

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

The happiest youth in the world?

Backman-Nord, Pia; Söderberg, Patrik; Forsman, Anna K.

Published in:
Nordic Psychology

DOI:
[10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264](https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264)

Published: 01/01/2021

Document Version
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

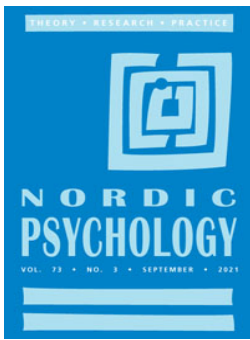
Backman-Nord, P., Söderberg, P., & Forsman, A. K. (2021). The happiest youth in the world? Exploring subjective well-being indicators among Finnish university students. *Nordic Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The happiest youth in the world? Exploring subjective well-being indicators among Finnish university students

Pia Backman-Nord, Patrik Söderberg & Anna. K. Forsman

To cite this article: Pia Backman-Nord, Patrik Söderberg & Anna. K. Forsman (2021): The happiest youth in the world? Exploring subjective well-being indicators among Finnish university students, Nordic Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264](https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2021.1996264>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 09 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 406



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The happiest youth in the world? Exploring subjective well-being indicators among Finnish university students

PIA BACKMAN-NORD¹, PATRIK SÖDERBERG¹ & ANNA. K. FORSMAN²

Correspondence address: Pia Backman-Nord, Department of Developmental Psychology/Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland. Email: pia.backman-nord@abo.fi

Abstract

This study examined characteristics of students who reported the highest level of happiness in “the happiest country in the world” (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), Finland. The study included 556 Finnish university students’ (of which 75% female) self-reported happiness level, relative to their self-esteem, social and academic competence, as well as demographic factors. According to the results, school success was not a condition for great happiness, whereas the students’ living situation proved to be an important factor. As predicted, a strong connection between a high level of happiness and high self-esteem was found, as well as a significant relationship between being socially skilled and very happy. The study also included an analysis of the students’ free self-descriptions, grouped into the McCrae and Costa’s (1991) Five-Factor Model of Personality. Theoretical as well as practical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: happiness, subjective well-being, youth, student, Finland

Introduction

To quote Lyubomirsky (2001): “... in almost every culture examined by researchers, people rank the pursuit of happiness as one of their most cherished goals in life.” Some concepts associated with happiness are joy, satisfaction, pleasantness, hedonic level and positive affect (Proctor et al., 2009). Veenhoven’s (2017) definition reads as follows: “Overall happiness is the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favorably. In other words: how much one likes the life one lives.” Brülde (2007) discusses four different conceptions of happiness: a hedonistic view, a cognitive (attitudinal) view, a mood (emotional state) view and a hybrid view.

Most frequently used in the field of happiness research (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006) is the umbrella term *subjective well-being* (SWB). As the term indicates, SWB aims to describe how and why people evaluate their lives in positive ways, including both cognitive judgments and affective reactions (Diener et al., 2009). The affective responses include both positive

¹Department of Developmental Psychology/Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland;

²Department of Health Sciences/Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland

and negative emotions, both playing a part in the overall experience of well-being. The cognitive area consists of one's own judgement of the quality of life, both globally and in different domains (family, friends, work...) and this cognitive component of SWB is often labeled life satisfaction, LS (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). In conclusion, SWB is defined as a combination of the emotions you experience every day, and how you interpret your life as a whole. In well-being research literature, the components of SWB are often used interchangeably, separately as well as together, to explain the term happiness (Proctor et al., 2009). Accordingly, we have chosen to use the term SWB, and its components, interchangeably with happiness in the current study.

Who is happy?

Is there such a concept as "a happy person"? As long as one universal definition of happiness does not exist, it is challenging to compare one subjectively reported happy individual to another. Conversely, if happiness truly is subjective, self-reports are an indispensable part of happiness research. Earlier research has shown that most people tend to report themselves as being happy (Diener & Diener, 1996; Myers, 2000). Diener and Diener (1996) presented a number of surveys from different parts of the world, in which few respondents' scores dropped below midpoint of the happiness scales. Several studies have shown that genetics play a considerable part in the individual experience of well-being. In their frequently cited article, Lykken and Tellegen (1996) estimated the heritability of SWB to approximately 50%. Bartels (2015) review shows a notable difference between heritability estimates of overall well-being, ranging from 0% to 64%, with an average of 36%.

Finland as one of the happiest

International studies are continuously aspiring to geographically rank the happiest people. One of the most noticed rankings is the UN's annual World Happiness Report, which has presented Finland as the happiest nation in the world four years in a row (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). What seems to make the Finnish population so content, according to these reports? The ranking is based on self-reports on quality of life, and explained by six factors: (1) Score of GDP per capita (in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, PPP), (2) Healthy life expectancy at birth (based on data by the World Health Organization, WHO), and self-reports on the topics of (3) Social support, (4) Freedom to make life choices, (5) Generosity (in terms of donating to charity) and (6) Corruption levels. Finland presented the highest score on reported life quality, with its citizens also reporting high levels of most the other factors, especially social support, with lack of corruption and satisfaction with freedom closely following. Taking lack of negative emotions into consideration, Finland has been scoring high as well. However, the nation has not been close to topping the list in self-reported positive affect. As an example, Finland reached spot 41 out of 156 in the 2019 report (Helliwell et al., 2019). Taking the cognitive and affective factors of SWB (Diener et al., 2009) into consideration: overall life satisfaction in combination with a relatively low level of negative emotions, rather than a considerable amount of positive emotions, is what classifies the Finnish people as explicitly happy.

