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Psychological well-being and self-esteem in Slovak adolescents

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Summary

The interest in adolescence as a transitional developmental stage characterized by many important biological, psychological, and social changes is never-ending. Studies into adolescents in the environment of their school, peer and family with regard to constantly socio-economical changes bring new findings about this period of life. In addition, mental health, its components and possible determinants in adolescence are always an important topic for researchers in this field. Therefore, the present thesis is focusing on mental health, in particular on psychological well-being and self-esteem among Slovak adolescents.

Chapter 1 provides an overall introduction in the adolescence period relevant for our study. Firstly, individual parts of the present study are focused on the constructs of psychological well-being and self-esteem as aspects of mental health. Their protective and risk factors, changes over time and countries' differences in adolescence are described in this part. Secondly, mental health in the school context is described. Particularly, the model of well-being in the school environment, perceptions of school belonging/school connectedness and social relationships, and bullying as a form of violence in the school context are introduced in this part of thesis.

At the end of the first chapter the following general aims of the present study are mentioned: (1) to unravel the factor structure of measures for psychological well-being and self-esteem; (2) to explore determinants of psychological well-being and self-esteem at a certain moment in their adolescence; (3) to explore change over time of psychological well-being and self-esteem. Also the six research questions of this thesis and the overall outline are described.

The background of the study, participants, study variables and statistical analyses used in this thesis are described in **Chapter 2**. Four samples are included to the present study. Three samples consist of Slovak respondents. The first one comprises of 519 adolescents with mean age 11.5 years and same adolescents with mean age 14.9 in the follow-up measure. The second sample is composed of 1,023 Slovak adolescents with mean age 11.5 and 3,694 adolescents with mean age 14.3 years are belonged to the third sample. The Hungarian respondents consisted of 431 adolescents with mean age 11.5 years are included to fourth sample. Slovak data were collected on September 1999, February 2000, and June 2000 (first sample), April-June 2003 (second sample) and on September – December 2006 (third sample). Hungarian data were collected on October 2000, January and June 2001. Furthermore measures are described.

Chapter 3 deals with psychometric characteristics of the key variables – psychological well-being (GHQ-12) and self-esteem (RSE) - in Hungarian and Slovak early adolescents with regard to their factor structure (research question 1). In both samples, the principal component analyses support the two-factor solution for GHQ-12 with subscales “depression/anxiety” and “social dysfunction” and the two-factor solution for RSE as well with subscales “negative self-esteem” and “positive self-esteem”. The reliability of the subscales is good.

Chapter 4 explores differences in positive, negative and overall self-esteem of adolescents between twenty two Central-Eastern European countries stratified by gender. In addition, the association between gender, cultural background, depression/anxiety and social dysfunction and self-esteem of young Hungarian and Slovak boys and girls in adolescence is explored (research question 2). The significant differences between Slovakia and other Central-European countries are confirmed. Also, cultural background and both factors, depression/anxiety and social dysfunction of psychological well-being significantly associate with self-esteem.

Chapter 5 deals with changes in psychological well-being and self-esteem between the age of 11.5 and 15. The role of gender and parental education as determinants of psychological well-being and self-esteem at the age of 15 is also explored (research question 3). Mean scores on depression/anxiety; overall self-esteem and negative self-esteem deteriorate significantly over time for both boys and girls. Besides this mean deterioration, proportions of boys and girls, who improved, deteriorated or remained stable in psychological well-being and self-esteem, are found on an intra-individual level.

The associations between two dimensions of assertiveness (distress and performance) and depression/anxiety and social dysfunction factors of psychological well-being and positive and negative self-esteem factors of self-esteem of adolescents are studied in **Chapter 6** (research question 4). At the same time, the influence of the distress dimension on dependent variables controlling for the performance dimension is explored. Findings show that the more anxious respondents felt in assertive situations, the less frequently they engage in these situations; and that both dimensions of assertiveness predicted psychological well-being and self-esteem. However, the negative effect of the distress dimension on psychological well-being and self-esteem controlled for the performance dimension do not increase.

Chapter 7 analyses gender differences in bullying, school connectedness, self-esteem and psychological well-being (research question 5). Their interrelations and the joint contribution of gender, bullying, school connectedness and self-esteem to psychological well-being in adolescents are explored. Boys have significantly more frequently

taken part in bullying others; report significantly higher self-esteem and better psychological well-being than girls. At the same time, higher frequency of being bullied, lower school connectedness and lower self-esteem are significantly associated with worse psychological well-being in boys as well as in girls, but higher frequency of taking part in bullying others is significantly associated with worse psychological well-being only in girls. Gender, bullying, school connectedness and self-esteem are significant independent predictors of psychological well-being, with the highest contribution of self-esteem to the total variance explained in psychological well-being.

Chapter 8 shows the significance of the school relationships in adolescents' psychological well-being and self-esteem. Significant associations between pupil-peer as well pupil-teacher relationships and psychological well-being and self-esteem are found. Particularly, better pupil-peer and also pupil-teacher relationships are statistically significant associated with better psychological well-being and higher self-esteem. The respondents are divided into four categories associated with bullying: normative contrasts (those who neither bully nor are bullied); passive victims (those who are/were bullied); aggressive non-victims (those who bullied); and aggressive victims (those who bullied and who are also bullied). All four bullying-categories are significantly associated with pupil-peer relationships. The categories of normative contrasts and passive victims are significantly associated with both factors of psychological well-being and both factors of self-esteem. However, in the categories of aggressive victims and aggressive non-victims the pupil-teacher relationship is not significantly associated with their psychological well-being and self-esteem.

In **Chapter 9**, the main findings, several strengths and limitations of the present study are discussed, and implications for future research and practice are formulated. The present thesis underlines the importance of the use of both factors – depression/anxiety and social dysfunction - of psychological well-being and positive self-esteem and negative self-esteem in association with the other study variables. Particularly, cultural background, gender, social skills as well as school environment, all of these are found as significant determinants of psychological well-being and self-esteem in adolescence. In addition, a more detailed insight into the school context and its influence on the mentioned variables could generate new interesting findings which could be used as a background for future studies.

