

Improving Psychological Well-being among Undergraduates: How Creativity Can Contribute?

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to assess levels of psychological well-being among undergraduates and to suggest how creativity can contribute to the enhancement of the psychological well-being. A total of 1965 university undergraduate students participated in this cross-sectional survey study. Responses from the Flourishing Scale was used to assess the levels of psychological well-being. Results showed that 256 undergraduates fall into the low and moderate low levels with majority of them are from the first year cohort. We discuss three methods, namely, open-ended projects, brainstorming sessions, and visualization that can be incorporated into the teaching and learning that can enhance creativity.*

Keywords: *Creativity, Flourishing Scale, psychological well-being, Schlossberg Transition theory, university undergraduates*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed great interest in psychological well-being (PWB). This is not unexpected since PWB has been shown to have correlations with other crucial mental health variables such as stress (Clemente, Hezomi, Allahverdipour, Jafarabadi, & Safaian, 2016), resilience (Sagone & De Caroli, 2014) and wellness (Harris, Martin, & Martin, 2013). A positive emotion which is often associated with people with high PWB also benefits health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Dockray, & Steptoe, 2010). Literature shows that PWB is defined in some broad definitions, ranging from personal experience of individuals (Diener, Eunkook, Richard, & Heidi, 1999) to association with life potential and happiness (Ryan, & Deci, 2008) to the result of accomplishing goals (Diener et al., 2009). However, the original definition by Ryff (1989) may provide a better conceptualization of this construct among university undergraduates. She defines PWB as the extent to which people live themselves to the fullest of their potentials. Huppert (2009) adds apart from the development of one's potential; the definition also includes having control over their lives, having a sense of purpose as well as experiencing positive relationships. Various factors can drive PWB. One of the prime factors is personality since the variable is associated with how we feel and how we function. Studies have shown that PWB correlates with the extraversion (high on sociability, assertiveness, etc.) and neuroticism (high on anxiety, worry, fear, anger, types of personality (Ruini et al., 2003).

Demographic factors also affected PWB, even though in a more complex form. For example, recent studies showed no gender difference (Visani, Albieri, Offidani, Ottolini, Tomba, Ruini, 2011) compared other studies that showed mixed results, i.e., higher scores for male (Stephens, Dulberg, & Joubert, 1999) or higher scores for female (Huppert, Walters, Day, & Elliott, 1989). Age is also a driver of PWB that have been extensively studied. According to Blanchflower and Oswald (2008), there seems to be a consistent U-shaped pattern that can describe the relationship between the two variables. That is, younger and older people tend to have higher well-being scores than the middle-aged.

Apart from the U-shaped pattern of age - PWB relationship, a study on PWB among undergraduates is essential since it marks the first time that they were away from their family and the need to on their ability to adapt to the university's environment. During this time, the undergraduates are undergoing confusion and ambivalence that may affect their PWB (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger & Pancer, 2007). Research shows that adaptation towards university life is not straightforward. The undergraduates need to face various challenges. According to Singh (2011), the imbalance between environment and demand (to complete assignments, engage in a university program, etc.) creates academic stress among undergraduates.

II. THE SCHLOSSBERG TRANSITION THEORY

Apart from the external challenges mentioned above, university undergraduates also facing a transition period of their self-identification. According to the Schlossberg Transition Theory, an individual transition can be categorized into three phases, namely (1) moving in, (2) moving through, and (3) moving out. During moving in, the undergraduates will try new things they experienced. They will start to shoulder responsibility especially with regards to self-management and finance. They also need to build new relationships with people they barely know. In the moving through a phase, the students will still be looking around and will try to adapt to new things. If the student feels comfortable with the new things that are experienced, the moving through phase will be traveled positively and so on.

At the moving through phase, the undergraduates are considered to have the ability to adapt to the initial challenges. They are undergoing life and keeping up with the demand of the university. However, they are still experiencing various changes and difficulties such as to maintain the dynamic

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relationships with other surrounding communities (peer, lecturer, etc.). The undergraduates will bring the knowledge, skills, and values gained through the first two-phase challenge into the moving out phase. In this phase, the undergraduates are no longer burdensome with the problems of the moving in and the moving through phases, rather, the self-preparation phase to graduation. When they enter the labor work, the phase moving in phase repeats in the context of new life.

As rightly observed by Schlossberg (1984), the changes and challenges need to be appropriately addressed, to ensure positive impacts such as positive well-being, good adaptation, as well as high satisfaction among undergraduates.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though understanding PWB is essential, surprisingly, there is still a lack of study of its kind in Malaysia. Most studies were conducted among graduate students (Panahi, Yunus, Roslan, Kadir, Jaafar, Panahi, 2016; Roslan, Ahmad, Nabilla, & Ghiami, 2017). Several studies investigate PWB and its relationship with other variables such as Facebook usage (Naeemi, Tamam, Hasan, & Bolong, 2014), career satisfaction (Norizan, & Siti-Rohaida, 2015), stress (Yunus & Mahajar, 2011) and self-compassion (Voon, Lau & Leong, 2017). Nevertheless, all these studies did not involve university undergraduates.