The Finns' tendency to score high on life satisfaction is also manifested in the 2015 PISA well-being results (OECD, 2017), in which Finnish 15-year-olds scored second highest among

the European countries (fourth highest worldwide) on LS. In a longitudinal between nations-comparison including 30 countries by Cavallo et al. (2015), Finnish adolescents scored second highest on LS in 2002 and third highest in 2010. The European Social Survey (2015) places Finland in the top five in terms of "hedonic well-being" (combining two items on happiness and life-satisfaction) in their 2012/2013 round 6, exploring personal and social well-being. The Happy Planet Index (New Economics Foundation, 2016) uses data from the Gallup World Poll in order to score the experienced well-being of citizens in 140 countries. The 2016 ranking placed Finland in the top ten among the other Nordic countries in terms of self-reports on life satisfaction.

In their cross-cultural comparison of happiness, Diener et al. (2003) reported a significant difference between "highly industrialized, Western nations (e.g. Finland, Canada), and less industrialized, collectivist nations such as Cameroon and India." Another culture-oriented study (Diener & Diener, 1995), with Finland topping the list in terms of life satisfaction, concluded that in nations similar to Finland, where individual freedom and self-realization generally are highly valued (Diener et al., 2003), the mean levels of SWB are high, and satisfaction with self (a component of self-esteem) is clearly connected to overall life satisfaction.

A finding by Diener et al. (1995) was a strong correlation between societal equality and SWB. Finland's low levels of corruption and strong social support system (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) demonstrate high levels of societal equality. In a chapter of the World Happiness Report, devoted to explaining the exceptional Nordic happiness (Martela et al., 2020), a comprehensive effort is made to explain why the Nordic countries are repeatedly topping the WHR listing. High quality state institutions with focus on well-functioning democracy, often referred to as the Nordic welfare state, is suggested as a common key factor behind the phenomenon. This supports, among other studies, Delhey and Dragolov's (2016) findings on high social cohesion levels in the Nordics. In this context, social cohesion is defined by the society's resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. De Looze et al. (2018) studied societal gender equality connected to life satisfaction in Europe and North America. Their results expose that countries demonstrating high levels of gender equality, including Finland, also display high levels of adolescent life satisfaction.

Research on youth and SWB

Frequently used in the field of SWB studies among youth is measures of global life satisfaction. Similarly to research on adults and well-being, studies on youth and adolescents have shown that the majority of young people report being satisfied with their lives (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Huebner et al., 2000; Proctor et al., 2009). Positive and negative experiences affect the LS reports, earlier experiences as well as daily events. Demographic factors have weak impact on youth LS, as reported in Proctor et al. (2009) literature review. This includes gender differences. However, the effect of gender on youth SWB has been much debated and several studies have found correlations, for example, Cavallo et al. (2015) in their cross-national study. In Moksnes and Espnes study (2013), boys scored higher on both life satisfaction and self-esteem than girls, which supports the results of Goldbeck et al. (2007). The 2015 PISA well-being survey (OECD, 2017) also found boys more likely than girls to score high on LS. Self-esteem is often reported as one of the most significant correlates of global

LS in youth, although cultural differences have been found (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). Age may have a decreasing effect on LS and overall SWB when children reach adolescence (Cavallo et al., 2015; Chui & Wong, 2016; Goldbeck et al., 2007). Relationships are important to adolescents as well as to adults. Some studies (Huebner et al., 2000) suggest girls are more satisfied with their peer relationships than boys. Additionally, family relations (family composition, parental social support, etc.) may have a greater impact than peer relations on young people (Gilman & Huebner, 2003).

Academic skills and happiness

Several studies have found correlations between happiness and school success (Antaramian, 2017; Gilman & Huebner, 2006), with happy students scoring higher than others on academic achievement, academic aspirations, attitude towards education and school satisfaction (Proctor et al., 2010). Huebner et al. (2000) also found modest correlations between gender and school satisfaction, with girls scoring higher than boys. However, the findings on school success and SWB are somewhat debated. A high level of education does not seem to correlate with one's level of happiness (Veenhoven, 2010), and high school graduates report to be equally happy as university graduates. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that while positive affect may lead to efficient problem-solving tasks, there is also a risk for the opposite: a happy mood might in certain situations decrease the problem-solving abilities. High IQ and cognitive abilities have shown little correlation with happiness, in contrast to emotional intelligence (Furnham & Petrides, 2003). As opposed to their fellow countrymen Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen (2010), Mangeloja and Hirvonen (2007) found no connection between academic success and Finnish students' happiness, and the 2015 PISA well-being survey (OECD, 2017) found the relationship between school performance and overall life satisfaction to be weak. However, adolescents who felt part of the school community and had good relations with the teachers were more likely to both perform better academically and be satisfied with their lives. Diener et al. (2009) concluded that moderate levels of happiness are the most advantageous for educational achievement. By contrast, Antaramian (2017) reported that the differences in academic advantages are only significant when comparing the most satisfied students to the rest – not when only comparing average satisfied students to unsatisfied ones.

