WHAT IS THE POINT OF UNHAPPINESS?
CASE STUDY ON HOW ADOLESCENTS RELATE TO UNHAPPINESS

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Abstract: *The scientific approach is based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained by applying the method of stimulating group creativity 6-3-5 on the topic: What is the point of unhappiness? Purpose of the investigation was: identifying ways in which adolescents relate to unhappiness; identifying key aspects (psycho-behavioural indicators) adolescents associate with unhappiness. After the statistical processing of data, we were able to outline the following indicators - in the negative register: mistrust, psychological imbalance, death, somatic diseases, low performance, vulnerability and vices; and in the positive register: power, growing up, emphasis on the quality of people, reflection on life and self-knowledge, change, managed emotions, appreciation of happiness and creativity. Unhappiness reveals our helplessness or power, brings us to our knees or empowers us, impoverishes and enriches us as people and adolescents seem to know this.*

Keywords: *unhappiness, stage of life, emotional competencies, adolescence.*

Emotional life in adolescents – vulnerabilities versus power

Emotional experiences of adolescents appear to include less happiness than in childhood (Arnett, 1999, p. 317; Robins et al., 2002, p. 428), adolescents are less happy than adults and this gap has narrowed with time (Twenge et al., 2015, p. 4), which indicates either the presence of emotional difficulties caused by new life events or evocative situations (from the past or the future) or an inability to deal with these emotional strains. Or we were only apparently happier in childhood than at any other age or something happened now, making us naturally wonder (Raghunathan, 2017, p.16): what don't we now know that we knew as children on how to be happy, or, conversely, we didn't we know as children and know now, and this

undermines happiness. Another series of studies, however, point out that in adolescence we witness an increase in the intensity of emotions, especially the negative ones, increased emotional instability and emotional disorders (Santrock, 1995; Arnett, 1999).

This raises some questions: to what extent is this emotional vulnerability influenced by the past and to what extent does it influence the future; to what extent can supportive interventions (educational, counselling, social policies) change this situation.

Studies cited by Adams & Berzonsky (2009, pp. 315-316) highlight more or less the same issues in adolescents: higher sensitivity to the past and the future, to events less significant before this age, emotional oscillations caused by the ephemeral nature of romantic relationships (Feiring, 1996), negative emotions oriented to the self, stronger in girls in relation to interpersonal contexts, but also in boys, however more related to achievements and activities in which they are involved (Hamilton & Jensvold, 1992), feelings of shame (more intense in girls) associated with psychosexual development, sexual experiences, compliance with gender roles, cultural standard of beauty, but also the degree of physical and sexual attractiveness (Reimer, 1996). We conclude that adolescence is full of novel events (firsts) serving for the first time as emotional triggers (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009, p. 316), and is a development period with special characteristics and with a decisive impact on the future of adolescents.

What makes the difference between happy adolescents and those who are victims of unhappiness?

When we are dealing with two different categories of adolescents: those with a well defined personal identity, independent and with an updated potential, and those inclined to a troubled development path, we cannot but wonder what contributed to this differentiation and how can we create equal opportunities for all for a favourable development. Based on the above considerations, we can easily suggest some courses of action:

1.   providing support to manage external stimuli (elimination of risk situations, interaction with situations that have a positive impact on development, proper reporting to these stimuli)

2.   providing support to control/manage, using various strategies, the own inner emotional world by facilitating self-knowledge;

3.   providing support in terms of emotional skills development, including: management of emotions, of a sense of wellbeing and resilience involving the use of coping strategies, and adjustment of stressors that generate emotions (Saarni, 2000, pp. 77-78, cited by Saarni, 2011). In essence, emotional skills are subsumed to emotional intelligence, an integrative concept including (Seal & Andrews-Brown, 2010): emotional

skills (potential innate capacities, the Salovey & Mayer model, 1990), emotional traits (favourite patterns, the Bar-On model, 1988), and emotional competencies (active learned behaviours, the Goleman model, 1995), to recognise and regulate own emotions and emotions belonging to others in order to efficiently and successfully adapt to the living environment (Goleman, 2008), to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour (Colman, 2009, p. 248) and to make right choice (Dumitru, 2001, p. 187). From this conceptual distinction, it appears that emotional intelligence is a potential to be trained, developed, exploited by forming emotional skills demonstrable in various everyday situations, thus ensuring success in life. Emotional competencies are a product of emotional intelligence, and especially of learning.

