

# Sense of Community and Life Satisfaction in Chilean Adolescents

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**Abstract** This study aims to contribute to the understanding of life satisfaction in Chilean adolescents, integrating dimensions regarding the relationship between the individual and their community environment. Specifically, this study examines the contribution that variables such as sense of community have on life satisfaction, examining the association between sense of community and overall life satisfaction. During the 2014/2015 school year, 438 adolescents between 1st and 4th year of their high school from 7 municipalities in 3 regions of Chile participated in the study. The instruments used were the Sense of Community Scale, and the Personal Well-being Index – School Children (PWI-SC). The analysis included descriptive and multivariate analyses. The main results indicate that the sense of community is significantly associated with life satisfaction, even when controlling for demographic variables. In addition, the two sense of community subscales were also associated with life satisfaction. These preliminary findings support the hypothesis that the perception of community variables influences the assessment that adolescents have on their lives. The discussion includes the implications for future research and community psychology in developing countries.

**Keywords** Sense of community · Life satisfaction · Chile · Adolescents

## Introduction

With the aim of improving the available knowledge on the determinants of well-being in childhood and adolescence as a whole (Ben-Arieh 2008), and particularly in the Latin American population, we suggest integrating dimensions that go beyond personal

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or interpersonal variables that leave the individual isolated from his/her environment (Díaz et al. 2011). According to this integrated approach, we hope to contribute in this way, like other authors such as Sarriera (2015), and Sarriera and Bedin (2015) who developed a socio-community well-being model, including variables related to the feeling of belonging to the community and satisfaction with the environment to the traditional dimensions of well-being.

All of which in turn echo the approach of Prillelstenky (2004), which states that individuals find optimal conditions to achieve well-being when personal, relational and collective needs are addressed together. In particular, considering the developments proposed by Prillelstenky (2004), which show how fundamental psychological needs to experience a sense of personal well-being cannot be achieved in isolation, requiring the presence of supportive relationships, respect for diversity, a sense of equality, and meaningful participation in the family, work and civic and community life. Thus, achieving higher levels of personal well-being require relational and collective spheres in order to be more integrated (Prillelstenky 2004).

## Well-Being in Adolescence

The conceptual field of well-being research integrates three perspectives: the psychological, subjective and social (Blanco and Valera 2007). In the present study, we will specifically deal with subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is defined as a tripartite category of phenomena that includes positive and negative emotions and the degree of life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1999). Affective components are based on emotional responses that, although short-lived and fluctuating, are representative of the nature of everyday life (Gilman et al. 2000). Meanwhile, life satisfaction is understood as a global cognitive assessment of a person's quality of life in light of their circumstances (Diener and Suh 1997; Seligson et al. 2003). Moreover, it expresses the degree, relative to a present state but not momentary, to which they positively evaluate their life as a whole (Veenhoven 1994) or with reference to specific environments, such as family, friends or school (Huebner 2004; Seligson et al. 2005).

The literature reports that high levels of life satisfaction positively correlate with physical and mental health, good interpersonal relationships, and educational and professional success (Park 2004). On the other hand, life satisfaction correlates negatively with risk behaviors, such as substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs), violence, aggression and sexual victimization (Proctor et al. 2009). Various studies carried out in adolescent populations report that low life satisfaction correlates positively with depressive symptoms, violent and aggressive behavior, substance abuse, suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem and lack of harmony in social relationships (Furr and Funder 1998; Suldo and Huebner 2004; Valois et al. 2004; Valois et al. 2009; Zullig et al. 2001).