A happy personality?

Personality is a broad concept, including hereditary and environmental influences, as well as learning characteristics (Garcia, 2011). Most researchers agree on personality traits playing a significant part in SWB (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener et al., 2009). Commonly used is McCrae and Costa's (1991) Five-factor model, consisting of the traits extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness. Out of these five, extraversion and neuroticism have in studies shown the strongest correlation with happiness, with extraversion positively and neuroticism and different types of chronic psychological distress negatively connected to SWB (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; McCrae & Costa, 1991). Agreeableness, a trait referring to the quality of an individual's interpersonal relations, have occasionally been found connected to happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Seligman, 2002), as well as openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 1991), and conscientiousness (Garcia,

2011), a trait describing efficient, competent and hardworking individuals (McCrae & Costa, 1991). In other words, researchers have found links to all five trait categories, showing SWB can be connected to many personality traits.

The role of social skills and relationships

One common feature for at least two of the five-factor personality traits is the focus on relations with other individuals. DeNeve and Cooper (1998) described the difference between the traits extraversion and agreeableness. They defined extraversion as a series of traits focused on the *quantity* and intensity of relationships, such as sociability, positive emotions and energy level, while agreeableness was defined by *quality* of relationships, including empathy and warmth. "Social skills" is included in extraversion in McCrae and Costa's (2010) model, indicating that the trait does not only mean being outgoing, but also being skilled in mastering social relations. Skilled or not, having close relationships and a good social support system is important for the feeling of psychological well-being, and people tend to report happy feelings when spending time with others (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Myers, 2000). Individuals who experience positive relationships with others, defined by intimacy, trust, concern, openness and connection, also show tendencies to being satisfied, hopeful, efficacious and better skilled to master their own environment (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Among young adolescents, social relationships in school and among family and friends are essential to SWB (Konu et al., 2002). Demir (2008) found that involvement in qualitative romantic relationships influence young adults' levels of happiness beyond the influence of personality traits. Several studies have also found that married people are happier than unmarried (See Diener et al., 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Myers, 2000). Young couples not cohabitating tend to show lower levels of happiness than couples living together, who in turn show lower levels than married young couples (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008). However, Soons and Liefbroer's (2008) results present distinct differences of happiness within marriage, depending on the quality of the relationship. The well-being factors of marriage might also be connected to the status of cohabitation. In countries where cohabitation is more frequent and socially accepted, like the Nordic countries, the happiness gap between living together and being married is evidently smaller (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). When adding the connections between happiness and personality traits like extraversion and agreeableness to the findings on the importance of social and romantic relationships on SWB (Demir, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2002), it seems that being socially competent may play an important part in being happy. Segrin and Taylor (2007) investigated social skills associated with positive relationships and psychological well-being. Their results closely connect social skills to happiness, life satisfaction and quality of life, with the conclusion that positive relations are the mediator between social skills and all the aspects of psychological well-being.

Self-esteem and SWB

A considerable amount of research shows a correlation between happiness and self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Self-esteem is a concept related to the value an individual puts on herself, and like SWB, it is subjectively graded and connected to perception. Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) summarizes self-esteem as a global feeling of self-worth or adequacy as a person, or

generalized feelings of self-acceptance, goodness and self-respect. "It is the evaluative component of self-knowledge. High self-esteem refers to a highly favorable global evaluation of the self." (Baumeister et al., 2003). In other words, self-esteem concerns global evaluation of oneself, whereas life satisfaction, a component of happiness, concerns global evaluation of one's life as a whole. Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) investigated the differences between happiness and self-esteem, and established them being clearly separate constructs with possibly different sources. The authors concluded that happiness appears to be more related to mood, temperament, global life satisfaction and social affiliation, whereas self-esteem is more connected to optimism and mastery. Baumeister et al. (2003) investigated whether self-esteem is as highly valued in all cultures as it is in Western individualist cultures, presenting perspectives from which self-esteem is not a universal human motive. This could be discussed in relation to happiness, which have been reported as highly valued in most examined cultures (Diener et al., 2003), but which is also less clearly defined as a concept than self-esteem.

Demographic factors

Are our happiness levels influenced by demography? Not to a very large extent, according to most studies, displaying modest correlations between SWB and variables such as age, wealth and race (Diener et al., 2009; Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Twenge et al., 2016). There seems to be no "happiest age" in which people experience most satisfaction and positive affect (Myers, 2000), and no significant differences in happiness between young adults and older adults (Twenge et al., 2016). Even if some studies (Yang, 2008) have shown that age and experience might lead to greater happiness, Twenge et al. (2016) found that in America the happiness levels of older adults have decreased, while the happiness levels of adolescents are higher than in the past decades. Gender differences in SWB is a debated area. While a number of studies have reported men to be happier than women, especially at a younger age (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013), other researchers demonstrate no significant gender differences (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Myers, 2000). Fujita et al. (1991) found that even though women reported more negative affect than men, they also felt more intense positive emotions, leading to the result that there were no gender-related differences in happiness levels overall.

