The Influence of the Differentiation of Social Psychological Situation in School on Life Satisfaction and the Mediating Mechanism

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Abstract: The current research explored the mediating role of self-esteem in the correlation between differentiation of social psychological situation in school (DSPSS) and students’ life satisfaction for primary and secondary school students under the framework of Self-Worth Orientation Theory. Based on a sample of 114 students, statistical analysis towards questionnaires containing demographic variables, differentiation of social psychological situation in school, self-esteem and life satisfaction was carried out. The results revealed that (1) significant positive correlation exited between DSPSS and students’ life satisfaction. (2) The effect of DSPSS on students’ life satisfaction was completely mediated by self-esteem. When a student’s social psychological situation is good, he will experience positive self-esteem, which leads to a more satisfied life. Conclusion: The differentiation of social psychological situation in school could positively predicted students’ life satisfaction and self-esteem would be the mediating mechanism.

Key words: DSPSS • Self-esteem • Life satisfaction • Self-Worth Orientation Theory

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of positive psychology, more and more researchers begin to explore subjective well-being (SWB). SWB contains both cognitive and affective components. The former can be further divided into positive emotions and negative emotions, while the latter refers to life satisfaction (LS) [1]. Life satisfaction is defined as a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his chosen criteria [2]. Individuals will report high life satisfaction if their perceived life circumstances are in line with their own standard [3]. Previous studies have documented that LS is an important indicator of positive psychological well-being [4, 5]. Although life satisfaction has been studied extensively in adults, students’ life satisfaction has been examined to a much lesser extent. Hence, it’s important for current researchers to explore life satisfaction of students and its influencing factors and internal mechanism.

The Differentiation of Social Psychological Situation in School (DSPSS) and Students’ Life Satisfaction: The Differentiation of Social Psychological Situation in School (DSPSS) refers to the differentiation of students’ psychological development environment in school [6]. The situational differentiation in school includes not only physical aspect, such as classroom facilities, seating position, but also psychological aspect which mainly consists of teacher-student relationship, peer relationship and parent-child relationship. All of these aspects have important influences on students' academic performance and social development [7, 8]. For students who receive more support and trust from teachers, peers and parents, they may have more positive social and psychological experiences in school, compared with those whose social and psychological situations are worse. Psychological situation differentiation in school plays a more important role on juvenile psychology and behavior when compared with physical situation differentiation in school [9].

According to the Self-Worth Orientation Theory, humans are reasonable and socialized animals, who are prone to find out the reasons underlying their doing [10, 11]. Following this assumption, the theory highlights that people need to construct and interpret the explanation systems inside and outside of themselves and find out who are they and the meaning of life. According to the interpretation of self-worth orientation, self-worth is the ultimate motivation of behavior. All endeavors humans do are aimed to prove their self-worth and with high sense of self-worth, individuals will generate high
self-esteem and self-confidence. Trust and support from significant others are important sources for students to reflect self-worth, which could lead to a more healthy physical and mental state. Researches have manifested that the bad effects of lacking significant others’ support brings disadvantages to teenagers, which could induce them to join in gangs for compensatory fulfillment [11]. Li et al. [9] found that the DSPSS (The higher score means students get more support and trust from teachers, peers and parents) could negatively predict adolescent’s Internet addiction. Other researchers also demonstrated the prediction of social support on life satisfaction [12]. As an important resource for youth’ self-worth, care and support from significant others such as teachers, peers and parents put students in a positive social psychological situation and may result in their higher life satisfaction.

Self-Esteem: Self-esteem refers to the positive evaluation and experience of self-worth in the process of social comparison [13]. Numerous studies have shown that self-esteem could significantly predict one’s level of satisfaction with life [14, 15]. Campbell et al. [16] found that among all the variables associated with life satisfaction, self-esteem is one of the most relevant predictors. Diener et al. [17] investigated 13118 college students from 31 nations and found that the correlation coefficient between life satisfaction and self-esteem was up to 0.4.