Different authors agree that the study of subjective well-being in children and adolescents presents some difficulties that other groups, such as adults, do not have. Indicators of subjective well-being in adolescents vary not only in terms of contextual variables, but also because of the development of the self-concept in adolescence (Casas 2010a; Frønes 2007). In this sense, we cannot assume that the results with adult samples can be extrapolated to younger populations, even though they belong to the

same socio-cultural context (Ben-Arieh 2008; Lau and Bradshaw 2010; Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Casas 2010b). Despite the importance of having measuring tools aimed at younger populations, there are very few publications on this topic. The development of this area would help to identify the factors related to individual differences in the perception of well-being (Huebner and Gilman 2002; Seligson et al. 2003, 2005), as well as the identification of risk subgroups in order to ensure the adequate provision of support and resources that governments can offer (Tomyn and Cummins 2011).

Since subjective well-being is a key component in achieving positive mental health and an important determinant of many positive results in the lives of children and adolescents, it is important to incorporate these measures into countries' educational and social programs (Cereceda 2012; Proctor et al. 2009). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF 2010) recommends the use of subjective well-being measures in public programs. They propose that the development of policies and programs for children and adolescents must include knowledge of this group's condition, as the target of said actions.

As in other fields of knowledge, the vast majority of research on subjective well-being comes from developed world contexts, especially from Europe and the United States (Casas et al. 2014b; Tiliouine 2015). Instead, research on this topic in developing countries is rather scarce (Lau et al. 2005; Siyez and Kaya 2008; Tiliouine et al. 2006; Webb 2009). Currently, thanks to the *International Survey on Children's Well-Being* (ISCWeB), several publications are available since 2013 changing the scenario of research related to subjective well-being. These efforts contributed to expand children's subjective well-being research in different countries sharing its results in academic, professional, and public policies contexts (Ben-Arieh 2013).

In Latin America, different research reports have contributed to disseminate its findings. In Brazil, Sarriera et al. (2014) published "*Children's Well-Being and Associated Psychosocial Factors*," and, in Chile, Alfaro et al. (2016) contributed with a national study of children subjective well-being based on the first wave of the ISCWeB. Other Chilean contribution to this research field included articles of psychometric properties of the *Personal Well-Being Index* (PWI; Alfaro et al. 2013), and the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS; Alfaro et al. 2015). Also, Rees and Dinisman (2014) reported international differences among countries participants (Algeria, Brazil, Chile, England, Israel, Romania, South-Africa, South Korea, Spain, Uganda, and United States) in the ISCWeB first wave related to children's life conditions, how children spend their time, life satisfaction, and assessments of different domains of their lives.

## Sense of Community

The sense of community concept refers to beliefs and attitudes about neighbors and the neighborhood (McMillan and Chavis 1986), being conscious of community members' perceptions, attitudes and feelings regarding their relationships and interactions with their everyday belonging context (Elvas and Moniz 2010). Essentially it puts focus on the interdependence that is built on the relationship between individuals and the expectations some people have relative to others (Pretty et al. 1994). Where attachment or emotional bonding to the neighborhood are essential traits, which assumes that

community members care about their neighborhood and, likewise, that the community cares for its members (Cantillon et al. 2003). Thus, the sense of community aims to highlight that people are part of a network of mutually supportive relationships that are always available and to which they depend (Sarason 1974). Therefore, if sense of belonging changes it implies a modification of feelings of sense of community experienced in the neighborhood.

The available evidence associates the sense of community with the well-being of a person, reporting positive relationships between integration into the neighborhood of residence and the psychological well-being and health of its members (Cohen et al. 2000; Delgado et al. 2012; Gracia and Herrero 2006). As reported by Farrell et al. (2004), there are positive correlations between low measures of subjective well-being, low mental health and lack of sense of community. Likewise, the sense of belonging to the neighborhood (Cicognani et al. 2008) and community participation have shown positive associations with Psychological Well-being (Herrero and Gracia 2007).

In a study conducted in Brazil, children who reported a greater sense of community with their neighborhood and community, obtained higher subjective well-being scores compared to those who showed little integration with their community (Rodrigues et al. 2014). Cicognani et al. (2014) observed a direct relationship between participation in community organizations and youth wellness, as well as mediational effect of sense of community and empowerment. Elvas and Moniz (2010) found that children and young people in a historic neighborhood of Lisbon showed higher levels of satisfaction, greater quality of life, elevated citizen participation in the neighborhood, and higher sense of community compared to people of the same age of younger neighborhood. In a more recent study, it was found that adolescents who reported receiving more social support, higher level of empowerment, and feeling more connected to their neighborhood, they showed more satisfaction with their life (Delgado et al. 2012).