The very happy

Many studies have examined the causes of happiness, but few of them have focused on the group of "very happy people" (Diener & Seligman, 2002). If most people report themselves as happy, what defines those who report a higher level of SWB than the vast majority? Diener and Seligman (2002) found that the happiest 10% had the strongest relationships and did not spend much time alone. They were also more agreeable and less neurotic than the average happy and unhappy groups. They did not lack negative emotions, but more often experienced positive affect than the others. On a 10-point scale, where the highest number was labeled "ecstatic," the very happy group often ranged between 7 and 9, but half of the time they also reported being in a negative mood. These results support Lyubomirsky's (2001) findings, showing that students nominated as very happy by their peers did experience similar types of negative emotions as the less happy

students, but several weeks later they recalled more positive affect than negative affect. (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Adolescents reporting high levels of life satisfaction also tend to score high on several scales measuring adaptive functioning of everyday life. They demonstrate significantly higher on all measures of interpersonal and intrapersonal functioning than the less satisfied groups (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Proctor et al., 2010). Proctor et al. (2010) also found that the happiest youth scored very low on depression, negative affect and social stress. In Gilman and Huebner (2006) study, the most satisfied youths showed no clinical levels of psychological symptoms, compared to the average satisfied group (the middle 50% of the distribution) in which 7% demonstrated clinical levels.

Aims and predictions of the current study

What makes one person happier than the average? What characterizes Finnish youth with high self-reported happiness? We aimed to answer these questions by examining Finnish university students' self-reported levels of happiness, in order to find associations between the happiest group and their self-esteem, social and academic skills. The study also included demographic factors, such as gender, living situation and language. The research was conducted in a bilingual geographic area where both Finnish and Swedish are common languages.

Based on previous research, we predicted that:

- The happiest youth would report higher self-esteem and higher levels of social self-efficacy than the rest.
- Living with other(s) would be positively related to happiness, reflecting a connection between relationships and happiness.
- In case of gender differences, boys would report higher levels of happiness than girls, but the differences would be modest. The demographic factors age and language would not have a strong impact on happiness.
- The happiest students would be more likely than the rest to describe themselves with words related to extraversion and low levels of neuroticism.

Based on the debated results between academic success and happiness, and Finland being known as a nation of academic success (Niemi et al., 2012), the connection between happiness and academic skills was evaluated as relevant, but explored without predictions of the outcome.

Method

Sample and procedure

The survey data was collected in spring 2017 among tertiary school students from Ostrobothnia, Finland, as part of a youth migration project in collaboration between Åbo Akademi University Youth Researchers, the Migration Institute in Finland, and the region development companies in Ostrobothnia. The overall aim of the survey was to examine future work ambitions and migration tendencies, as well as current well-being of adolescents and young adults. A link to the online survey was sent out via student unions and social media, and in total 556 students aged 21–29 participated in the survey and answered the happiness item (women = 414, men = 141; mean age = 23).

Measures

Happiness was measured by asking the respondents "Are you happy?" on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 = very unhappy and 7 = very happy. Responses were dichotomized so that the happiest students (those reporting a 7 on the scale) formed a separate group.

Living arrangements were measured with the item "Who do you live with?" and the respondents was categorized into the three groups "living alone," "living with friends or other students" and "living with partner." The answers "living alone with child(ren)," "living with partner and child(ren)" and "living with my parents" was removed from the final analyzes because of the insufficient number of respondents choosing these alternatives.

Self-esteem was measured with four items from a revised version of the Global Self Worth subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPA) by Harter (1988; see also Frojland, 2017). Students reported to what extent, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), they agreed with statements such as "I like myself the way I am" and "I'm often disappointed at myself" (reversed item). Items were combined to a scale with good internal reliability ($\alpha = .81$), which was categorized into low, medium and high self-esteem based on ± 1 standard deviation.

Social competence was measured with four items from the social self-efficacy subscale of the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C) by Muris (2001)¹. Students reported to what extent, on a scale from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (very well), they perceived they were able to get along socially, for example "cooperate with others" or "gain same-age friends." The four items were combined into a scale with adequate internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$), which was categorized into three categories based on ± 1 standard deviation.

Academic competence was measured with four items from the academic self-efficacy subscale of the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C) by Muris (2001), with the same 1–5 scale as for social skills. The items concerned both school success and the ability to focus on studying. They were combined into a scale with adequate internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$), which was categorized into three categories based on ± 1 standard deviation.

In addition to these fixed items, an open-ended item was created, in which the respondents were asked to describe themselves in three words. The answers of the respondents were grouped into the traits extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness of McCrae and Costa's (1991) Five-Factor Model of Personality. Each word was coded on each dimension as either 1, 0 or -1 . For example, the word "outgoing" was coded as a 1 on extraversion (and a 0 on the other traits), whereas "shy" was coded as -1 on extraversion. Words not easily classified as a personality trait suitable in one of the five categories, for example the word "Swedish-speaking," was coded as a 0 on each trait dimension.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were done in SPSS version 23. Descriptive statistics were compiled to display the data in terms of percentages, and also to display the percental differences between the group "very happy" and the rest of the respondents. Binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to investigate the research questions. In addition, a *post hoc*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and proportion of the happiest students among the study participants.