Can teenagers learn to be happy? Happiness is a subjective state of wellbeing which produces positive results physically, psychologically, behaviourally, socially and personally (Diener & Chan, 2011) and it depends on the satisfaction of life and living of pleasant emotions (Lelord & Andre, 2001), while unhappiness is the opposite. Given the relativism about what makes adolescents happy or unhappy (unhappiness-event or unhappiness-state), and the variability in their psycho-behavioural responses when confronted with these events/states, there is one central element that gives them the power to find answers to questions such as: How do adolescents manage unhappiness so they do not become its prisoners? How do we prevent the emergence of learned helplessness (Seligman, 2004)? Or how can we transform our vulnerabilities into power? Wayne L. Payne believed that emotional intelligence is a skill that involves a creative relationing with states of fear, pain, desire (Roco, 2001, p. 139), which allows for a superior adaptation to critical life situations. Do adolescents in unhappy life situations manage to have good performances and success in life? Goleman says yes, under certain conditions: those who are optimists (master aptitude), those who have a good mood that facilitates flexibility in thinking (good mood), those who think positively and have hope when faced with difficulties, those who experience the state of emotional involvement (flow) equal to passion in everything they do (Goleman, 1995, cited by Roco, 2001, pp. 168-171).

Studies should focus on adolescence as a period in which resources can be developed (strengths, qualities, potential), and not as a stage of life with issues that need to be managed (Lerner et al., 2009). To what extent can we capitalise on the strengths of age-specific development to form/develop emotional skills that will serve people throughout life?

For example, in the emotional sphere, adolescents have emotional skills regarding: reflection on mixed and conflicting emotions, regulation of emotions, concealing of emotions, and, to the other, they are capable of

empathy and guidance for others (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009, pp. 313-320). Intellectually, the ability to use heuristic strategies emerges, but also the facts of reality, the ability to inventory alternatives, possibilities, the need to philosophise and to shape an own conception of the world and life (Munteanu, 1998, pp. 239-241) and thought processes are more analytical and more reflective than previously (Birch, 2000, p. 263). Emotion and intellect are halves of the same whole being incomplete and ineffective without each other (Segal, 1999, p.11).

In relation to preteens and children, adolescents are better at *decision-making* (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009, pp. 271-272), a process by which a person tries to figure out *how* to achieve a particular purpose. Do adolescents have the purpose of being happy clearly defined? This involves searching for information on themselves and others, evaluating options and choosing one (the best), anticipating the consequences of their actions, and applying the solution and dealing with the consequences of their decisions (learning from the success or failure of their decisions). Yet, in real life, adolescents can make wrong decisions because they do not understand the factors that influence the quality of decision making (they focus on certain aspects only, neglecting important ones), because of a deficient self-knowledge and due to the lack of self-control strategies (emotional disorganisation, poor resilience to external pressure).

In this paper, we tried to capture how adolescents relate to unhappiness through an exercise that trains personal and group reflection by integrating multiple viewpoints. It should be noted that personal reflection is closely related to intelligence and the power of anticipation, the possibilities of abstraction and creation (Cerghit, 2006, p.190). Results highlighted both development resources and the difficulties adolescents associate with experimenting the state of unhappiness.

Methods and working procedure

The scientific approach is based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained by applying the method of stimulating group creativity 6-3-5. The 6-3-5 method consists in using the creativity of 6 participants who are required to write 3 ideas on the subject stated (each on a separate column of a sheet) and to add new answers on the sheets all team-mates following the 5 rotations, rendering a large number of ideas (about 108) in the group (Munteanu, 1994, p. 274-275). The group was then asked to select the 10 most valuable ideas. We used data from 28 such mixed groups (168 first year university students, aged 19 to 23), on the topic: What is the point of unhappiness? The students used their own emotional experience of what

understand by unhappiness. The exercise of self-reflection and group reflection on the topic of unhappiness highlighted two opposing registers: a negative dominant and a positive dominant, in which we were able to identify several indicators.

Purpose of the investigation. Identifying ways in which adolescents relate to unhappiness. Identifying key aspects (psycho-behavioural indicators) adolescents associate with unhappiness.

Results

The research is explorative and was based on the quantification of qualitative data. After the statistical processing of data, based on the frequency of answers recorded, we were able to outline indicators in the negative and positive registers. First, we identify the following indicators in the *negative register* (112, in percent 40%): mistrust (39), psychological imbalance (37), death (10), somatic diseases (8), low performance (7), vulnerability (6) and vices (5).