## The Present Study

Despite the notable and important advancement of scientific production on well-being in childhood and adolescence, there are still some areas that have been insufficiently developed, to which this study aims to contribute. Firstly, it is required to advance the study of psychological states and determinants associated with the different dimensions of well-being in children and adolescents, particularly in developing countries. The evidence available on these populations has still far to reach the production volume associated with adults (Casas et al. 2012; Tomy and Cummins 2011). Secondly, the study of well-being in childhood and adolescence could be benefited from the inclusion of factors that come from the meso-systemic level. In particular, it is relevant to examine the relationships of concepts associated with the mesosystem, such as the sense of community. Their inclusion in the study of well-being would advance the ecological and multilevel understanding of well-being (Ben-Arieh 2008), integrating contextual dimensions that jointly consider personal, relational and collective needs (Prillelstenky 2004).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of life satisfaction in adolescents, integrating dimensions that contribute to the understanding of the relationship between

the individual and their community environment. Specifically, the present study examines the contribution that sense of community has on life satisfaction, as well as analyzing the specific contribution of sense of community dimensions have with overall life satisfaction. Thus, the questions that guide this research are as follows:

- Is there an association between sense of community and overall life satisfaction in Chilean adolescents?
- To what extent does the sense of community dimensions are associated with and overall life satisfaction in Chilean adolescents?

## Method

### Participants

Study participants consisted of 438 adolescents (37.5% women) – enrolled in grades between 1st and 4th year of secondary education. Students were from 7 urban neighborhoods from 3 regions of Chile during the 2014/2015 school year. Participant ages ranged from 14 to 19 years ( $M = 15.8$  years;  $SD = 1.21$ ), and came from three socio-economic levels (39.8% from lower level, 37.1% from midlevel, and 23.2% from higher level).

### Procedure

The questionnaire containing scales used in the study was administered as part of the data collection from a research project funded by the Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile. The research project's original objective was to adapt and validate various scales of subjective well-being and other psychosocial variables relevant to the study of the quality of life of adolescents aged between 14 and 19 years that were enrolled in secondary education. No participants were compensated, and all the surveys collected were anonymous. Ethical research protocols (similar to IRB standards) were met with particular emphasis on the confidentiality of the information produced, the informed consent of the participating schools, the assent of adolescents, and the consent of parents or guardians.

### Instruments

**Personal Well-Being Index for School Children (PWI-SC)** Cummins et al. (2003) developed the Personal Well-being Index for Adults (PWI-A) where each of its items corresponds to a different quality of life domain (e.g., interpersonal relationships, standard of living). Based on the PWI-A, Cummins and Lau (2005) developed the Personal Well-being Index for School Children (PWI-SC), which contains 7 items and was adapted to be administered to children and adolescents aged between 5 and 18 years in the school setting.

The PWI-SC uses questions about different satisfaction domains (Alfaro et al. 2015). Students responded using an 11-point scale where “0” is “Completely Dissatisfied” and

“10” is “Completely Satisfied”. In each domain, the following question was answered: "Currently, to what extent are you happy with each of the following things or aspects of your life?" Domains evaluated were: (1) “your health”; (2) "the things you want to be good at (excel)"; (3) "your relationships with people in general"; (4) "how safe you feel"; (5) "the things you do outside your house"; (6) "what can happen to you later in your life"; (7) "everything that you have". The Cronbach’s alpha for this study was 0.81.