	Participants in total (%)	% of very happy in each category	Cross tabs	Group differences
Gender			ns	
Female	75	11		
Male	25	13		
Age			ns	
19–24	75	11		
25–29	25	13		
Language			ns	
Swedish	70	12		
Finnish	30	10		
Living with			11.53**	A < P
Alone (A)	46	7		
Friend(s)/other students (F)	15	14		
Partner (P)	37	17		
Self-Esteem			74.93***	L, M < H
Low (L)	16	1		
Medium (M)	67	8		
High (H)	17	37		
Social competence			13.95*	L < M, H
Low	16	2		
Medium	69	11		
High	16	20		
Academic competence			ns	
Low	15	7		
Medium	68	11		
High	17	17		

*** $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

correlation analysis was conducted to explore the link between happiness and students' self-description.

Results

Of all respondents, 83.1% reported being more happy than unhappy on the 1–7 scale ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.15$). 11.5% of the total sample reported being very happy, 7 on the scale. There were neither significant differences between the reportedly very happy in terms of

gender, nor between the age-groups, or language groups (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). However, high levels of happiness were more prevalent among students living with a partner than among those living alone (Pearson Chi-Square = 11.53, $p < .01$).

Between the happiest group and the rest, significant differences in self-esteem were found. As assumed, reporting being very happy was clearly connected with reporting high self-esteem among the respondents (Pearson Chi-Square = 74.93, $p < .001$). Social skills were also related to between groups-differences in happiness, with significantly higher social self-efficacy in the very happy group (Pearson Chi-Square = 13.95, $p < .01$). Between the two happiness groups, no significant differences in academic competence in terms of academic self-efficacy could be established.

Next, binary logistic regression analysis was carried out (see Table 2). In the first model, only demographic factors (gender, age, home language and living situation) were included. In this model, living situation was the only significant predictor, with students living with a partner (Odds Ratio = 2.91, $p < .05$) as well as students living with friends or other students (Odds Ratio = 2.38, $p < .05$) being more likely to be very happy than students living alone.

In the second model, psychosocial factors (self-esteem, social self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy) were added to the demographic factors. Among these, both self-esteem and social self-efficacy were found to be significant predictors of high levels of happiness. Compared to students with low self-esteem, students with high self-esteem were more likely to report being very happy (Odds Ratio = 29.66, $p < .001$). Similarly, students with high social self-efficacy were more likely to report being happy than students with lower self-efficacy (Odds Ratio = 6.34, $p < .05$). However, no significant effect was found on academic self-efficacy. Even after inclusion of the psychosocial factors, living arrangements remained a significant predictor of high student happiness, but only in terms of living with a partner (Odds ratio = 2.82, $p < .05$).

A *post hoc* correlation analysis was conducted between general happiness and the five-factor variables based on the self-descriptions. In total, 464 students described themselves in at least one word, and 63% of the words used made it to the final groups of five-factor traits. 91% of the students used at least one word included in the final trait categories. Among the most popular words written in the self-descriptions were "kind," "positive" and "calm" (translated from Swedish and Finnish). The words were most frequently linked to the trait *agreeableness* (46.1%). The second most frequent was *extraversion* (41.6%), followed by *conscientiousness* (40.9%). 25.9% of the respondents used words connected to *neuroticism*, and 24.4% used words connected to *openness*. On a happiness scale level, there was a significant negative correlation between neuroticism and happiness ($r = 0.14$, $p < .01$), and significant positive correlations between conscientiousness and happiness ($r = 0.13$, $p < .01$), and between extraversion and happiness ($r = 0.10$, $p < .05$). However, and arguably due to sample size and missing data, no significant characteristics were found in the happiest group in terms of personality traits.

Discussion

Positive psychology allows researchers to investigate positive mental health as more than just lack of mental problems (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the characteristics of the happiest youth of Finland, a country

Table 2. Logistic regression analysis of the happiness factors.

Independent variable	Model 1 (Demographic variables)		Model 2 (M1 + Psychosocial variables)	
	Wald	Odds ratio	Wald	Odds ratio
Gender	1.28		1.73	
Female		1		1
Male		1.42		1.58
Age	0.17		0.12	
19-24		1		1
25-29		1.14		1.13
Language	0.01		0.14	
Swedish		1		1
Finnish		1.03		1.14
Living with	4.22**		8.49*	
Alone		1		1
Friend(s)/ other students		2.38		1.97
Partner		2.91		2.82
Self-esteem			38.56***	
Low				1
Medium				4.81
High				29.66
Social competence			6.02*	
Low				1
Medium				3.63
High				6.34
Academic competence			0.11	
Low				1
Medium				1.00
High				1.13
MODEL SUMMARY				
Omnibus test step	0.02		59.43***	
Omnibus test total	0.02		59.43***	
Hosmer–Lemeshow	8.60		6.08	
–2 Log Likelihood	365.3		305.87	
Cox&Snell R Square	0.03		0.13	
Nagelkerke R Square	0.05		0.25	
Overall percentage correct	88.5		88.7	

*** $p < .001$.** $p < .01$.* $p < .05$.

labeled “the happiest country in the world” the last four years by the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). What are the common features of these students? The fact that our respondents were in the ages 19–29 made it possible to compare the results to previous studies on both adolescents, youth and adults.