The scarcity of research on PWB (and its relationship between other variables) among undergraduates may be the cause of the lack of understanding regarding PWB in Malaysia. This in turns, limits our ability to provide interventions to enhance their PWB. Improving PWB is essential since the variable has been positively associated with other important variables such as academic success (Rüppel, Liersch, S., & Walter, 2015), self-esteem (Ameri & Bagheri, 2015), optimism (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009) and intelligence (Wigtil & Henriques, 2015).

Literature also shows that PWB is also widely studied with ill-being, such as academic stress (Chow, 2007) or anxiety (Liu, Shono, & Kitamura, 2009). Nevertheless, as quotes by Huppert (2009), since well-being is more than the absence of ill-being and the drivers of well-being is very much different from the drivers of ill-being, than there is a need to study it in its own right. As such, the purpose of this study is to measure PWB among university undergraduates. More specifically, the objectives of the present study are (1) to gauge information on the agreeableness of the undergraduates in eight aspects of PWB, and (2) to identify the level of PWB of the undergraduates, and (3) to suggest how creativity can improve PWB of the undergraduates.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A total of 1965 undergraduates were employed from seven public universities in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used for this study because of the constraint of time and cost. The following Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic information.

Table. 1 Undergraduates' Demographic Profile

Demographic Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	581	29.6
Female	1384	70.4
Years of Study		
First	351	17.9
Second	757	38.5
Third	486	24.7
Fourth	371	18.9

Data were collected during lectures to ensure good returns and it takes about 5-10 minutes to complete the task. In this study, the Flourishing Scale (FS) (Diener et al., 2009) was employed to gain information on the respondents' PWB. The 8-item instrument measures human functioning aspects such as positive relationships with others, the purpose of life as well as additional characteristics like feelings of competence and optimism. The FS is widely used in many well-being studies because of its simplicity in measuring PWB. Before it is used, the FS was translated into Malay language and then converted back to English by a language lecturer. The similarity of the meanings of both versions was endorsed by the same lecturer as well as a lecturer in psychology.

Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale with the following pattern of responses: strongly disagree – disagree - quite disagree - somewhat agree - agree-strongly agree. The undergraduates with high scores were operationalized as possessing high PWB and vice versa. The reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was .862. Table 2 depicts the FS items.

Table. 2 The Flourishing Scale

Code	item
FS1	I lead a purposeful and meaningful life
FS2	My social relationships are supportive and rewarding
FS3	I am engaged and interested in my daily activities
FS4	I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others
FS5	I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me
FS6	I am a good person and lead a good life
FS7	I am optimistic about my future
FS8	People respect me

V. RESULT

Table 3 depicts the percentage of response for each category for the FS item. It can be seen that most of the responses clustered around Agree categories (Somewhat Agree + Agree + Strongly Agree). This also causes a high mean score of between 4.27 and 4.98 for items in the FS.



Table. 3 Percentage of Responses

Item	SD	D	QD	SA	A	StrA
FS1	1.3	1.8	5.3	16.1	40.3	35.2
FS2	.7	2.2	6.3	17.9	42.4	30.5
FS3	2.6	4.6	16.5	29.1	33.5	13.6
FS4	1.0	2.3	8.2	33.6	38.0	16.8
FS5	.8	1.5	8.1	32.2	41.4	16.0
FS6	.8	1.4	6.1	26.4	42.1	23.2
FS7	.7	1.7	5.5	23.4	43.2	25.5
FS8	1.1	1.5	8.5	32.8	42.0	13.9

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, QD = Quite Disagree, SA = Somewhat Agree, A = Agree, StrA = Strongly Agrees

Even though the present study reported a high mean score for items in the FS, this study also revealed that there was a considerable amount of concern regarding the number of undergraduates that experience a low level of PWB. As shown by the following Table 4, a total of 71 undergraduates (3.6%) were classified as having a low score of PWB, while another 175 (8.9%) were at moderate low level. Further analysis showed that there was 4.5% male undergraduates at the low level compared to 3.3% for their female counterparts. There were also higher percentages of male undergraduates at moderate low level (12.9%) compared to 7.2% for the females. Additional analysis showed that the first year students represent the highest percentage of undergraduates at low levels at 14.2% compared to the second year (1.6%), third year (1.6%) and the final year (.3%). A similar trend was also reported for moderate low level, where the first year undergraduates were the largest at 14%, followed by the third year (8.5%), second year (8.1%) and the final year (6.5%).

Table. 4 Number of Undergraduates at Each Level

Level	Range of Score	Number of Undergraduates
Low	8-25	71 (3.6%)
Moderate Low	26-31	175 (8.9%)
Moderate High	32-37	648 (33%)
High	38-48	1071 (54.4%)

Note* Mean = 37.47, SD = 5.78

An independent sample t-test was carried out to compare the effect of gender toward PWB. Result showed that the mean different is statistically significant [$t(1963) = -3.918, p = .000$]. A one-way ANOVA was employed to test the effect of years of study on PWB. Results in Table 5 shows that there were significant difference in the mean score of PWB between groups [$F(3, 1961) = .183, p = .000$]. Post-hoc test using Bonferroni showed that the mean score for the first year was significantly lower than that of other groups. The mean score of the second year was also significantly different from the final year. No significant difference was recorded between the third year and the final year.