Table 1. Indicators of negative and positive registers associated with unhappiness

Indicators Negative register	Frequency	Percent	Indicators Positive register	Frequency	Percent
Mistrust	39	13.92	Power (motivation, will)	36	12.85
Psychological imbalance	37	13.21	Growing up	34	12.14
Death	10	3.57	Quality of people	23	8.21
Somatic diseases	8	2.85	Reflection	23	8.21
Low performance	7	2.50	Change	19	6.78
Vulnerability	6	2.14	Managed emotions	15	5.35
Vices	5	1.78	Appreciation of happiness	14	5
			Creativity	4	1.42
Total	112	(40%)		168	(60%)

Students mentioned a number of aspects they associate with unhappiness named negative indicators (see figure 1):

Figure 1. The frequency of negative indicators associated with unhappiness
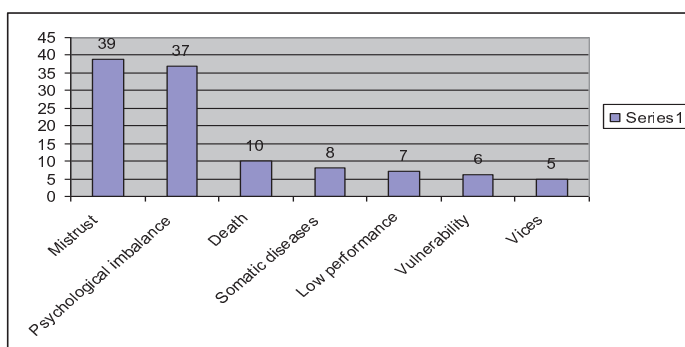
- **_Mistrust_** – loss of confidence in self, people, life and the future, self-neglect, self-contempt, negligence, insecurity, uncertainty, envy, malice, coldness in relationships, isolation, introversion, etc.
- **_Psychological imbalance_** – psychiatric pathology, mental illness, depression, anorexia, emotional instability, irritability, negativism, anger, dark thoughts, frustration, aggression, suffering, confusion, etc.
- **_Death_** – suicide, self-destruction, loss of life earlier, destruction of others, violence, genocide.
- **_Somatic diseases_** – indicating the connection between disease and unhappiness by various diseases such as cancer, ulcers, heart disease or simply mentioning the category.
- **_Low performance_** – without power to work, indifferent in everything, inactivity, lack of zest for life, lack of efficiency, low concentration power, unfulfilment, carelessness, failure, etc.
- **_Vulnerability_** – easily influenced, manipulated, wrong or hasty decisions, easily wounded, victim in the eyes of others, inferiority in relation to others, pitiful, gullibility, etc.
- **_Vices_** – mentioning addictions such as tobacco, alcohol, drugs.

We note the dominance of indicators such as mistrust, psychological imbalance and death, that raise some questions about the following: a) do adolescents perceive a causal link between unhappiness and these aspects or do they simply relate to them as some explanatory models in the absence of other explanations (such as, unhappy people kill themselves, develop various mental illnesses, or, simply, x has a mental illness and seeks explanations for this); b) or are these indicators alarm signals that adolescents send to adults (in which case the signals are evident as they raise relationing issues) or are they ways to express unhappiness to which they do not know how to relate (in which case discrete signals emerge that should not be ignored). In one optimistic variant, we can refer to these indicators as simple fears of adolescents who, when confronted with unhappiness, believe that _they are not ready_ to face it (personal vulnerability – psychological imbalance, death), and that _they cannot rely on anyone_ to get out of a situation (contextual

vulnerability – mistrust). In a pessimistic variant, the data indicate the orientation of adolescents to *a culture of death* (in percent 31%): hatred of others and of the self (mistrust), major mental distress (mental illness) and self-destruction (death). This is reinforced by the fact that only 9% associated unhappiness with indicators denoting a transient and relative vulnerability and with less serious consequences (somatic diseases, low performance, vices). In essence, we do not know whether these indicators mentioned are not those who maintain and amplify unhappiness (vicious circle).

From the point of view of the teacher/parent, we must be aware that, no matter how much we try to reassure the child's happiness, we cannot do it always and perhaps by doing so we weaken the child and turn him or her into a victim of unhappiness because he or she is not equipped to defend him/herself and to emerge victorious and stronger in this fight to win happiness. As happiness is not permanent and is sought, similarly unhappiness is not permanent and can be overcome. This will be reinforced by those mentioned below.