**Sense of Community Scale** This study used the version of 18 items developed by Sánchez (2001) considering different aspects of the assessment a person makes on the community (neighborhood/location) where they live and ties they have with its members (e.g., “My neighbors often help me if I need it”; “I have roots here”). This scale can be utilized as unidimensional measure (sum of 18-items score), or using three subscales (neighborhood interaction, territorial belongingness, and interdependence). In the current study, the instrument was administered with a 7-point Likert scale where “0” corresponds to “strongly disagree” and “6” to “strongly agree”. This scale obtained high reliability in its overall form in this study (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.93), and acceptable reliability in its three subscales (neighborhood interaction, alpha = 0.87; territorial belongingness, alpha = 0.80; and interdependence, alpha = 0.72).

**Demographic Variables** The administered questionnaire included questions on socio-demographic information such as age (continuous variable), gender (male/female), degree of study (1st to 4th years) and socioeconomic status. In the case of socioeconomic status, the analysis considered three categories (high, medium and low) obtained from the recoding of the school vulnerability score developed by an agency of the Chilean Ministry of Education, which has high correspondence with family income levels.

## Data Analysis

The total sample has 15 fewer cases because they had more than 20% of missing values in their responses. Several variables had missing data, although the frequency of missing data was less than 5%, therefore their values were imputed with the median of each item. Lost data analysis used the multiple imputation procedure to make use of all available data. Missing data were imputed using the function *Missing Values Analysis* of the IBM SPSS 21.0 statistical package (Graham 2012).

The study’s data analyses included different statistical analyses. Firstly, the analysis included comparison of means (*t*-test, one-way ANOVA) according to demographic variables, and correlations between study variables. Next we analyzed the association between variables using linear regression controlling for demographic variables. Finally, we also tested specific contributions of sense of community subscales using linear regression controlling for demographic variables. Statistical analysis was implemented with the Stata 14.1 software.

## Results

### Descriptive Analysis

The comparison of averages using *t*-tests for independent samples established that there are statistically significant differences according to sex in two of the five studied variables. Women obtained significantly lower averages than men in life satisfaction and neighborhood interaction (see Table 1).

Meanwhile, the comparison of means by one-way ANOVA established that there were no statistically significant differences among school grades, although there were differences with socioeconomic status in the life satisfaction variable. Those who belonged to the medium socioeconomic level obtained significantly higher means regarding life satisfaction compared to the higher and lower levels (see Table 2).

### Correlations

The correlation analysis showed statistically significant correlations in all variable combinations ( $p < .001$ ). The correlation observed between sense of community and life satisfaction was  $r = .30$ . Correlation among sense of community subscale were significant as expected (see Table 3).

### Multiple Linear Regression Models

The analysis included the evaluation of four regression models that assessed the association and the main effects with life satisfaction (see Table 4 and Table 5). Model 1, without controlling for demographic variables, explained 9% of life satisfaction variability ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ;  $F_{(1, 481)} = 47.08$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In the analysis of main effects, sense of community ( $\beta = 0.30$ ;  $t = 6.86$ ;  $p < .001$ ) had a direct and statistically significant association with life satisfaction.

Demographic variables were controlled in Model 2. This model explained a 14.8% variability with life satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.14$ ;  $F_{(4, 478)} = 20.78$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In the analysis of main effects, sense of community and sex variables had a direct and statistically significant association with life satisfaction (see Table 4). This indicates that those with a greater sense of community, and who are males, have a statistically significant

**Table 1** Mean comparisons of assessed variables according to sex

Variable	PWI-SC <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Sense of community (TOTAL) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Neighborhood Interaction <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Territorial Belongingness <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Inter-dependence <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<i>Sex</i>					
Female	7.45 (1.53)	59.14 (23.08)	21.24(10.19)	11.79(6.71)	15.97(4.92)
Male	8.19 (1.23)	62.31 (22.98)	23.38(9.89)	12.79(6.43)	15.80(5.11)
<i>t</i> -test	$t = -5.78^{***}$		$t = -2.27^*$	$t = -1.63$	$t = 0.34$