According to our results, students living with a partner had a significantly higher chance of being very happy than students living alone. A modest difference was also found between the cohabitation alternatives, showing that students living with friends also have a tendency to report more happiness than students living alone. A limitation within this study item was the respondents only being asked about their living situation, and not specifically about their relationships or relationship status. A significant connection between social competence and happiness was also found in the current study. Enhancing personal relations with others, and accordingly being able to function well when interacting with others, seems to be an important factor. Both our results on cohabiting and social competence supports previous studies, for example, Mangeloja and Hirvonen’s (2007) findings on Finnish university students, arguing that social relationships constitute the main influence on student’s happiness, and Soons and Liefbroer’s (2008) findings on the connection between happiness and cohabiting with one’s partner. In summary, our results on both social skills and cohabiting being connected to high levels of reported happiness supports the findings of Diener and Seligman (2002): very happy people seem to have strong relationships and spend much time with others. At the same time, Finland is classified as an individualistic nation (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener et al., 2003). Is the focus on autonomy and individualism, together with the high social cohesion level of the “Nordic welfare state” (Delhey & Dragolov, 2016; Martela et al., 2020) a crucial combination when explaining Finnish happiness, with cohabitation or equivalent close relations distinguishing the happiest Finns from the “fairly happy” ones? Further research within the field of Nordic welfare combined with youth happiness and relationships is needed, with particular focus on the *quality* of relationships and on the social support network of young individuals.

Academic self-efficacy did not relate significantly to high levels of happiness in this study, regardless of gender. Previous research in this area has shown contradictory results (Antaramian, 2017; OECD, 2017). Our study supports the results of Mangeloja and Hirvonen (2007), showing that academic success did not contribute significantly to university student’s satisfaction. One possible reason for school success not being crucial to Finnish student’s happiness levels could be the equality of Finland’s school system. While in some countries academic competence is important not only for one’s career, but possibly for one’s survival economically, Finland offers free education to all citizens. This means, failing in school does not necessarily have major consequences for the young student. Another education is often within reach. However, it is important to remember that the current study includes university students only. The results could possibly have differed if they had covered young adults with mixed educational backgrounds, even if studies (see Veenhoven, 2010) have found that education level and happiness does not seem to correlate. Furthermore, considering the results of the PISA 2015 well-being survey (OECD, 2017) may be important regarding student’s SWB. Every school has the potential to increase the involvement of students in the school environment to make them feel noticed and valued. If feeling part of the school community and having good relations with teachers is

necessary for young people's school satisfaction, this should not be overlooked. And, once again, qualitative relationships are mentioned as one of the conditions for happiness.

As predicted, the very happy also reported very high self-esteem. Even though happiness and self-esteem have been manifested as separated constructs (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006), most studies have shown that happy people, young as well as older, tend to treasure both themselves as individuals as well as the life they are living (Baumeister et al., 2003), especially in individualistic nations (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener et al., 2003). Whether the high self-esteem or the overall happiness is the causal factor is not an equally straightforward conclusion. Regardless of the causality, deploying resources on working with student's self-esteem would demonstrably be money well spent – both for individual well-being and for the well-being of society.

Our findings on socio-demographic factors are mainly in line with previous research (see Gilman & Huebner, 2003) on youth in the field of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, showing no connections between age, home language and happiness in our sample of students. Neither could any significant gender differences in reported happiness be found, which partly contradicts earlier findings. Could the non-existent gender differences be connected to Finland being considered a gender-equal country (De Looze et al., 2018)? Perhaps, or perhaps not. Meisenberg and Woodley (2015) results showed no higher SWB among women compared to men in gender-equal countries. Conversely, Mencarini and Sironi (2012) found that enhanced gender equality has increased the levels of general well-being among women in their international European study. More research is required to make conclusions in this field. Even if fundamental demographics such as gender and age did not prove to have an impact on happiness in the current study, there is need for further research in the area of socio-economic happiness factors, such as wealth and social status. Taking the UN's World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) into consideration, it could be rewarding to further investigate happiness in relation to the six explanation factors. Further investigation of the connection between the Finnish population's estimation of the social support system and lack of corruption, as well as their view on what defines freedom, would be relevant. Notable is that as much as 75% of the respondents in our study reported to be female (see Sax et al., 2003, for further discussion on the topic response rates and gender), a factor possibly influencing the gender differences. Self-selection bias is always a challenge in studies where the respondents initiate participation, rather than being randomly assigned.

There is consistent support for the use of self-reports in the field of SWB and LS, as it enables for internal reflection according to the individual's own values (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Myers, 2000). This was one reason why we found it important to include the respondents' freely formulated descriptions of themselves in the analyses. At the same time, it is important to remember that global reports of happiness are influenced by a number of factors, like the respondent's current mood, beliefs on happiness and ability to retrieve positive and negative information (Diener et al., 2009). Additionally, the possibility of reporting being happy without truly experiencing it, is a risk the researcher always has to consider. A limitation of the current study is happiness being measured with a single item-question. This was due to the fact that the original purpose of the survey was not mainly to examine happiness, but to investigate work ambitions and migration tendencies. There was no possibility to add further happiness items, which could have helped us to create a bigger

picture. What would have been the difference between Finnish youths' reported LS and positive/negative affect? Would the happiest group consist of the same people if the components of SWB were studied both separately and together? More research based on multi-item measures is needed to affirm and expand our results.