As mentioned in the previous section, the relationship between teacher - student, peer and parent – child constitute the most important interpersonal relationships between students [18]. Trust and support from teachers, peers and parents are the important source of students’ self-worth. When a student’s social and psychological situation is benign, significant others (teachers, peers, parents) would trust and support him or her and then these contribute to his or her self-esteem and self-confidence, which could lead to high self-esteem [11]. Hence, self-esteem is hypothesized as an important mediator because students endowed with trust and support from their teachers, peers and parents would be more satisfied with themselves and more likely to possess high self-esteem, which could in turn promote their life satisfaction.

Research Hypothesis: The present survey research investigated the differentiation of social and psychological situation in school’s influence on students’ life satisfaction and self-esteem’s mediation role. We assume that (1) the differentiation of social psychological situation in school has a significant effect on students’ life satisfaction and (2) self-esteem has a mediating effect on the above correlation (see the model in Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1: Model Diagram of the Research](image)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Objects: A total of 114 primary and secondary school students (50 boys and 64 girls) in Beijing were recruited online through the Qualtrics. The age range was between 8 and 19 years old. The average age is 15.12 years, with the standard deviation of 3.15 years.

Research Tools

Differentiation of Social Psychological Situation in School (DSPSS): We adopted the 25 item scale by Li et al. [9], which consists of 4 dimensions: teacher’s support and trust, peer’s support and trust, parent’s support and trust and student’s self-concept. The respondents were asked to make 4 point score on these questions (“1” means very inconsistent, “4” means very consistent). The higher score means that students get more support and trust from teachers, peers and parents. Cronbach’s coefficient ranges from 0.80–0.95 and the split-half reliability ranges from 0.84–0.93. Structural validity: CFI=0.98, TLI=0.98, IFI=0.98, RMSEA=0.07.

Life Satisfaction (LS): We adopted the 5-item scale by Diener et al. [19]. It included items such as, “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”, “The conditions of my life are excellent”. The respondents were asked to make 7 point score on this question. “1” means strongly disagree and “7” means strongly agree. Cronbach’s α= 0.83 and the split-half reliability was 0.80.

Self-Esteem: We adopted the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) [20]. This scale was developed by Rosenberg and contains 10 items assessing global self-esteem. Items are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Examples of items included: “I am able to do things as well as most other people”, “I take a positive attitude toward myself”. Cronbach’s α= 0.85 and the split-half reliability is 0.82.
In addition the questionnaire collected information on basic demographic variables such as respondent’s sex, age, years of father’s education, years of mother’s education and family socioeconomic status etc.

**Data Processing:** The software SPSS was used for the data analysis. First, a correlation analysis was conducted to provide an overall descriptive analysis. Then we used the bootstrapping procedure from Hayes [21] and the corresponding SPSS PROCESS macro to test the mediation effect.

**RESULTS**

**Correlation among DSPSS, Self-Esteem, Life Satisfaction and Respondents’ Background Information Variables:** As shown in Table 1, except for the correlation among sex and life satisfaction, self-esteem, DSPSS and family socioeconomic status, age and self-esteem, all correlations among variables were significant.

**The Mediation Effect Analyses:** We tested whether the effect of DSPSS on student’s life satisfaction was mediated by self-esteem or not. Fig. 2 presented a visual depiction of the mediation model. After controlling sex, age, parents’ educational background and the perception of the family socioeconomic situation, students’ life satisfaction could be significantly positively predicted by DSPSS ($\beta=0.14, t(99)=2.23, p=0.028, \eta^2=0.21$). Self-esteem could be significantly positively predicted by DSPSS ($\beta=0.11, t(99)=5.81, p<0.001, \eta^2=0.40$).

Finally, we conducted DSPSS and self-esteem into the life satisfaction model, the results revealed that DSPSS could not significantly predict life satisfaction ($\beta=0.03, t(98)=0.45, p=0.65, \eta^2=0.28$), while life satisfaction could still be significantly predicted by self-esteem. A 1000-resample bootstrap revealed a significant indirect effect of DSPSS on students’ life satisfaction via self-esteem ($b=0.11, SE=0.04, 95\% CI [0.05, 0.20]$). The confidence interval did not include 0, which meant that the effect of DSPSS on life satisfaction was fully mediated by self-esteem (see the model in in Fig. 2).