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 2** Mean comparisons of evaluated variables according to course year and socioeconomic status

Variable	PWI-SC	Sense of community	Neighborhood Interaction	Territorial Belongingness	Inter-dependence
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
<i>High School Grade</i>					
1st	7.94 (1.45)	61.64 (23.03)	22.73 (9.86)	12.29 (6.82)	16.04 (4.89)
2nd	7.85 (1.52)	61.48 (24.65)	22.37 (10.82)	13.03 (6.52)	15.89 (5.43)
3rd	7.75 (1.34)	61.75 (22.97)	23.36 (9.96)	12.41 (6.03)	15.67 (5.15)
4th	8.16 (1.10)	58.61 (22.55)	21.55 (9.38)	11.75 (6.62)	15.70 (4.63)
$F_{(3, 479)}$	1.43	0.37	0.52	0.66	0.15
<i>Diff.</i>	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Socioeconomic status</i>					
Low (L)	7.61 (1.46)	58.82 (23.53)	21.48 (10.19)	12.39 (6.35)	15.54 (4.78)
Medium (M)	8.27 (1.10)	62.52 (22.85)	23.31 (9.78)	12.54 (6.66)	15.93 (5.18)
High (H)	7.85 (1.57)	62.84 (23.57)	23.28 (10.12)	12.24 (6.72)	16.31 (5.23)
$F_{(2, 480)}$	11.08***	1.57	1.90	0.08	0.87
<i>Diff.</i>	M > L & H	–	–	–	–

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

association with the dependent variable. School grade and socioeconomic status variables showed no direct association with the dependent variable.

The analysis also assessed sense of community subscales association with life satisfaction (see Table 5). Model 1, without controlling for demographic variables, explained 9.7% of life satisfaction variability ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ;  $F_{(3, 479)} = 17.11$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In the analysis of main effects, neighborhood interaction ( $\beta = 0.23$ ;  $t = 3.06$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and interdependence ( $\beta = 0.14$ ;  $t = 2.13$ ;  $p < .05$ ) had a direct and statistically significant association with life satisfaction.

Demographic variables were controlled in Model 2. This model explained a 15.7% variability with life satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ;  $F_{(6, 476)} = 14.78$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In the analysis of main effects, neighborhood interaction, interdependence, and sex variables had a direct and statistically significant association with life satisfaction (see Table 5). This indicates that those with a stronger community connections, and who are males, have a statistically significant association with the dependent variable. Territorial belongingness,

**Table 3** Intercorrelation matrix among the assessed variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Life satisfaction	–				
2. Sense of community	.30***	–			
3. Neighborhood Interaction	.27***	.84***	–		
4. Territorial Belongingness	.23***	.90***	.67***	–	
5. Interdependence	.30***	.94***	.71***	.77***	–

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 4** Association between sense of community on overall life satisfaction controlled by demographic variables ( $N = 483$ )

Variables	$R^2$	$\beta$	$t$
<i>Model 1: unadjusted for demographic variables</i>	0.09***		
Sense of Community		0.30	6.86***
<i>Model 2: adjusted for demographic variables</i>	0.15***		
Sense of Community		0.28	6.63***
Sex		0.23	5.41***
Grade		0.03	0.77
Socioeconomic status		0.05	0.05

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

school grade, and socioeconomic status variables showed no direct association with the dependent variable.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to (1) analyze the contribution of sense of community to life satisfaction in Chilean adolescents; and (2) analyze the specific contribution of sense of community subscales with overall life satisfaction in Chilean adolescents. The first objective suggests that there is a direct and statistically significant association between the sense of community and life satisfaction, even when controlling for demographic variables.

