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THE ROLE OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG ACADEMIC STUDENTS FROM POLAND, LITHUANIA, AND CROATIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

The aim of research was to explore the relationship between self-acceptance (SA) and civic engagement (CE) among academic students ($N=1,362$) from Poland, Lithuania and Croatia. Binomial logistic regression and subgroup analyses (by gender, country, study degree, and study field)

were performed. The results indicated that the students with the lowest levels of SA exhibited the lowest levels of CE. In addition, men were less likely to present high CE compared to women, students from Lithuania were less likely to be highly civically engaged in comparison to those studying in Poland, and students of the natural sciences and humanities were less likely to have a high level of CE than those studying social sciences. The study underscores the critical role of self-acceptance in promoting civic engagement among young adults. During health crises such as a pandemic, it is essential to encourage student involvement in activities that support local and global communities, particularly focusing on individuals with the lowest levels of self-acceptance.

Keywords: self-acceptance, civic engagement, COVID-19 pandemic, academic students

Introduction

According to Ryff (1989), self-acceptance is one of the dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which fosters self-development and maturity by accepting one's own strengths and weaknesses. Ellis (1977, p. 101) developed the concept of "unconditional self-acceptance", defined as accepting oneself as a whole and in an unconditional manner, without fear of approval from others. Acceptance manifests itself when a person considers himself or herself and others to be fallible. Self-acceptance requires a realistic and subjective awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses. It causes the individual to feel that he or she is of "unique value" (English & English, 1958; Bingöl & Batik, 2019). Unconditional self-acceptance involves accepting oneself without fear of losing the love, respect and approval of others (Hill et al., 2008). It can be spoken of even when a person accepts themselves, despite behaving inappropriately or making mistakes (Bingöl & Batik, 2019). According to ongoing research, self-acceptance determines good relationships with other people (Chełminia et al., 2024). Acceptance is crucial in friendships, because one accepts being in a relationship with another person and this represents the approval of the other (Prusinski, 2016). Through this, positive experiences occur, which are the source of closeness or intimacy in relationships with others (Chełminiak et al., 2024). A self-accepting person sees himself or herself as an individual whose job is not to meet all perfectionist standards. As a result, his or her level of self-doubt and self-standards is reduced, which can translate into positive relationships with other people (Chełminiak et al., 2024).

In this project, our objective was to test whether self-acceptance increases the likelihood of student civic engagement during a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes brought about by the pandemic meet the

criteria for traumatogenic change, which is defined as sudden, profound, wide-ranging, and affecting fundamental values and patterns of life (Sztompka 2002; Alexander 2004; Baranowski & Odrowąż-Coates, 2018). There was a unique combination of health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession, which took a toll on the public's mental health (Golberstein et al., 2020; Kimhi et al., 2020). WHO (2022) found a 25% worldwide increase in the frequency of anxiety and depressive disorders during the first year of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the pandemic changed the way schools and universities operated, which in turn affected the well-being of students (Buchnat et al., 2021; Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2020; Jankowiak et al., 2022; Jankowiak & Jaskulska, 2021; Jaskulska & Jankowiak, 2020; Poleszak & Pyżalski, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; Jaskulska et al., 2022; Kanclerz et al., 2023; Peret-Drążewska et al., 2023; Jankowiak et al., 2024). Civic engagement is crucial in times of crisis for the community to cope (Tong et al., 2024). Civic engagement occurs when citizens participate in their community to improve the lives of others or help shape the future of the community (Adler & Goggin, 2005) and solve social problems (Diller, 2001; Marciak, 2019, 2020). As numerous studies have shown, positive self-evaluation is associated with engaging in behaviours for the benefit of others (Li & Hao, 2022; Fu et al., 2017; Marciak et al., 2022; Zuffianò et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to test the likelihood of academic students' civic engagement during a pandemic depending on their level of self-acceptance.

Materials and Methods

Design and ethics

The data were obtained between 14 May and 14 July 2021 as part of the project cooperation of COST Action number CA17114, entitled "Transdisciplinary solutions to cross-sectoral disadvantage in youth (YOUNG-in)", supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). The Action CA17114 ran from 19.09.2018 to 18.03.2023 and its details are available on the website: <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA17114/>.

During research planning and implementation, we followed the principles of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. The research project was accepted by the Ethics Committee for Science Projects in the Faculty of Educational Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (No 1/16.04.2021).