We were not able to detect any significant characteristics in personality traits, in terms of self-descriptions, among the happiest students. To show the validity of the trait categories, we chose to present the significant correlations on a scale level. The correlation analysis showed significant correlations between being happy and describing oneself with words connected to conscientiousness, extraversion and low levels of neuroticism. These results are mainly in line with previous studies, with perhaps the connection to conscientiousness standing out. Worth mentioning is also the language differences of Swedish and Finnish. What concerns the open-ended questions, the language in which the answer is written may be of importance for the type of words the respondent chooses. For future studies, a five-factor personality scale could be used as a more well-established alternative to our experimental, open-ended research question.

In the current study, the emphasis has deliberately been placed on the comparison between the reportedly very happy and the rest. This needs to be considered when reading the results, as the study can be argued to lack in information regarding the happiness spectrum. The purpose of this study was not primarily to analyze what causes more or less happiness on a scale, but to highlight what makes the very happy different from the average. In our study, as well as in earlier studies (Diener & Diener, 1996), most people placed themselves in the "quite happy" category. Based on this, examining the characteristics of "the happiest" may be a key to understanding core happiness factors.

Note

1. As the current survey was part of a larger project encompassing early adolescents as well as young adults, the four items best allowing for intergrade comparison (not reported here) were chosen for each subscale of the SEQ-C. For further details on the scale, please contact the responding author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

REFERENCES

- Antaramian, S. (2017). The importance of very high life satisfaction for students' academic success. *Cogent Education*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1307622>
- Bartels, M. (2015). Genetics of wellbeing and its components satisfaction with life, happiness, and quality of life: A review and meta-analysis of heritability studies. *Behavior Genetics*, 45(2), 137–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10519-015-9713-y>
- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest: A Journal of the American Psychological Society*, 4(1), 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1529-1006.01431>
- Brülde, B. (2007). Happiness theories on the good life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 8(1), 15–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9003-8>

