

Sense of Humor and Resiliency: Explanatory Components of Psychological Well-being

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Abstract

Introduction: The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between sense of humor, resiliency and psychological well-being and possibility of explanation of psychological well-being in native and non-native students based on sense of humor and resiliency constructs.

Method: The sample consisted of 332 native and non-native students of the University of Zanjan (191 females and 141 males) who were randomly selected. They completed the Sense of Humor (SHQ), Conner–Davidson Resiliency (CO-RISC) and Psychological Well-being (RSPWB) questionnaires.

Results: Data analysis using stepwise regression indicated that resiliency in the first step ($R^2=16\%$) and along with sense of humor in the next step ($R^2=16\%$) predicted psychological well-being of first year students. The additional findings indicated that all subscales of humor were positively correlated with psychological well-being, and also the subscale of humor in stressful situations showed the highest correlation with psychological well-being. There was no difference in association patterns between native and non-native students.

Conclusion: Given that sense of humor and resiliency variables are significant predictors of psychological well-being in students, by creating and empowering these capacities, we can promote their mental health.

Keywords: Sense of Humor, Resiliency, Psychological Well-being, Student

Introduction

Positive psychology as a new applied trend over the two recent decades has originated from applied psychology, rapidly developed, and attracted a large number of psychologists and scholars. Nowadays, this trend is famous for dealing with happiness, joy and psychological well-being of individuals. In fact, positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal and favorable human functions, with the aim of understanding factors that individually or collectively help the individuals reach further growth and development [1]. This movement tends to make use of human beings' strengths as a shield against mental diseases [2]. In this regard, factors that lead to further adjustment and satisfaction of human beings while facing the threats of life are among the most fundamental structures in research of this approach [3]. One of the variables that are investigated in positive psychology is psychological well-being whose domain of investigation has exceeded the individual life and reached social interaction [4]. Psychological well-being includes the individual's perception of the amount of coordination between the determined and outlined goals and functional consequences that are obtained in the process of continuous evaluations which leads to relatively stable internal satisfaction in the sequence of life [5]. The individual's cognitive beliefs about life appraise the conditions according to expectations, values and previous relevant experiences [6]. Today's psychology stipulates that mental health is not merely the absence of damage, but it is related to the positive

aspects like positive emotions, meaning construction in life and social participation [7]. Negative events may cause problems to mental health such as depression and anxiety [8-9] and also brings about less well-being and weak consequences of mental health. However, due to the presence of some psycho-social factors, differences in the individuals' methods of responding and their style of adjustment with stressful events of life, this subject has been highlighted by positive psychology approach [10]. In a study conducted on 187 university students, Margaret et al. [11] figured out that life stresses can be one of the predictors of mental problems. Empirical evidence also indicates that an increase in stress can have a harmful effect on the academic performance of the students [12-13]. While encountering negative events, however, a student can resort to supportive factors like personality and society and reduce the harmful effects of stress [14]. In another study conducted by Bewiek et al. [15], it was indicated that the amount of stress is a valid index in predicting psychological well-being among students in the beginning of new academic year. This perhaps means that students can achieve an optimal management of life and then improve their mental health in the challenges of facing with stresses caused by displacements in location and changes in emotions, communications and social status.

One of the components of positive psychology is resiliency which plays an important role in mental health [16] and is said to be the capacity of the individual to stay healthy while facing negative events [17] and also means being flexible as encountering the challenges of life [18]. Resilient individuals are characterized by optimism, positive coping style and mental toughness, which are related to good physical and mental consequences [19]. Comparing the youth with high and low levels of resiliency indicated that higher levels of resiliency are more likely to be accompanied with low levels of mental problems, social conflicts and poor academic performance [20]. In fact, resilient individuals show more adaptive behaviors while facing negative events in life [17]. Connor [21] believes that resiliency guarantees the individuals' well-being by adjusting and reducing the effectiveness of harmful factors like stress and depression. Studies indicate that resilient individuals do not have self-destructive behaviors, are emotionally calm and can cope with unfavorable situations [22]. In their study, Arce et al. [23] indicated that resilient individuals are more willing to express positive emotions while encountering emotional events with neutral or unknown nature. They believe that this is due to these individuals' ability to successfully get along with difficult situations. In other words, positive interpretation of negative emotions in resilient people provides the ground for their health [24].