Participants

The research participants were university students (N=1362) from: Poland, N = 596 (43.8%), Croatia, N = 386 (28.3%) and Lithuania, N = 379 (27.8%); gender (female, N=921, 67.6%; male, N=388, 28.5%; no declaration, N = 53, 3.9%); age (M = 22.2; 18-19 year, N = 168, 12.4%; 20-21 year, N = 517, 38.0%; 22-23 year, N = 409, 30.1%; 24-25 year, N = 160, 11.8%; over 25 year, N = 105, 7.7%; no declaration N = 3, 0.2%); place of residence (university city, N = 724, 53.1%; non-academic city, N = 518, 38.0%; mixed, N=81, 5.9%); study degree (first degree – bachelor's, N = 914, 67.1%; second degree – master's, N = 357; 26.2%; and integrated master's, N = 90, 6.6%); study year (1st, N = 367, 26.9%; 2nd, N = 282, 20.7%; 3rd, N = 283, 20.8%; th, N = 208, 15.3%; 5th, N = 200, 14.7; 6th, N = 22, 1.6%); and represented the following fields of the sciences: (natural, N = 634, 46.5%; social, N = 361, 26.5%; and humanities, N = 338, 24.8).

Measures

The Self-Acceptance Scale of Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-Being (PWB) (main predictor variable) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) is one of six dimensions measured by PWB. The SA scale consists of 3 items: "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out" (1); "I like most aspects of my personality" (2); "In many ways, I feel disappointed about my achievements in life" (3). Response formats: strongly disagree (1), disagree somewhat (2), disagree slightly (3), agree slightly (4), agree somewhat (5), strongly agree (6). The internal consistency of the SE scale in this study was on satisfactory level (Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = 0.798$).

Civic Engagement Scale during COVID-19 (CESC19) (Marciniak et al., 2022) measures the phenomenon of civic engagement of academic students with the 10 items, divided into the five dimensions: volunteering, donation/charity, cooperation/support, activism (supports / protests), and socio-political participation. Each dimension covers two elements, one from each of two domains: 1) COVID specific activities – characteristic of the pandemic state, strongly connected to it or taking place in this specific period (C); and 2) non-Covid specific, usual, general activities that can be taken in normal, non-pandemic circumstances (NCS), for example: "I delivered meals

or groceries, or otherwise supported isolated people that I know (e.g., family, neighbours) for free" (C); "I participated in volunteering activities, e.g., offered help to people in need beyond the circle of my family and friends (NCS)." The respondents indicated which of the 'various activities undertaken by some people during the COVID-19 period' they had performed during the last year, with answers: yes (1) or no (0). The internal consistency of CE Scale was on a satisfactory level (Cronbach's alpha $\alpha=0.704$).

Sociodemographic characteristics: students' age, gender, and country, study degree (bachelor's, master's and integrated master's), study field (social, humanities, natural), year of study. The answers were collected in a multiple-choice format.

Statistical Analyses

The analysis of mean ranks differences in CE was followed by a binomial logistic regression analysis model. All statistical analyses were performed with 95% confidence intervals. The adopted level of significance (p) was $\alpha = 0.05$ ($1 - \alpha = 0.95$). We used IBM SPSS software (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) to analyse the data.

Results

The self-acceptance of academic students was measured using Self-Acceptance Scale (dimension on the Ryff's PWB Scale). The mean result was $M = 12.40$ (with standard deviation $SD = 3.506$), where 10.50 is the median score for the normal distribution. According to the quartiles: low level of self-acceptance (1st quartile, SAS of PWB scores: 3-10), $N = 388$, 28.5%; rather low SA (2nd quartile, scores: 11-13), $N = 367$, 26.9%; rather high SA (3rd quartile, scores: 14-15), $N = 330$, 24.2%; high SA (4th quartile, scores: 16-18), $N = 277$, 20.3%. The civic engagement was $M = 4.2$ ($SD = 1.891$; $Me = 4$), where 5.5 is the median score for the normal distribution. According to quartiles: low CE level (scores of 0-2; $N = 247$, 18.1%); medium CE level (scores of 3-5, $N = 774$, 56.9%); and high CE level (scores of 6-10, $N = 341$, 25.0%).

Table 1. Results of binomial logistic regression for the relationship between civic engagement (CE) during the COVID-19 outbreak in the experiences of Polish, Croatian and Lithuanian students and factorial models: self-acceptance (SAS PWB): gender, country, study field [B = coefficient; SE = standard error; W = Wald statistic; Exp(B) = the odds ratio].