- Cavallo, F., Damasso, P., Ottová-Jordan, V., Brooks, F., Mazur, J., Välimaa, R., Gobina, I., Gaspar de Matos, M., & Raben-Sieberer, U. (2015). Trends in life satisfaction in European and North-American adolescents from 2002 to 2010 in over 30 countries. *European Journal of Public Health*, 25(2), 80–82. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv014>
- Cheng, H., & Furnham, A. (2003). Personality, self-esteem, and demographic predictions of happiness and depression. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34(6), 921–942.
- Chui, W. H., & Wong, M. Y. H. (2016). Gender differences in happiness and life satisfaction among adolescents in Hong Kong: Relationships and self-concept. *Social Indicators Research*, 125, 1035–1051.
- De Looze, M. E., Huijts, T., Stevens, G. W. J. M., Torsheim, T., & Vollebergh, W. A. M. (2018). The happiest kids on earth. Gender equality and adolescent life satisfaction in Europe and North America. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(5), 1073–1085.
- Delhey, J., & Dragolov, G. (2016). Happier together. Social cohesion and subjective well-being in Europe. *International Journal of Psychology: Journal International de Psychologie*, 51(3), 163–176.
- Demir, M. (2008). Sweetheart, you really make me happy: Romantic relationship quality and personality as predictors of happiness among emerging adults. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(2), 257–277. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-007-9051-8>
- DeNeve, K. M., & Cooper, H. (1998). The happy personality: A meta-analysis of 137 personality traits and subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 197–229. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.197>
- Diener, E., & Diener, C. (1996). Most people are happy. *American Psychological Society*, 7(3), 181–185.
- Diener, E., & Diener, M. (1995). Cross-cultural correlates of life satisfaction and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(4), 653–663. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.4.653>
- Diener, E., Diener, M., & Diener, C. (1995). Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 851–864. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.69.5.851>
- Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Oishi, S. (2009). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and life-satisfaction. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 187–194). Oxford University Press.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Lucas, R. E. (2003). Personality, culture, and subjective well-being. Emotional and cognitive evaluations of life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 403–425.
- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13(1), 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415>
- European Social Survey. (2015). *Measuring and reporting on Europeans' wellbeing: Findings from the European Social Survey*. ESS ERIC.
- Frojland, L. R. (2017). *Ungdata – Lokale ungdomsundersokelser. Dokumentasjon av variablene i sporreskjemat*. NOVA. www.ungdata.no
- Fujita, F., Diener, E., & Sandvik, E. (1991). Gender differences in negative affect and well-being: The case for emotional intensity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(3), 427–434. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.61.3.427>
- Furnham, A., & Cheng, H. (2000). Lay theories of happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1(2), 227–246.
- Furnham, A., & Petrides, K. V. (2003). Trait emotional intelligence and happiness. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 31(8), 815–824.
- Garcia, D. (2011). Two models of personality and well-being among adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(8), 1208–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.02.009>
- Gilman, R., & Huebner, S. (2003). A review of life satisfaction research with children and adolescents. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 18(2), 192–205.
- Gilman, R., & Huebner, E. S. (2006). Characteristics of adolescents who report very high life satisfaction. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 35(3), 311–319.
- Goldbeck, L., Schmitz, T. G., Besier, T., Herschbach, P., & Henrich, G. (2007). Life satisfaction decreases during adolescence. *Quality of Life Research*, 16(6), 969–979.
- Harter, S. (1988). *Manual for the self-perception profile for adolescents*. University of Denver.
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (Eds.). (2018). *World happiness report 2018*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (Eds.). (2019). *World happiness report 2019*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J., & De Neve, J. (Eds.). (2020). *World happiness report 2020*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J., & De Neve, J. (Eds.). (2021). *World happiness report 2021*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Huebner, E. S., Drane, W., & Valois, R. F. (2000). Levels and demographic correlates of adolescent life satisfaction reports. *School Psychology International*, 21(3), 281–292.
- Konu, A. I., Lintonen, T. P., & Rimpelä, M. K. (2002). Factors associated with schoolchildren's general subjective well-being. *Health Education Research*, 17(2), 155–165.
- Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon. *American Psychological Society*, 7(3), 186–189.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2001). Why are some people happier than others? The role of cognitive and motivational processes in well-being. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.239>
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(6), 803–855. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.803>
- Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & DiMatteo, M. R. (2006). What are the differences between happiness and self-esteem? *Social Indicators Research*, 78, 364–404.
- Mangelolja, E., & Hirvonen, T. (2007). What makes university students happy? *International Review of Economics Education*, 6(2), 27–41.
- Martela, F., Greve, B., Rothstein, B., & Saari, J. (2020). The Nordic exceptionalism: What explains why the Nordic countries are constantly among the happiest in the world. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. Sachs, & J. De Neve (Eds.), *World happiness report 2020*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Meisenberg, G., & Woodley, M. A. (2015). Gender differences in subjective well-being and their relationships with gender equality. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(6), 1539–1555.
- Mencarini, L., & Sironi, M. (2012). Happiness, housework, and gender inequality in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, 28(2), 203–219.
- McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (1991). Adding Liebe und Arbeit: The full five-factor model and well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(2), 227–232.
- McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (2010). The five-factor theory of Personality. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and Research* (pp. 159–180). Guilford Press.
- Moksnes, U. K., & Espnes, G. A. (2013). Self-esteem and life satisfaction in adolescents – gender and age as potential moderators. *Quality of Life Research: An International Journal of Quality of Life Aspects of Treatment, Care and Rehabilitation*, 22(10), 2921–2928.
- Muris, P. (2001). A brief questionnaire for measuring self-efficacy in youths. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 23(3), 146–149.
- Myers, D. G. (2000). The funds, friends, and faith of happy people. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.56>
- New Economics Foundation. (2016). The happy planet index 2016. A global index of sustainable wellbeing. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5735c421e321402778ee0ce9/t/57e0052d440243730dfd03f3/1474299185121/Briefing+paper++HPI+2016.pdf>
- Niemi, H., Toom, A., & Kallioniemi, A. (2012). *Miracle of education. The principles and practices of teaching and learning in Finnish schools*. Sense Publishers. <https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/655-miracle-of-education.pdf>
- OECD. (2017). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being, PISA*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-en>
- Proctor, C. L., Alex Linley, P., & Maltby, J. (2009). Youth life satisfaction: A review of the literature. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10(5), 583–630.
- Proctor, C. L., Alex Linley, P., & Maltby, J. (2010). Very happy youths: Benefits of very high life satisfaction among adolescents. *Social Indicators Research*, 98(3), 519–532.
- Salmela-Aro, K., & Tynkynen, L. (2010). Trajectories of life satisfaction across the transition to post-compulsory education: Do adolescents follow different pathways? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(8), 870–881.
- Sax, L. J., Gilmartin, S. K., & Bryant, A. N. (2003). Assessing response rates and nonresponse bias in web and paper surveys. *Research in Higher Education*, 44(4), 409–432.

- Segrin, C., & Taylor, M. (2007). Positive interpersonal relationships mediate the association between social skills and psychological well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences, 43*(4), 637–646. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.01.017>
- Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology. An introduction. *The American Psychologist, 55*(1), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.5>
- Soons, J. P. M., & Kalmijn, M. (2009). Is marriage more than cohabitation? *Well-being differences in 30 European countries. Journal of Marriage and Family, 71*(5), 1141–1157.
- Soons, J. P. M., & Liefbroer, A. C. (2008). Together is better? Effects of relationship status and resources on young adults' well-being. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 25*(4), 603–624.
- Twenge, J. M., Sherman, R. A., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2016). More happiness for young people and less for mature adults: Time period differences in subjective well-being in the United States, 1972–2014. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 7*(2), 131–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615602933>
- Veenhoven, R. (2010). Capability and happiness: Conceptual difference and reality links. *The Journal of Socio-Economics, 39*(3), 344–350. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socsec.2009.11.007>
- Veenhoven, R. (2017). Measures of happiness: Which to choose? In G. Brulé & F. Maggino (Eds.), *Metrics of well-being* (pp. 65–84). Springer.
- Yang, Y. (2008). Social inequalities in happiness in the United States, 1972 to 2004: An age-period-cohort analysis. *American Sociological Review, 73*(2), 204–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240807300202>