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WHAT DOES IT MEAN "BEING CHILLED"? MENTAL WELL-BEING AS VIEWED BY SLOVAK ADOLESCENT BOYS

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Abstract: In adaptive development, mental well-being has a role to play in adolescents' search in adolescents' niche in life and the formation of a separate identity. Although this has been an area of interest in a number of disciplines, there remains ambiguity over our understanding of terms such as quality of life, life satisfaction, and mental well-being. Our aim was to employ an interpretative phenomenological analysis to find out how adolescent boys perceive the concept of mental well-being and ascertain what helps them and stops them from "feeling chilled". The data was obtained from a sample of 26 secondary school students who attended one of four focus groups. We found that they achieved a kind of escape from the world of social roles through performing activities like physical exercise or driving a vehicle, while searching for a sense of latitude and potency and attempting to reduce tension. Thus there is a clear distinction between what they desire and what is expected of them. Hanging out and "chilling" with their peer group seemed to be an important part of relationship formation, while close dyadic relationships were less significant. To a certain degree, the results of this study contradict conventional notions of happiness and mental well-being found in mainstream psychology.

Key words: mental well-being; adolescence; boys

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental stage involving great change. It is a period in which social norms associated with the work ethic, having an established identity and deriving a sense of meaning from profitable activity are progressively imposed (Erikson, 1950). Erikson (1950) described adolescence as a psychosocial moratorium, in which the responsibilities of adult life are postponed until childhood is over. Related to this, Twenge (2014, 2017) found, in her extensive intergenerational comparison, that young people over twenty, millennials, adolescents, and post-millennials dislike social rules and demands being placed upon them, and seek to prioritize their own needs and goals over those of others. Their unrealistic expectations mean they are insufficiently prepared for working life.

Adolescents, especially boys, experience a decline in life satisfaction and contentment (Goldbeck et al., 2007; O'Connor et al., 2016). However, good mental health and well-being provide a solid basis for successfully transitioning to adulthood. Consequently, interest in

this topic is growing in a number of academic disciplines, where the focus is on research and practice aimed at improving the mental well-being of adolescents (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2016).

There is no exact definition of mental well-being, but generally it is conceived of as a positive component of mental health (Soutter, 2011; WHO, 2005). Research on mental well-being can be located along two theoretical branches: the hedonic notion of happiness based on pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance, and the eudaimonic idea of happiness emphasizing personal growth, self-realization, and good deeds (Baytemir, 2016; Brey, 2012). Holistic perspectives on well-being that emphasize the multidimensional nature of the construct are most prevalent today (Liddle & Carter, 2015). These define well-being in terms of autonomy, positive affectionate relationships, positive emotions, engagement ("flow"), meaning and personal growth ("flourishing"), among others (e.g. Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Khawaja, Ibrahim, & Schweitzer, 2017; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2002).

Most of the existing research on well-being was carried out on the adult population. Perceptions of well-being are determined by gender and cultural and generational context, and there is a lack of knowledge on how it is seen by young people of school age (Soutter, 2011). Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009) suggest that future investigations should target adolescent well-being, with the aim of establishing the relevance of theories stemming from research on the adult population. Similarly, McAuley and Rose (2010) state that in order to further our knowledge about well-being, children and adolescents should be asked directly about their understanding and perceptions of it. Many studies have been concerned with aspects of ill-being, such as depression, anxiety, delinquency (Rask, Åstedt-Kurki, & Laippala, 2002), discomfort, fatigue, frustration, isolation, loneliness, or disturbed relationships (Narayan et al., 2000).

Some qualitative studies have focused on well-being from the perspective of children and adolescents. The results suggest that relationships with family members, peers, and teachers; entertainment and fun activities; and a sense of freedom and security are seen as essential to the subjective experience of well-being (Counterpoint Research, 2008; Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; Morgan, 2010; Soutter, 2011).