Noteworthy is that in the positive register the frequency of answers is higher (168, in percent 60%) and integrated the following indicators: power (36), growing up (34), emphasis on the quality of people (23), reflection on life and self-knowledge (23), change (19), managed emotions (15), appreciation of happiness (14) and creativity (4).

Figure 2. The frequency of positive indicators associated with unhappiness
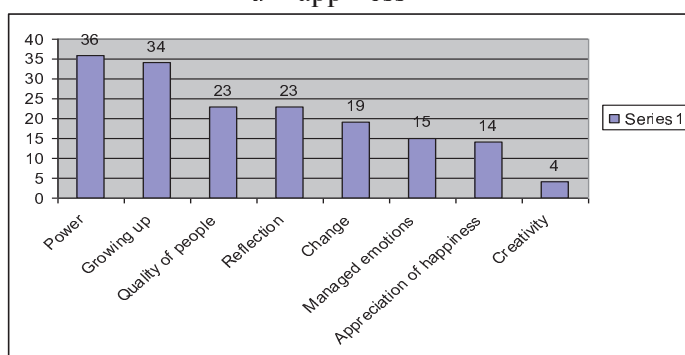
In the positive register, adolescents mentioned the following:

- ***Power*** – to become invincible, to become master of the situation, to have the power to deal with difficult situations (what does not kill you makes you stronger), to become strong again, to discern between good and evil or issues such as – strengthening the mind, trust in own powers, finding inner

strength, self-motivation (to challenge ourselves, to become better), strong will, strong character, resilience, ambition to conquer, stimulation to seek solutions, etc.

- *Growing up* – to know/exceed your limits, to seek solutions to not get in that situation again, to be more realistic, to accumulate experience, to realise that I was wrong, to think about own mistakes, to learn from mistakes, to think twice about what's right and what's wrong, to come back down to earth, to correct myself, to be responsible, to be more wise, to avoid situations that lead to unhappiness, to feel that I am alive, to be more careful, to do things seriously, etc.

- *Emphasis on the quality of people* – a) the quality of others – to ask/receive/accept help from people, to have someone when faced with difficulties, to identify friends and people who are not trustworthy, to identify low quality people that disregard me, marginalise me, isolate me, abandon me in hard times, or take advantage of the situation in which I find myself; b) personal qualities – to be sensitive to people's needs, to provide help, to do good deeds, to make others happy, to empathise with each other, to open up to each other, to appreciate the other people around, to be united with people like you, or, the opposite, to obtain some benefits from people, to take advantage of people's kindness.

- *Reflection* – self-knowledge and self-reflection – introspection, to know myself better, to reflect on oneself, to assess myself as a person, to discover new abilities, to rediscover myself, to self-analyse my life, to reflect on the matter, to better be aware of the reality, to have/find a personal view on the world, to contemplate, etc.

- *Change* – implies a desire for change: to start a new life, to reinvent yourself, to want new things, to reassess the direction of life, to seek new goals/ideals in life, a new meaning, a new life philosophy, to change something for the better in myself as an individual, to seek new development opportunities, etc.

- *Managed emotions* – to learn something from and about the current emotions: disappointment, emotional outpouring, sorrow, discomfort, sensitivity, empathy, fear, anger, anxiety, annoyance, sadness, dissatisfaction, disquiet, shame, guilt, embarrassment, envy, etc.

- *Appreciation of happiness* – to see what I've lost, to cherish true happiness, to balance happiness with unhappiness, to permanently seek happiness, etc.

- *Creativity* – helps you have artistic inspiration, express yourself artistically, produce something in art.

Unhappiness is a step for give us stronger and more maturity (25% of responses), it helps us to know better people, life and us (17% of responses).

Analysing the data obtained, we note the following: unhappiness is part of a process of personal development in which one gains in terms of personal power, maturity, self- and interpersonal knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, a development in which one moves towards a life with meaning. As we asked ourselves about the negative aspects associated with unhappiness, we are still puzzled by the following: is unhappiness placed by adolescents in a causal relationship with the emergence of these qualities (only by experiencing unhappiness may we end up possessing these qualities) or is it an explanatory model by which these qualities can be explained conjecturally (we generally believe that people experiencing happiness come to possess such qualities, less than the unhappy). We arrive at a paradox: unhappiness can bring something beautiful to light or can destroy what was beautiful in a person. Of course, as educators/parents, we are concerned with how to determine our children to exploit moments of unhappiness and make decisions that positively affect their lives. The answers are also suggested by this data: to educate that sense of personal power (will, motivation, personality traits, self-esteem, independence, resilience, etc.), to educate the sense of responsibility in everything they do (these are steps to growing up), to educate social skills (we are influenced by others and influence them by everything we do or do not do), to educate emotional competencies (we are emotional beings), to educate the ability to adapt to change and to make beneficial change decisions (nothing is permanent), to encourage creativity (there are no predetermined solutions for many problems of life).