Factors	The binomial logistic regression of CE and multiple of factors					
	B	SE	W	Df	p	Exp(B)
Self-Acceptance Level (reference category: low)			9.787	3	< 0.05	
Rather Low	0.439	0.157	7.854	1	< 0.01	1.551
Rather High	0.180	0.166	1.171	1	0.279	1.197
High	0.413	0.176	5.481	1	< 0.001	1.511
Gender (reference category: Female)			240.233	2	< 0.001	
Male	-0.676	0.137	24.210	1	< 0.001	0.508
Others	-0.122	0.302	0.164	1	0.685	0.885
Country (reference category: Poland)			510.458	2	< 0.001	
Croatia	-0.162	0.143	1.296	1	0.255	0.850
Lithuania	-1.071	0.154	48.621	1	< 0.001	0.343
Study Field (reference category: Social)			21.337	2	< 0.001	
Humanities	-0.716	0.162	19.441	1	< 0.001	0.489
Natural	-0.496	0.142	12.251	1	< 0.001	0.609
Cons.	0.815	0.183	19.847	1	< 0.001	2.259

The likelihood of high civic engagement was higher for those with rather low or high levels of self-acceptance using as a reference those who have low self-acceptance level. In addition, men were less likely to have high CE in comparison to women. Considering the countries in which students studied, those from Lithuania and Croatia were less likely to be highly civically engaged than those studying in Poland. Moreover, using students from the social sciences as a reference, those from the natural sciences and humanities are less likely to have a high level of civic engagement.

Discussion

The main aim of the article is to examine the relationship between self-acceptance of academic students and their civic engagement during the pandemic. This relationship has been confirmed by the results of our research. Academic students with a lower level of self-acceptance (compared to students with a rather low and high level) exhibit a lower likelihood of high civic

engagement. Thus, as our findings show, it is not necessary for individuals to have a high level of self-acceptance, but, on average, thinking positively about themselves (rather low self-acceptance) is enough to act to others' benefit in a health crisis. Because civic engagement can address important issues of public concern (Adler & Goggin, 2005), and promote collective well-being (Cnaan & Park, 2016; Funk, 1998), it is pro-social and supportive of others. However, for individuals to be civically engaged, they must have the belief that they can and should act towards improving their community (Ehrlich, 1997). It can be assumed that people with low levels of self-acceptance do not feel that they are able to help others and therefore withdraw from such activities. Consequently, the results of our study show the importance of taking action aimed at helping students with the lowest levels of self-acceptance. These can include activities that support self-development and positive self-perceptions, as well as preventive or socio-therapeutic activities. It is noteworthy that the objectives of most socio-therapeutic programmes involve developing social skills, forming adequate self-esteem, and enhancing self-acceptance (Soroko & Jankowiak, 2020; Jankowiak et al., 2024; Jankowiak & Soroko, 2021; Nosek-Kozłowska, 2025).

Interestingly, our research shows that men are less likely to have high self-acceptance than women. Indeed, previous research has shown that women and girls evaluate themselves less positively than boys and men, since self-esteem is determined by gender roles (Freire & Ferreira, 2020; Jankowiak, et al., 2021; Orth, et al., 2010; Kalantarkoush, 2012; Sprecher et al., 2013). Many traits which are traditionally associated with masculinity enhance self-perception (Brunet et al., 2010), as those traits are highly valued socially. Admittedly, most studies have looked at self-esteem rather than self-acceptance, but it is worth emphasizing that these constructs are related (MacInnes, 2006). Perhaps young women can strengthen their self-acceptance during their studies through experiences of a self-developmental nature that are embedded in the process of studying. Higher self-acceptance is also characteristic of social studies students, i.e., those whose degree courses often contain several units focusing on getting to know themselves and others, and also developing social skills (Kapustová, 2024; Jankowiak et al., 2024). It can be assumed that these experiences have a positive effect on self-acceptance. Differences were also observed in the self-acceptance of Lithuanian students, who rated themselves worse than their Polish peers. This indicates the importance of developmental context in shaping positive self-perceptions, an aspect that certainly warrants further research.

Conclusion

Our research findings indicate that students with the lowest levels of self-acceptance in health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic will not actively work for others. In order to foster civic engagement, which is the key to well-functioning communities in crisis, it is important to take action to strengthen the self-esteem of students with the lowest levels of self-acceptance. These activities can take the form of both support and reinforcement of positive attributes, as well as socio-therapeutic interventions for vulnerable groups. The results of this project indicate that students in social studies, which include courses that aim to develop social skills and understanding of self and others, have higher levels of self-acceptance than students in humanities and natural sciences.

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