The current study follows on from research carried out in New Zealand. As mental well-being is largely a subjective experience, we believe a phenomenological approach could help us to obtain a new understanding of contentment in adolescents. Our objective is to identify the key themes in adolescent boys' experiences of well-being, and to establish what helps them and what stops them from feeling "chilled".

Methods

Participants

The research sample consisted of male pupils aged 16 to 18 from two grammar school classes and two technical school classes. The sample contained a total of 63 students, including 26 boys in the first to third grades of upper secondary school. The participants were placed in four focus groups—five first grade grammar school students (group A) and five third grade grammar school students pupils (group B), seven second grade technical school students

(group C) and nine third grade technical school pupils (group D). Participation in the focus groups was completely voluntary, and underage students had their parents sign the informed consent form. The participants were notified of the purpose and subject of the research in advance. The schools in this study were selected out of convenience.

Procedure

The data-collection method used was semi-structured focus groups. These are an appropriate choice where the research goal is to understand how a specific group of people makes sense of how they experience certain phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this case, adolescent boys were the specific group and the phenomena was their well-being. The use of focus groups allows participants to reflect on their own experience and speak freely on the subject. The researcher or moderator makes sure the participants stick to the subject and enables them to express their thinking.

In both the Slovak schools (the grammar school and the technical school) the director randomly selected two classes, and the participants were recruited from these. The pupils in the selected classes received informed consent forms explaining the nature and purpose of the research. Underage pupils had to obtain a parental signature. Only pupils who were willing to participate and who brought signed informed consent forms were able to attend the focus groups.

The discussions in the semi-structured focus groups were recorded with the participants' knowledge and consent. The focus groups were held in the school building during regular school hours and lasted the length of a lesson – 45 minutes. The moderator (the first author of this study) had prepared three main topics for the discussion:

- What does "being chilled" mean to them?
- Who or what makes them or helps them feel "chilled"?
- Who or what stops them from feeling "chilled"?

The recordings of the focus group discussions were transcribed word for word and subsequently analyzed using a qualitative approach.

Data analysis

We used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify the key themes in our data on how adolescent boys experience and think about what makes them feel chilled. This method is suited to analyzing data gathered through individual in-depth interviews. Although Smith (2004), who developed IPA has expressed caution about applying it to data gathered through focus groups, it has already been used to analyze focus group data on its own (Dunne & Quayle, 2001) and in conjunction with individual interviews (Flowers, Duncan, & Knussen, 2003). There are certain limitations regarding the use of IPA with this type of data, specifically that the idiographic principle is marginally compromised as it provides less nuanced insights into the individual's lived experience.

Despite these issues regarding the use of IPA on our type of data, the validity of our findings is supported by the fact that theme saturation was achieved, based on rich data containing descriptions of subjective phenomena and their commonalities in the

participants' reflected experiences. When performing the analysis, the initial list of themes was independently compiled by the two authors of this study, and these were combined afterwards. The final list of master themes and subthemes was compiled on a consensus basis. Thus our chosen methods of validation were saturation of findings and independent coding by the two researchers.

Results

After the initial reading of the transcripts, a list of emergent themes was compiled. This list consisted of the themes of carelessness, obstacles of external reality, selfhood and self-regulation, leisure activities, and positive and negative relationships. Further reading of the transcripts enabled us to find patterns and connect emergent themes. This resulted in a list of the master themes (Table 1) that had emerged out of each of our focus groups. There were no significant differences between the grammar school and technical school students or between the classes. The only notable difference was that the technical school students were keen on driving and cars, while the grammar school students were generally more interested in sport. Saturation of results was achieved during the analysis of the fourth focus group, as no additional theme or subtheme emerged.