In the second objective, two of three sense of community subscales were confirmed as variables significantly associated with overall life satisfaction. This result confirms

**Table 5** Association between sense of community subscales on overall life satisfaction controlled by demographic variables ( $N = 483$ )

Variables	$R^2$	$\beta$	$t$
<i>Model 1: unadjusted for demographic variables</i>	0.10***		
Neighborhood Interaction		0.23	3.06**
Territorial Belongingness		-0.04	-0.55
Interdependence		0.14	2.13*
<i>Model 2: adjusted for demographic variables</i>	0.16***		
Neighborhood Interaction		0.17	2.35*
Territorial Belongingness		-0.04	-0.59
Interdependence		0.18	2.88**
Sex		0.24	5.52***
Grade		0.03	0.74
Socioeconomic status		0.04	0.98

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

the evidence presented in the introduction of this study. In particular, it supports the idea that the perception of the sense of community has a positive effect that enhances the overall assessment that adolescents make about their lives. It is salient that territorial belongingness was not significantly associated with life satisfaction which suggests that Chilean students are less involved with their territories and urban spaces. However, adolescents reported a significant association between their community relationships (neighborhood interactions, and interdependence) with life satisfaction which reinforces the idea of showing more identification with their human interactions instead of neighborhood “culture.”

Results suggest that life satisfaction has more variation when it is associated with the sense of community subscales related to neighborhood interaction and interdependence among members of a community. On the other hand, there is no variation regarding the dimensions of this construct relative to territorial belongingness.

This outcome opens opportunities to persevere in studies of the different levels of adolescent subjectivity that are related to their life satisfaction in their daily lives. In particular, it is salient that the dimensions that have variation (interaction and interdependence) refer to micro social dimensions. Unlike the subscale that does not show variation (territorial belongingness) that refers to and is characteristic of a systemic mesolevel, relative to the subjective experience of being a part, to have a membership, roots, and identification with collective traditions of the neighborhood.

Additionally, these findings could have theoretical implications necessary to deepen, concerning the weight of the collective and mesosystemic levels in the individual processes of evaluation of life conditions that is implied in the life satisfaction. It allows enriching the already mentioned research perspectives, such as those of Sarriera (2015), and Sarriera and Bedin (2015) that aim at the development of a well-being model that considers variables related to the feeling of belonging to the community. Gilman and Huebner (2003) indicated that it is possible to explain well-being better if along with interpersonal level dimensions include indicators of contexts related to community and other social environments, such as social participation and broadly daily life, as Casas and collaborators (2014a) mentioned in their work.

In social terms, these results could also have implications showing dynamics of social life typical of modern forms of modernity, which make societies more complex, generating new structures of risk and greater social fragmentation (Beck 1998). Moreover, the Chilean society also shares characteristics of modern society which has highly limited social and community bonds among individuals (Subirats et al. 2005).

Regarding the limitations of this study, the proportion of the sample partially reflects the socioeconomic and gender distribution of the adolescent population in Chile. These limitations need to be considered in similar studies. Additionally, several methodological challenges will be relevant to address in future studies. These include the use of more sophisticated statistical analyses to model the association between the proposed constructs and overall life satisfaction. In addition, the use of structural equation modeling with other variables as mediators would further enrich the findings of similar studies to the extent that the sample better reflects the income distribution of the study population.

From a conceptual aspect, this study could be strengthened by including two variations in new designs. The first variation is to fully use the concept of subjective well-being as a dependent variable including all of its components for measurement:

overall life satisfaction, positive and negative affects. The second variation is to include mental health variables in adolescents (externalizing and internalizing problems) in order to study the contribution of the sense of community to the variability of overall life satisfaction. Both variations facilitate the comparability of the obtained results with research from emerging fields such as socio-emotional health in schools and subjective well-being in adolescents (Vieno et al. 2007).

Finally, this study represents a preliminary contribution in research related sense of community and life satisfaction in Latin American countries, particularly in young people. To our knowledge, this study reinforces previous findings related to the association between socio-community variables and well-being (Sarriera and Bedin 2015) in the context of the Latin American community psychology. Thus, this study particularly helps to visualize the contributions of community psychology in understanding the variability of overall life satisfaction in adolescents.

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