**DISCUSSION**

The research found that DSPSS significantly predicted students’ life satisfaction, when gender, age, parents’ educational background and the perception of the family socioeconomic situation were controlled. Self-esteem significantly predicted students’ life satisfaction, which is consistent with the results of previous studies [22, 23]. In addition, this research also found the mediation of self-esteem in the association between DSPSS and students’ life satisfaction.

**Effect of DSPSS on Students’ Life Satisfaction:** Our results demonstrated that students who received more trust and support from teachers, peers and parents (i.e., having better social and psychological situation), would be more satisfied with their life. The school-related social trust and support had positive impacts on students’ school satisfaction [24]. Previous study has demonstrated that teachers, peers and parents are significant others for students, especially for primary and secondary school students [9]. Based on the Self-Worth Orientation Theory, everyone is searching for self-worth and the meaning of life. When the individual’s sense of self-worth is high, he or she will experience more positive physical and mental state. The care and support from significant others are important resources that contribute to individuals' feelings of self-worth [11]. Therefore, students who receive more trust and support from teachers, peers and parents could have higher sense of self-worth, which in turn leads them to experience more happiness and satisfaction.

**The Mediation of Self-Esteem:** The research proved self-esteem’s mediation effect in the relationship between DSPSS and students’ life satisfaction. The path of DSPSS→self-esteem→life satisfaction was significant. This path indicates that individuals with good social and
psychological situation in school receive more trust and support from teachers, peers and parents and are apt to engaging in high self-esteem, which may lead to high life satisfaction. The mediating role of self-esteem is consistent with previous study suggesting self-esteem as a partial mediator in the relationship between social support and life satisfaction [25]. Here, the completely mediating role of self-esteem provided a new insight into the relationship between DSPSS and student’s life satisfaction. Students who receive sufficient support from teachers, peers and parents have a higher sense of self-worth, which generate positive self-esteem and lead to a more satisfied life. This finding also supports the Self-worth Orientation Theory. When individual’s sense of self-worth is positive, life will be meaningful and they will experience higher self-esteem, which in turn leads to higher life satisfaction. Among all the resources for students’ self-worth, students would be highly sensitive to significant others’ judgments and responds [11]. Hence, student who receives more trust and support from the significant others would be in a better social and psychological situation in school, which leads to a higher life satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Study: Some limitations in the current study should be addressed. First, the data of the research all came from questionnaire, so no causal relationship can be obtained. Hence, the causal relationship between DSPSS and Life satisfaction has to be confirmed in follow-up research. Secondly, although DSPSS consists of four dimensions, the present study regarded these dimensions as a whole when performing data analysis. Although teachers, peers and parents are significant others for students, some studies have found that this influence may differ in different age cohort. Trust and support from teachers and parents are relatively more important for primary students [9, 24]. Future researchers may examine the respective effects of different groups of significant others in different age groups.

CONCLUSIONS

- The differentiation of social psychological situation in school can positively predict students’ life satisfaction.
- Self-esteem can positively predict students’ life satisfaction.
- Self-esteem fully mediates DSPSS’s prediction effect on students’ life satisfaction.

REFERENCES


Appendix

Scale of the Differentiation of Social Psychological Situation in School:

The following sentences describe people's attitudes and opinions about you. Please make a judgment on the degree of compliance with your actual situation according to the situation described in the sentence and draw "©–" on the number of the corresponding option. Only one option can be selected for each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Very inconsistent</th>
<th>Slightly consistent</th>
<th>Basically consistent</th>
<th>Very consistent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers always smile at me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Classmates think I am smart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parents think I am a student with good moral character</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I trust my own competence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Parents love me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. classmates think my academic is good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teachers let me do something important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Classmates always smile at me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Parents trust my competence</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I think I am a student with good moral character</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I feel warm with my parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Classmates like me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Teachers have confidence in my development.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Classmates think my grade is good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Parents always smile at me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I have confidence in my own development.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Classmates think I am an excellent student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Teachers like me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I think my language ability is good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Parents have confidence in my development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. I like myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Classmates have confidence in my development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I think I am smart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I feel kind with my teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I think I am an excellent student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>