Table 1. Master themes and their sources

Master theme	Arising from
Need to escape from the world of social roles and expectations	Discrepancy between desires and duties as a barrier to pursuing long-term goals Indifference as protection against work overload
Tension reduction	Mental tension released by physical activity Clear mind—feeling of ease and being in the here and now
Search for latitude and potency	Barrier-free microcosmic playfield Need for physical self-improvement Positive relationships with adults that disburden them of their responsibilities Absence of structure in peer-group activities
Distrust in relationships	Inability to establish close relationships Insincerity Distrust
Involuntary participation in relationships resulting from a social role	Unwillingness to knowingly work on improving relationships Family relationships as a necessity

The need to escape from the world of social roles and expectations

One of the main well-being topics discussed by the adolescent boys was the need to escape from the world of social roles and expectations. A key source of ill-being was the

discrepancy between the adolescents' desires and duties. Their response to adults who insisted the adolescents perform their duties was one of anger and ill-being. This concerned both teachers' demands of students, and parents' demands of their sons.

> *It is like… If I was prepared for class, okay, then the teacher wouldn't get on my nerves… but because I am not prepared for that class and don't know anything, he gets on my nerves.* (Frederik D165-169)

> *Well, sometimes my parents get on my nerves...it depends - my mom always wants to keep the house clean and my father gets on my nerves in many ways.* (Andrej A99-104)

Duties the adolescents thought most onerous included getting up early for school, walking the dog, tidying up or studying for exams. They thought that studying was the most onerous of all. They found it very difficult to exert self-control and to concentrate on studying. They often abandoned their duties to engage in passive activities (e.g. sleeping, doing nothing). The adolescents most often called this laziness, moodiness, or disinterest.

> *What can ruin my mood? Getting up.* (Ľuboš A146)

> *Laziness a little bit. When I'm studying, everything else is more interesting.* (Frederik D108-109)

> *Moodiness maybe...when I wake up in a bad mood, I am like that all day...until something happens that could change it… but that doesn't usually happen…all of us have days when we wake up in the morning and don't want to get out of bed and would like just to stay at home and in bed…so maybe moodiness.* (Adam C243-248)

> *Hmm, I wouldn't say disinterest...because when somebody takes everything seriously, they might explode but if you don't care, you just don't care.* (Dávid C178-181)

Disinterest and indifference to studying were a means of protection for the adolescents – a way of coping with external tension. This meant they lacked long-term goals and were insecure about the future. The topic most mentioned by the adolescents was fear of failing at school.

> *I discovered that when I don't study I get the same grades as when I do.* (Peter C233-234)

> *It works from the beginning...but when I start planning...then I am like – what's meant to happen, will happen...when it's spontaneous or like…because when you've planned something and it goes wrong, you'll be really pissed off… so I feel carefree when something goes wrong when there was no planning more than if the planning some ruined my plans for Friday or Saturday.* (Michal B189-199)

> *Sure. I usually think about what's going to happen after I finish school. Of course I'm afraid about what's going to happen.* (Frederik D122-124)

Tension reduction

School stress, insecurity regarding the future and anger at demands and social pressure were related to general ill-being. The adolescents saw ill-being as a mental state that produced tension. They tried to eliminate the mental tension through physical activity. Working out at

the gym, doing any kind of sport (football in most cases) or going for a walk were all means of releasing tension.

Sport, to let off steam – in a physical way at the gym. (Erik C31-32)

I play football, I like working out, training – in general. (Patrik B35-36)

The adolescent boys associated the release of mental tension through physical activity with feeling chilled and being in the here and now. Exercising was an opportunity for them to relax, think of something else. Thanks to exercising they had "pure mind" afterwards and were feeling chilled.

When you arrive there [at the gym], you already feel chilled. The atmosphere is different. And then it gets even better. (Erik C96-98)

You know, you can think about different stuff there [at the gym]. You just unwind, relax and forget everything there – stress, everything. And when you leave that place, you're thinking positively and so… you have a clear head and feel at peace in that way. (Dávid C39-43)

I feel happy when I feel chilled and have clear mind – when I am in the country. (Patrik B25-27)

Search for latitude and potency

The adolescent boys repeatedly stated they wanted to have their own personal space where pleasure can be derived from the absence of external barriers. This was most apparent in their description of their favorite solitary activities such as driving, which fits with the metaphor of being in the driving seat. They escape the expectations of social reality to submerge themselves in their own microcosmic playfield, mostly through interaction with the external world, but also through fantasy and contemplation. In this microcosmic playfield, they can establish a greater sense of control over their own reality.