Another possible component that affects psychological well-being is the sense of humor. This era which has been considered as the renewal or rebirth of psychology has covered a wide range of theories and studies which have focused on sense of humor [25]. Humor is a global and generally positive activity that is experienced by people of different social and cultural classes all over the world [26].

Sense of humor, according to Freud, is the best defense mechanism that has been proposed as a method to encounter life events with less stress – a survival skill to overcome problems [27]). In other words, humor is an adaptive evolutionary tool to cope with stress, relieve stress, and establish cohesion and it functions as a mechanism of healthy relationship and mental health of the individual [28-29]. Over the last 20 years, a quite different body of psychological literature has also developed and aimed at the role of humor in coping, quality of life, and psychological well-being [30]. Scholars have discovered that empowerment characteristics like hope, kindness, sense of humor, love, appreciation, and curiosity are significant predictors of psychological well-being [31, 32]. Studies intend to figure out an answer for this question that how sense of humor can facilitate coping with stress or improve social and personal relationships [26]. It seems that individuals who make use of their sense of humor to enhance their relationships with others, also use it to enhance their internal feelings [33].

Considered as the selected people of the community, university students are effective in the future of the country, and their mental health affects their academic success [24]. Empirical evidence indicates that an increase in stress can have a harmful effect on the academic performance of the students. Moreover, depending on whether the university is located in the place of the student's permanent residence or not, the period of study can bring about different rates of stressors. With a background of the environment, family and social support, native students can maintain a higher level of psychological well-being while non-native students can be affected due to the absence of such supportive factors. Various studies have investigated psychological well-being, mental disorders, and causes of development of mental disorders among university students. However, it seems that studying those students who have resisted the challenges and problems of university life and have better mental health can be an effective step forward to help this group. In this regard, the present study aimed at responding to this question that whether the students' psychological well-being can be predicted by taking into consideration the structures of resiliency and sense of humor or not. In addition, the present study investigated whether the pattern of the relationship between psychological well-being, sense of humor, and resiliency is different among native and non-native students or not.

Methods

The statistical population consisted of all the freshmen of the Zanjan University who were studying in the first semester of the academic year of 2012-2013. The sample consisted of 332 native (35.2%) and non-native (64.8%) randomly selected students (191 females and 141 males). Proportional stratified sampling was utilized to ensure the equality of the proportion of gender, nativity, and non-nativity in the sample to the whole population. The study sample was selected from among the students of four faculties (Humanities, Basic Sciences, Agriculture, and Engineering) with respect to their proportion to the whole

population. The participants were required to complete the Sense of Humor Questionnaire (SHQ), Conner–Davidson Resiliency (CO-RISC) and Psychological Well-being (RSPWB) scales. Data collection started in late in November in order to let the students (both native and non-native ones) reach a relative mental stability in the first stages of their admission to university. Data collection was carried out through the following questionnaires.

1. Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-Being (RSPWB):

It is composed of 18 questions that are scored using a 6-point Likert type scale from "I totally disagree" to "I totally agree". This questionnaire includes 6 components (self-acceptance, positive relation with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth) which measure the level of the psychological well-being of an individual. This scale was designed in 1989 by Ryff and Kiz and was normalized in 2009 in Iran by Sefidi. Its Cronbach's alpha was reported to be 0.73.

2. Sense of Humor Questionnaire (SHQ):

This questionnaire was developed and validated by Khoshu'i et al. (2009). It is composed of 25 items that are scored in a 7-point Likert type scale from "I totally agree" to "I totally disagree". The questionnaire has 5 factors (humor, laughter, verbal humor, sense of humor in social relationships, and sense of humor in stressful situations) for each of which the participant can obtain minimum and maximum scores of 5 and 35, respectively. The total score of a participant on the whole questionnaire can be at least 25 and at most 175. Higher score on this questionnaire indicates more sense of humor. By evaluating the reliability of the questionnaire by consistency method, correlation coefficients of 0.74 to 0.80 were reported for the dimensions and 0.92 for the whole questionnaire.