Table. 5 Results of One-way ANOVA for the Effect of Years of Study on PWB.

Level	Mean Difference	p-value
First – Second	-3.41	.000
First – Third	-3.77	.000
First – Final	-4.57	.000
Second – Third	-.36	1.000
Second – Final	-1.16	.006
Third – Final	-.81	.224

VI. DISCUSSION

The research examines the PWB among undergraduates from seven universities. The results show that 246 undergraduates were classified at the low and moderate low levels that in turns provide empirical evidence to show that they did not live to their fullest potentials (Ryff, 1989). This is rather unfortunate since the university is a perfect place for building up personal possibilities such as social skills and leadership skills. The data also explains that there were higher percentages of male undergraduates at low PWB levels compared to the females. With regards to years of study, it was found that there was a higher percentage of first-year undergraduates at the two lower levels of PWB.

The present study reveals that female undergraduates demonstrated significantly higher PWB compared to their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the finding contradicts many other clinical studies on well-being and mental health where women have a higher lifetime prevalence of mood or anxiety disorders (Boyd et al. 2015; as well as depression (Kuehner, 2016). As such, there is a need to conduct further study to identify the cause of this contrasting results. The present finding also confirms that age affects the PWB of the undergraduates (Farrer, Leach, Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Hadjimina & Furnham, 2017). One possible explanation is that the longer they stay at the university, they can face many challenges that in turns, help the undergraduates to manage their life independently.

As mentioned in the above paragraph, undergraduates should take advantage of the conducive university environment to flourish to their fullest potential. Therefore, university stakeholders need to play an active role in improving PWB among their undergraduates. One exciting area that can be explored was by incorporating creativity into university climate.

Creativity can be defined as the process of generating something innovative, meaningful, original and unexpected (Sternberg, 1999). Concerning life at university, creativity can also be associated with the ability to meet challenges and difficulties with openness and a sense of possibility. There is a growing number of literature that associates creativity and PWB. A study by Richards (2007) showed that happy and active participants were likely to be engaged in creative activities.



Stuckey and Noble (2010) found that listening to music, visual art therapy, expressive writing, and art-based interventions can improve physiological and psychological consequences. Meanwhile, a study by Rezanezhadamirdehi (2011) showed that people with artistic abilities and jobs report higher levels of well-being than those who without. In the study of a college student in Pakistan, Arshad and Rafique (2016) found a positive and significant correlation between PWB and creativity ($r = .54$).

One pulling factor for incorporating creativity in university is that, contrary to popular belief, creativity is learnable (Lucas & Claxton, 2009). That is, the university stakeholders, including lecturers, can devise creative activities in their teaching and learning to promote positive PWB. For example, instead of the traditional standard project where undergraduates were asked to complete the task(s), an open-ended project can help them to explore their potential more creatively. In open-ended projects, the undergraduates were provided with the freedom to choose the type of project they want to create. Students are encouraged to explore different solutions and describe their answers in a way which they like. Besides, it is also essential for the lecturers to work with the undergraduates on the ways they will be evaluated. As such, open-ended projects are highly likely to create higher engagement on the programs/activities as well as better understanding of the content.

One crucial part of promoting creativity is to provide an opportunity for the undergraduates to voice out their opinions and ideas. Applying strategies such as brainstorming coincide with this purpose. This is because, during brainstorming, undergraduates generate ideas around a specific area of interest and they are encouraged to think freely and to move into new areas of thought such as problems, opportunities, etc. The idea of brainstorming sessions to provide the participants with diverse opinions in a dynamic synergy that can increase the creativity of the group. However, it should be noted that creativity requires courage and tenacity. Undergraduates need to be informed that not every idea can provide a successful solution, and failure is inevitable.

Another practical way to enhance creativity is to utilize visualizations by capturing both the creative and learning processes. This can be done by transforming texts into graphics, such as mind maps or infographics. Latest technology such as virtual reality is also able to enhance creativity by visualizing events and environments the undergraduates weren't physically able to access. Also, the use of comic strips can be fun as well (Gerstner, 2003; Malia, 2007). Utilization of visuals may become essential aspects of research since many Malaysian undergraduates were visual learners (Ramalingam, 2014; Sahana Ghosh, Jaiprakash, & Govindaraja, 2014).

VII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to assess levels of PWB among undergraduates and to suggest how creativity can contribute to the enhancement of the PWB. Results showed that there a concern over a number of students at the low and moderate the low levels. The analysis also revealed that the first year represents the majority of undergraduates at these two levels. Based on a review of past studies, we argue

that incorporating creativity can contribute to enhancing undergraduates' PWB. We discuss how (1) open-ended project, (2) effective brainstorming sessions, and (3) visualizations can help improve driving creativity among undergraduates.

Nevertheless, we also believe that there is a still long way of understanding PWB among undergraduates. As rightly observed by Huppert (2009), providing interventions on at-risk subgroups may provide short-term relief, a more comprehensive effort need to be intensified to find universal that can reduced number of undergraduates in the long term with common mental problems.

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