I feel chilled when I can do what I want, when I can be where I want and when I want, when nobody is forcing me into anything and when I can be with whom I want. When I can just drive or ride a quad bike. When I'm with friends or when I'm relaxing at home. (Matej C22-26)

I feel fine when I'm just lying in bed thinking about lots of different stuff. I feel best when I come from the gym, take a shower and lie in my bed. (Erik C14-17)

Well, I just play some music and listen… when I'm driving my car and the streets are empty. I just drive at my own pace and listen to music. (Marcel C120-123)

Experiencing control and potency can often, but need not, overlap in the boys' preferred activities. Driving a car might involve both, while in activities like extreme sports the emphasis is on potency. The same applies to income from a part-time job or the self-improvement aspect of exercising at the gym that goes with releasing tension, but this was less emphasized in their verbal reports. However, the ephemerality of this kind of gratification is also hinted at by one participant.

Well, I'd like to add that I feel happy when I'm doing what I want and that's extreme sports, for instance, and sports in general, really. And I'm most happy when it's warm outside and I can ride a motorcycle or a bike. (Miroslav B58-64)

(Your job makes you feel chilled?) Yeah, when nobody's there. The money just keeps coming. I work in a pub. (Why do you feel like that about it? Because you're alone, you can do what you want and you get paid for it?). Yes. Because I don't do anything, I get the money – that's a good feeling. Then comes the evening and I have to work. That's not fine. Only when I get a tip, then it's fine. (Nikolas D71-80)

I'm thinking… I don't know… we go to the gym sometimes. There was a time when I worked out regularly and when I had finished, I was fine. I had a good feeling about myself. Now it's gone. (Frederik D37-41)

This need for personal space and to experience latitude and potency is accompanied by a preference for less demanding teachers who put less emphasis on schoolwork in general, not just in the sense of having higher standards regarding student performance.

He [teacher] tells some of his stories and so... doesn't care about the lesson... then he teaches for the remaining ten minutes of class and that's it. (Nikolas D160-161)

A similar phenomenon could be seen when one participant was asked about the positive aspects of his relationship with his mother and he mentioned her willingness to absolve him from the housework.

(Do your family help you feel chilled?) Sure, my mother. (How?) She cooks, cleans the house... gives me money. (Nikolas D55-58)

In peer relationships, groups seem to be preferred over being in a pair with a friend or girlfriend. Having a sense of their value in a wider group was generally more important than being close to a single person. The boys referred to shared time spent with their peer group as "doing nothing", as opposed to doing something, that is, fulfilling the social roles they struggle to incorporate into their identities. "Doing nothing" usually meant hanging out with friends and drinking alcohol. There were a few exceptions, but structured activities (such as team sports, board games, watching movies) were not mentioned.

What's great about it [spending time with a group of friends]? For me personally, it's that I know that if something happens or I need help, they'll be there for me just like I'm here for them in their time of need. And when they're with me somewhere, in a car for instance... I know they're there for a reason. If they didn't want to be there, they wouldn't be there. (Marcel C52-58)

It's a comforting feeling when you can be with someone [girlfriend] you like very much… just like that, at home. All day… doing nothing. Doing nothing and just being with that person, that's the best feeling in my opinion. … Or it's even better when the two of you have friends in common. (Richard C196-204)

(What do you do with your friends?) Nothing… we just… nothing specific. We go out, have a drink. (Erik D19-21)

In the focus groups, the participants had difficulty further elaborating on what "doing nothing" constituted experientially. This was the case both in the technical school and the grammar school. Though shame and inhibition could also have been factors, we consider this to be largely due to the lack of verbal symbols available for describing this experience. The nature of the activity—hanging out, alcohol, "just talking"—indicates that the aim is to act out impulses and therefore it is difficult to reflect on it retrospectively.