3. Conner–Davidson Resiliency (CO-RISC):

This scale has 25 items that were designed in a 5-point Likert scale from "Totally wrong" to "Always right" in 2003. The score of this scale ranges from 25 to 125. This scale was

designed to measure the level of resiliency among individuals. Its reliability for university students was reported to be 0.93.

Results

In accordance with the objectives of the study, the results are presented in the following tables. Table 1 presents the descriptive indices of the participants obtained from sense of humor, resiliency, and psychological well-being tests. These statistics is presented according to native and non-native students.

According to the data presented in Table 1, it is clear that sense of humor and resiliency of non-native students (122 and 84.22, respectively) and psychological well-being among native students (M=71.8) were higher.

Moreover, before regression analysis was carried out, the correlation between the study variables was examined using Pearson correlation coefficient. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2, at a significant level of 0.01.

In order to investigate whether students' psychological well-being can be predicted through sense of humor and resiliency or not, multivariate stepwise regression analysis was employed. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

As indicated in Table 3 and according to the results of the regression analysis, the variable of resiliency solely and along with sense of humor determine respectively 14.2% and 16.5% of psychological well-being. In order to respond to the question whether the pattern of sense of humor, resiliency, and psychological well-being is different among native and non-native students or not, the independent samples t-test was employed to compare the mean scores of the two groups, which proved no significant difference. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables of sense of humor, resiliency, and psychological well-being among native and non-native students

Variable	Student	N.	Min. Score	Max. Score	Mean	SD
Sense of Humor	Native	117	74	169	118	2.06
	Non-native	215	45	171	122	2.30
Resiliency	Native	117	49	122	82.11	1.45
	Non-native	215	44	125	84.22	1.6
Psychological Well-being	Native	117	25	99	71.11	1.18
	Non-native	215	38	108	69.84	9.49

Table 2. Correlation matrix of the study variables

Variable	Total Sense of Humor	Resiliency
Sense of Humor	1	
Resiliency	0.196**	1
Psychological Well-being	0.223**	0.377**

** P<0.01 & P<0.05

Table 3. The results of regression analysis of the effect of sense of humor and resiliency on psychological well-being

Criterion Variable	Step	Predicting Variable	Beta	R ²	F	Sig.
Psychological Well-being	First	Resiliency	0.377	0.142	54.69	0.001
	Second	Resiliency	0.347	0.165	32.57	0.001
		Sense of Humor	0.155			

As indicated in Table 5, the results of the regression analysis among the native and non-native students indicate that resiliency predicts 23% and 11% of psychological well-being of native and non-native students respectively. By separating native and non-native students, the role of sense of humor in psychological well-being was not significant.

In order to examine the predicting power of the variables of sense of humor and psychological well-being among native and non-native students, multivariate stepwise regression analysis was carried out separately for each group. Table 5 indicates the results of these analyses for native and non-native students.

Table 4. The results of the independent samples t-test in the two separate groups of native and non-native students

Variables	Groups	N.	Mean	T	df	Sig.
Sense of Humor	Native	117	118	-1.50	330	0.133
	Non-native	215	122			
Resiliency	Native	117	82.11	-1.18	330	0.23
	Non-native	215	84.22			
Psychological Well-being	Native	117	71.11	1.06	330	0.28
	Non-native	215	69.84			

Table 5. The results of regression analysis of the effects of Sense of humor and resiliency on psychological well-being among native and non-native students

Student	Predicting Variable	Beta Coefficient	T	R ²	Sig.
Native	Resiliency	0.48	7.03	0.23	0.001
Non-native	Resiliency	0.32	5.06	0.107	0.001

