environmental changes. In these conditions, the educational relationships serve as a catalyst for resilience. Our study aims at investigating the perception of Romanian students, framed by the specific cultural context, regarding positive emotions, optimism and wellbeing, and collective resilience. The questionnaire-based inquiry has collected the responses of the participants. The key-themes identified from the answers to the open questions have been interpreted in a grounded theory approach. Our findings show that all participants declare positive experiences regarding emotions and that the reasons for which they are grateful are the learning acquisitions and personal achievements.*

Keywords: *wellbeing; cultural imprint of resilience; resilience in higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between education and wellbeing has been a topic of interest for the last decades. Some reports have shown positive association between education and wellbeing (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005), and positive association between education at moderate levels and wellbeing (Stutzer, 2004). Other studies have pointed out negative relation (Dockery, 2010; Shields, Wheatley Price, & Wooden, 2009). The negative association between education and wellbeing has two possible explanations: education costs and assumes additional loss of leisure and work-related stress (Kristoffersen, 2018). More than that, some evidence enhances an indirect effect of education on wellbeing through labour market outcomes, economic status and health (Powdthavee *et al.*, 2015).

The effects of education on wellbeing might also differ across countries and the approach to education-happiness puzzle focussing on the role of expectations, contributing greatly to how individuals evaluate their circumstances according to some reference points that differ systematically across

education levels (Kristoffersen, 2018). Other authors present evidence that preferred working hours fall with higher education, therefore education may affect subjective wellbeing negatively due to overwork and, furthermore, people with higher education may be exposed to greater stress because they experience their work as more demanding (Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2003). As Kristoffersen (2018) highlighted, education may improve wellbeing only if expectations are exceeded, but may decrease wellbeing if they are not met (Kristoffersen, 2018). Some studies show that much of the effect of education on subjective wellbeing is cancelled out by increases in aspirations (Clark *et al.*, 2015).

There are cultural variations regarding positive emotions: in Western cultural models positive emotions are associated with individual success, high self-esteem, and good health (Heine, Lehman, Markus & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Positive and negative emotions are not simply bipolar opposites and often have different predictors and consequences that are culturally determined (Leu, Wang & Koo, 2011).

Growing cross-cultural evidence has shown that a pro-positive/contra-negative orientation to emotion is more prevalent in Western, especially American cultural contexts, whereas a more balanced orientation toward emotion exists in Eastern cultural contexts (Miyamoto, Ma & Wilken, 2017). The approach to pro-positive and balanced system of emotions is relevant to the present study for the

consideration that Romanian culture presents similar factors with East Asian cultures. These cultures record low levels for individualism, unlike Western culture, therefore being considered collectivist (Hofstede *et al.*, 2012, 99-101). The relevance of cultural differences in emotion is highlighted in *Figure 1*.

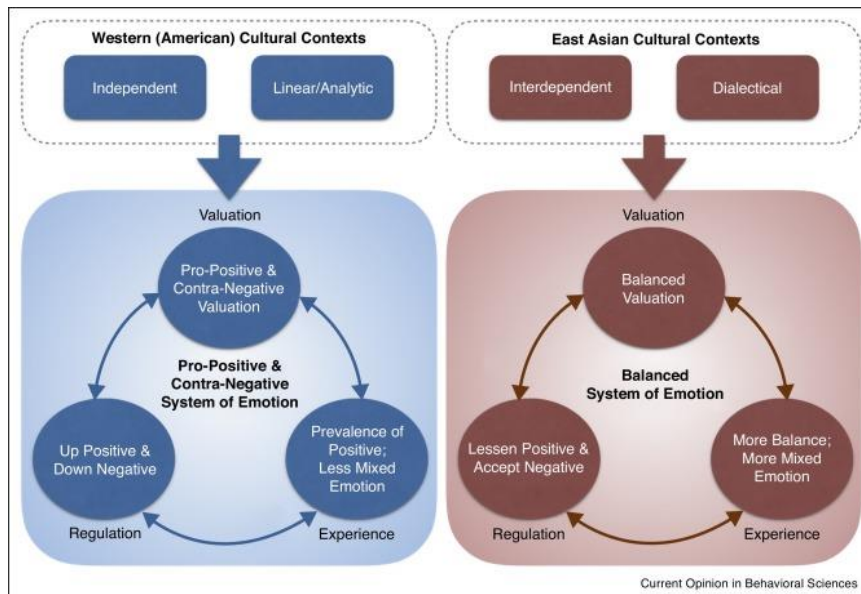


Fig. 1. Pro-positive and contra-negative versus balanced system of emotions (Miyamoto, Ma & Wilken, 2017)

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The main research question followed in our study was: *Are national cultural patterns preserved in young students' behaviour regarding positive emotions?* The objectives of the study were: (a) To identify the positive emotions experienced most often by students; (b) To set means for individual and collective resilience; (c) To evaluate the current profile of students towards positive emotions and collective resilience.

3. EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION

3.1. Procedure. The questionnaire-based inquiry was launched in February 2022 via Google Forms. The themes identified in the responses to the open items were further developed in several focus-groups.

3.2. Participants. The target group consisted in 76 students enrolled in teacher training activities. The distribution according to "sex" variable divides them in 73 females and 3 males. The participants are aged between 20 and 65 years.

3.3. Measures. In order to evaluate the current students' profile regarding the benefits of positive emotions and their use for resilience, we initiated a questionnaire-based inquiry and selected the major themes regarding positive emotions and resilience emerged from the open questions. A quasi-grounded theory was developed, sustained with the issues added by the interventions in focus-groups.

4. FROM INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING TO COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

4.1. Aspects regarding positive emotions. In this study, we used the conceptual framework for positive emotions developed by Barbara L. Fredrickson (2019). The respondents have chosen the positive emotions experienced most often as follows: Joy – 25%; Amusement – 20%; Love – 20%; Hope – 15%; Pride – 5%; Interest – 5%; Inspiration – 5%; Satisfaction – 5%. The results show that serenity and gratitude are missing in students' choices. Half of the participants declare they experience positive emotions in regular school and educational activities *very often* (25%) and *often* (25%), *sometimes* (40%), *rarely* (10%).

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4.2. Aspects regarding individual and collective resilience. Among the reasons for which they consider to be grateful at the end of the week, the respondents have chosen: Personal accomplishments – 40%; Learned lessons – 30%; Recreational activities – 15%; Family relationships – 10%; Meetings with friends – 5%. As we can see, the majority of respondents have a self-centred approach (80%) and only 20% find their comfort in human relation with relatives and friends.

4.3. Aspects regarding the current profile of students towards positive emotions and collective resilience. The current profile of student does not match the traditional profile identified for the Romanian people, who were used to set the interest of the group above the personal interest. The Western models of management and personal development have contributed to the change of the perspective about individual and collective interest. The current profile of the respondents towards emotions is the result of a mixture of influences occurred over the times, with ancient historical origins, and of postmodern shades of globalization.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of wellbeing is a popular topic nowadays. All the respondents declare they are familiar with the content of it. The study enhanced an individualist perspective in higher education and the focus on learning outcomes rather than interpersonal relationships. The study groups are usually seen as appropriate for solving the tasks, but educational relationships are not really considered to be a reference for learning. The results do not have the quality of being generalized. The limited number of participants and the emerging perspective of grounded theory are the main disadvantages. Nevertheless, the importance of education and training in achieving higher standards regarding the quality of life according to higher expectations towards personal and professional life has been already highlighted. Higher education is a competitive area and this point may influence the responses of the students about their feelings and thoughts.

The benefits of individual and collective wellbeing are too obvious not to address the academic environment with relevant evidence regarding applied positive psychology and resilience. Promoting ways to create and enhance wellbeing would only help to diminish the effects of the alienation in the educational relationship experienced

during the last two year of online or hybrid learning. In the same time, it would help to train competent and healthy teachers, who will pass on to further generations the effective behavioural patterns. From a cultural perspective, Romanians tend to express negative emotions rather than positive, but non-replication of the cultural pattern about the prevalence of the group over the individual it is encouraging.

The new curricular vision implemented in early childhood education and care, in primary and in secondary education set on competence formation and development will lead to the increase of a proper understanding of wellbeing and its contribution to collective resilience. The gap in the high school curriculum will have to be filled if recovery of the future students is desired. Nevertheless, individual and collective wellbeing will promote citizenship and democratic values.

The findings of the investigation show that individual resilience is better addressed than collective resilience in higher education nowadays.

The limits of the study will be exceeded by extending the number of participants and investigating the differences according to age, specialization, educational background or working experience. However, the relevant response to the research question shows that traditional cultural patterns are less provided in current students' behaviours, as premises of promoting real wellbeing and collective resilience.

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