Distrust in relationships

Not all relationships are a source of latitude and well-being for the adolescent boys. Adolescents often claimed that they were surrounded by dishonest people who lie to them, distort their words, manipulate them, and are false and malicious. They felt they could not trust such people. They were uncomfortable around those who wanted to be in the spotlight. This group included classmates in the main, but also teachers and friends.

> *For example, my class teacher doesn't support us – she is… I don't know how to describe her… she says something to you and then you go round the corner and she'll suddenly say you're an idiot.* (Patrik B143-151)

> *For me it's disturbing when somebody who...usually people who want to make an overall impression on that type of group and they disturb the peaceful atmosphere in this way.* (Sebastián B78-102)

> *Or when somebody tells you something you know is true, but he claims it isn't. You saw it somewhere or I don't know, you read it somewhere and somebody else claims that it isn't true. When he thinks he knows everything. I'm not blaming anybody, I'm just saying. Even your friend might do it – you know he's lying.* (Dávid C219-225*)*

> *Or when you tell somebody something and he tells it in a totally different way to somebody else. And this false version spreads. And then everybody thinks it's true. That can really piss me off – sorry.* (Ľubo C226-229)

Involuntary participation in relationships stemming from a social role

Adolescents felt good among peers whom they had chosen as friends. Relationships with classmates who were simply placed in the same class were considered essential to the role of student. They were not willing to knowingly take part in strengthening these formal relationships. In each class, the boys formed close relationships with a few friends they got on well with, and with whom they shared common interests. But there was a lack of supporting climate, a sense of belonging.

> *What do I look forward to at school? To Erik. I'm not gay, but we are good buddies.* (Frederik D173-175)

> *I don't want to talk about this in public. We aren't used to being together like this.* (Marek D139-141)

We observed similar perceptions of family relationships among some of the adolescents. Relationships with some family members were seen as a habit or unavoidable necessity due to expectations and social pressure. They felt uncomfortable in such relationships and were not willing to strengthen them and they contrasted them with the relationships they chose to have with their friends.

> *I would say it's a matter of habit. Because you can have somebody in the family you don't like that much or vice versa, but it's your family so you simply take it as it is. But if you have friends you don't like that much, they're just not your friends. So you can sort it out. You know, when for example somebody hurts you, you don't care about them anymore, right? But you can't do that in your family. Just because of social reasons, of how it would look.* (Peter C64-74)

Discussion

Based on the data gathered, we can state that the adolescent boys were relatively coherent in describing what they considered important for their well-being. As previous studies (Counterpoint Research, 2008; Morgan, 2010; Soutter, 2011) have found, the adolescents perceived relationships with other people, especially their parents and peers, to be an important source of well-being. Some theories on well-being (e.g. Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) emphasize the importance of feelings of intimacy, warmth, and trust in relationships, but this was less evident in the focus group discussions. Instead the adolescents emphasized feelings of freedom and latitude, often described as "doing nothing", in their relationships with peers, parents and those close to them. Time spent with peers mainly involved shared activities (e.g. exercise, driving, watching films). Counterpoint Research (2008) also found that activities with peers where there is no need to speak were vital to children's well-being. In this situation those involved co-exist in a shared world where understanding comes without verbal communication. Shared activities or sport provide a certain amount of freedom to children and adolescents and an opportunity to develop fellowships based on common interests. This seems to be essential to adolescent well-being (Shin & You, 2013; Soutter, 2011).

Notwithstanding a few exceptions, our participants did not mention structured activities (such as team sports, board games, watching movies). We could speculate that structure is purposefully avoided because of its association with expectations of social reality. This is apparent in the way the adolescent boys related to others. The adolescents liked parents and teachers who had no or very few expectations of them and provided them with space to relax and the opportunity to do what they want. The adolescent boys in general preferred relationships they had chosen themselves (friends) to relationships formed out of obligation (family, classmates).