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the possibility of predicting psychological well-being based on variables of sense of humor and resiliency. The analysis of the collected data indicated that the students' psychological well-being can be predicted and explained through resiliency and sense of humor. The findings of the present study are in agreement with those of the studies conducted by Bahadori- Khosroshahi and Hashemi [33], Bonanno [17], Masten [34], Connor [21], Connor and Davidson [19], Campbell-sills et al. [35], Ahern and Norris [36], and Basu [37]. These researchers believe that decrease in the level of resiliency in life events is accompanied with the feeling of mental pressure, anxiety, and depression. According to resiliency hypothesis and the theory of development and creation of positive emotions, these emotions enhance psychological well-being through their promoting effects [1]. Conceptually, the idea of psychological well-being chains is the opposite side of the idea of descending depression chains. In cases when individuals have negative experiences and emotions, they experience tunnel vision which mostly leads to negative pessimistic thoughts. This negative thought leads to more negative emotions which might quickly cause the spiral (circular) movement to decrease. On the other hand, positive emotions remove blindfolds and let people see more possibilities and think more optimistically. Those who experience positive emotions probably experience more regular ascending chains of psychological well-being, which is joyful. In the meantime; however, the more important point is that ascending chains also help the creation of a set of coping skills. Therefore, individuals who experience positive emotions cope with the tribulations of life better in most cases and are more resilient [1]. Masten [34] also considers the individuals' resiliency as their empowerment capacity in order to change adverse results. On the other hand, the

more the individuals are resilient in coping with problems and stresses of life, the less they will be exposed to mental confusion and they will reach higher health and psychological well-being [38]. While facing stressful events, resilient individuals adopt an optimal management trend and solve the problem in an emotional way. Moreover, the results of the present study indicated that there is a positive relationship between sense of humor and psychological well-being.

The results of the present study are in agreement with those of the studies conducted by Chauvet and Meyer [39], Khoshoei [40], and Bahadori- Khosroshahi and Khanjani [41]. It is indicated that sense of humor is an effective means to cope with mental pressure and can calm down stressful mental conditions or feelings [42]. The great German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche proved the value of sense of humor when he stated "the only creature on the globe that experiences the utmost pain (i.e. human) has created laughter". Robinson [2] reviewed the effects of sense of humor and stated that high levels of support of the pharmaceutical value of sense of humor (emotionally) has caused it to become an adaptive and coping behavior and also a means for tension relief, defense against depression, sign of emotional growth, and also survival. Humor while facing stress plays a protective role and decreases threat and stress damage. Individuals with deeper feelings show remarkably better temper after negative events of life [43].

Another finding of the present study was the correlation between all components of sense of humor and psychological well-being of the students. However, the highest correlation was related to the subcategory of sense of humor in stressful conditions and psychological well-being. In explaining this finding, it can be stated that the first year of entering a new place, period, or career that is different from what has been our secure and habitual program for years can cause stress and tension, which can

be coped with by weakening and dimming stress. Students with psychological well-being maintain their optimal level of mental health through the sense of humor mechanism, or vice versa, i.e. individuals utilize sense of humor mechanism more in stressful conditions; therefore, they are more likely to achieve a higher level of psychological well-being. Humor helps the individual see the positive aspects of events and gain capacities to consider the events from a humorous viewpoint; therefore, the level of stress will drop. Moreover, in the present study, regression analysis was utilized to check the possibility of different relationship patterns in explaining psychological well-being among native and non-native students, which proved no difference, and in the both groups, resiliency variable was the predictor of psychological well-being. In explaining this finding, it can be stated that the possibility of resiliency is a personality quality which allows individuals to conduct different behaviors in same situations and conditions. This quality can be the basis for behaviors like sense of humor. Students who are resilient, apart from being native or non-native, can always maintain their psychological well-being at an optimal level. In other words, resiliency is like a potential capital that is always available for the students to help them maintain their mental security whenever the need arises.

Conclusion

Due to the new emergence of psychological well-being, its effective components still need to be further explored. This need can be met as a result of extensive research and studies. The results of the present study and other related ones which have aimed investigating effective components in psychological well-being can reveal this construct with more clarity in the field of psychology. Knowing and enhancing the level of psychological well-being of university students in the form of a set of individual and group measures can establish grounds for enhancing the level of mental health in societies in the near future.

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