In an optimistic version, we might believe adolescents are aware that unhappiness is transient and that it is just a life lesson that is getting them better prepared for the next one (60% of responses). But we must not forget that their answers have undergone a change through a negotiation process where the decisions have been made by the strongest. In a pessimistic version, we might think that these positive aspects are simple philosophical reflections unrelated to reality.

Weighing the data indicating the association of unhappiness with maladjustment and risk behaviour with data showing a positive behavioural spectrum, the saving solution comes from dealing directly with reality, correctly assessing personal resources and calling for mechanisms of adaptation (coping): seeking social support, problem solving, searching for information, relaxation techniques, humour, religion, positive reassessment, etc. (Băban, 2003, p. 170). By 10 years of age, most children are able to use these cognitive strategies to cope with stress (Saarni, 1999, cited by Santrock, 2011), but the general pattern vary with regard to intelligence and other personal characteristics.

In essence, we consider that unhappiness is a trigger of forces which subsequently give us happiness when we are focusing on personal development, clearly defined goals, closeness to people, self-knowledge, etc.: the force of the fighter or self-love, the force of responsibility, the force of altruism or love for another, the force of change, the force of knowledge and self-knowledge, the force of personal effort, the force of creativity, etc.

Conclusions

In this article we showed that adolescents associate unhappiness with two different registers – the negative register (40% of responses) and the positive register (60% of responses), indicating vulnerability and power elements. The positive register identified the following indicators: power, growing up, emphasis on the quality of people, reflection on life and self-knowledge, change, managed emotions, appreciation of happiness and creativity. The negative register identified the following indicators: mistrust, psychological imbalance, death, somatic diseases, low performance, vulnerability and vices. Because the subject itself was ambiguous – What is the point of unhappiness? – it makes sense to emphasise the limits of this study in that:

- because happiness is a concept difficult to define, similarly unhappiness can have many meanings for the respondents; we do not know if when thinking about unhappiness they called for a holistic analysis of their own lives or considered some concrete circumstances, and we do not know what kind of emotions (unhappiness-state) or events (unhappiness-event) they have classified as unhappiness (Kahneman & Tversky, 2003, cited by Raghunathan, 2017).

- in terms of the association unhappiness – the indicators mentioned above, we do not know whether it is a cause-effect association or simply an explanatory model;

- the frequency of responses may not reflect reality, because we do not know whether respondents called on their own life experiences or pure philosophical speculation.

Despite these limitations, some facts came to light that deserve to be studied further:

- despite the fundamental right to happiness (like studies says, adolescents are unhappy), easily renounce it (choose to function in negative register and become prisoners of unhappiness, sometimes amplifying it);

- adolescents do not differentiate between cause and effect, the consequences source in the emergence of unhappiness – negative indicators may themselves be a source of unhappiness and its cause, not only the effect or consequence;

- adolescents realise that unhappiness in itself is not bad, but is influenced by a personal choice for one of the two registers (positive register or negative register);

- adolescents know that unhappiness cannot be avoided, but can be transformed into happiness (happiness can be a consequence of the confrontation with unhappiness, it depends on our resources and on how we report to unhappiness in a manner specific to winners);

- generally, people avoid unhappiness, but it is a source from which we can learn a lot (learning is a generator of happiness through the psycho-behavioural acquisitions that make us stronger in any confrontation in life);

- as happiness requires an effort to acquire and maintain it, similarly, unhappiness requires a personal initiative to remove it, focused on constructive solutions, but for adolescents we note a weakness and an orientation towards the culture of death (31% of responses). We do not become happy by pitying ourselves, taking refuge in vices, and self-destruction.

- just as happiness is learned, so is unhappiness, which is why, as educators/parents, we must always ask ourselves what did my child learn from this happiness or unhappiness he or she experiences?

Unhappiness reveals our helplessness or power, brings us to our knees or empowers us, impoverishes and enriches us as people. Therefore, there is a school of unhappiness, a pedagogy of unhappiness from which everyone learns something or not, or that at least teaches us that sometimes you have to choose between happiness and unhappiness. And sometimes it is better to choose unhappiness that walls us up than happiness that dehumanises us.

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