Anger and ill-being were triggered in the adolescents through being instructed to carry out their duties. There was a characteristic discrepancy between the desire to do what they wanted and the social roles assigned to them. This phenomenon has been described by Erikson (1950). He states that adolescents are faced with adults making demands of them and with a predefined image of society where rules have to be observed. The adolescent boys in our sample longed for latitude and freedom, which are characteristic of childhood,

and they displayed an aversion to duties and responsibility. This is how cultural stereotypes portray young people and adolescents, and reflects research by Twenge (2014, 2017). She deduces that this is a result of permissive parenting, overly focusing on satisfying material needs and excessive praise. But it could also be the result of parents substituting for the lack of an emotional side (Counterpoint Research, 2008).

The adolescents had difficulty explaining the importance of their preferred activities; although they could be seen as protecting against excessive social pressures. Their comments about laziness, moodiness, doing nothing and sleeping contrast with the nature of social reality. The adolescents lacked the ability to positively explain the importance of activities that did not meet social expectations. In addition, there was no overall sense of goal pursuit. This was reflected in their concerns about the future and the absence of ideas as to what they would like to do in the future, which applied to both grammar school and technical school students alike.

The adolescents did not generally convey their own point of view when discussing the meaning and relevance of their preferred activities, which Seligman (2002) and Ryff and Keyes (1995) consider to be a factor of well-being. However, the adolescent boys did not directly indicate that they lacked meaning or fulfilment. They stated they had never discussed such topics, hence their difficulty in finding the appropriate words to express what they meant by "doing nothing". Physical activities such as working out or doing sport to eliminate stress and tension and to achieve a feeling of ease and being in the here and now were considered meaningful.

Our results support findings from previous studies concerning children's and adolescents' well-being that point to the importance of interpersonal relationships, enjoyment, leisure activities, freedom, and latitude (Counterpoint Research, 2008; Morgan, 2010; Soutter, 2011). In contrast to previous research, themes like health, spirituality, safety or self-esteem did not emerge. This may be due to differences in culture, gender, or generation. Our sample consisted of boys aged 16 to 18, whereas previous studies have included girls, children, and young people up to the age of 20. The absence of self-esteem in the verbal reports of our participants may be because this is less important in Slovak culture compared to more prototypical Western cultures, especially American culture, where self-esteem is a prevalent theme in public discourse and parenting (Twenge, 2014).

Limitations and recommendations

We consider our research to be an important source of information about the experience of well-being in adolescent boys; however, it does contain some limitations. The focus groups lasted for 45 minutes, which is a relatively short amount of time for a focus group discussion. One group did not have repeat meetings. The adolescents were recruited using self-selection, which is likely to have produced a specific sample. This method of selection also resulted in boys only being recruited, as no girl showed an interest in taking part. The boys commented during the research that they did not get on with the girls. They indicated that they would like to change that, but that the girls refused to talk to them. It would be beneficial to find out how adolescent girls differ from adolescent boys and the degrees to which their perception of well-being is similar to or different from that of boys.

Group dynamics can have a potential impact, and this proved to be the case to a certain extent in our research. The adolescent boys in the focus groups were also classmates, so they were hesitant about discussing matters related to class relationships when the subject was spontaneously brought up. The moderator also had to intervene significantly on some occasions to ensure the discussion stayed on topic. As the conversations were held in groups, the adolescents tended to reply in a socially desirable way. The presence of their peers could be one reason the boys' comments lacked the intimacy and fervency that is reflective of relationship patterns. Instead they emphasized latitude and freedom, which might be perceived as a more socially desirable reply. Another limitation was the adolescents' varied abilities to reflect on their experiences. The kind of school they attended (technical school or grammar school) did not determine this.

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