ADOLESCENT PLAYFULNESS AND WELL-BEING
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Introduction
A common approach in studying adolescent well-being is to focus on the transactional processes between person and environment that are a function of their interactional relationship (Diener, 2000). Environmental influences on adolescent health are frequently grouped into a number of problem domains where young people most likely experience daily stressors and use various coping strategies that differ by age, gender and ethnic group (Copeland & Hess, 1995; Hess & Copeland, 2001; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). It has been noted that variation in personality is at the root of coping research (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), which is conceptualized according to a process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991) or the trait-oriented model (Haan, 1974; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Based on past research, it is claimed that particular personality dispositions enhance active coping styles, while others are known to lead to internal coping or withdrawal (Costa & McCrae, 1988; Frydenberg, 1990).

Playfulness has been suggested as a personality trait that might mediate positive coping and facilitate the reduction of daily stress during adolescence (Liebermann, 1971). If playfulness functions as a mediator of stress, it is assumed that adolescents who are more playful would either experience less stress, and hence, perceive higher levels of well-being or they would deal with stress in a more playful proactive manner. If the latter, the negative health effects of stress might be reduced. Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) have applied this type of thinking to leisure coping. However, playfulness in adolescence may also be antagonistic to well-being (Graham & Jardine, 1990). Highly playful adolescents may experience increased stress due to an incompatibility between their personality disposition and circumstances in the immediate environment. Incompatibility may be experienced during school, leisure or at home.

To examine the above relationships, a study was conducted to explore a possible link between a person’s propensity to play (i.e., playfulness) and her/his experience of daily stressors. As well, the role of playfulness as a mediator or an antagonistic factor in adolescent well-being across different social contexts was examined. Lieberman’s playfulness scale (1967) has been the only playfulness scale employed to measure the playfulness of adolescents. However, Lieberman’s scale is an observational rating scale, a method of data collection not recommended for use with adolescent populations due to its intrusive nature (Lightfoot, 1997). As a result, an adolescent playfulness scale was developed for this study. The theoretical underpinnings of the study are interactionist in nature and attention was given to the adolescents’ own evaluation and interpretation of playfulness and subjective well-being.

There were two key objectives: (1) the development of an instrument that would measure adolescents’ dispositions to play, in other words, perceived playfulness; (2) the assessment of a possible link between playfulness, satisfaction with leisure and school, and adolescents’ perceptions of daily stressors and various coping strategies.

Methods
A scale was developed using adolescents’ language and conceptualizations of playfulness. The operationalization of playfulness was based on the literature as well as
information collected with semi-structured interviews with 9 adolescents aged 13 to 19 years. The participant interviews were transcribed and the responses content analyzed, categorized, transformed into verbal statements, and subsequently included in the item pool from which the scale was created. Items based on the review of literature were also developed and included in the item pool. All items were examined for redundancies and assessed to determine if they could be grouped into one or more dimensions that would represent the playfulness conceptual domain. It was decided to adapt Lieberman’s five existing domains in developing the adolescent playfulness scale to ensure that the playfulness domain was fully represented by items. The five domains were labeled physical animation, social engagement, mental spontaneity, emotional fluidity and humorous perspective. Domain specific definitions were developed. A panel of judges including adult researchers familiar with the concept of playfulness, and adolescents who had participated in the interviews evaluated the items for content and face validity. Adjustments were made to the overall item pool by removing irrelevant and redundant items and by modifying unclearly stated items. This process reduced the number of items to a total of 45. The final 45 items were pilot-tested for scale purification purposes using a 5-point-Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ‘almost never true for me’ to 5 ‘almost always true for me’.

A pilot test was conducted to examine the psychometric qualities of the preliminary scale. University students (n = 70) were recruited from first and second-year recreation courses and adolescents aged 13 to 18 (n = 60) were recruited from a local junior high school and high school as well as some community groups. A standard principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation was performed on the items. A cut off of .4 for factor loadings was used to eliminate items. It was decided to extract five factors suggested by the scree plot and based on previously stated theoretical considerations. The five factors extracted accounted for a total of 65% of the variance. The factor loading of an item on a particular dimension of the overall scale represents the convergent validity of the item. Reliability analyses were conducted to select items that comprise an internally consistent scale and that represented the full conceptual domain of the playfulness construct. Cronbach alpha was calculated to measure internal consistency. It was decided to select 20 items and coefficient alpha for the 20 items was .89. The inter-item correlations (.25 to .61) and coefficient alpha ranging from .73 to .85 for each of the subscales suggested that they had adequate internal consistency and reliability for research purposes.

The newly developed adolescent playfulness scale was then incorporated into a self-administered questionnaire consisting of other scales and questions that included (a) the Leisure Satisfaction Scale (LSS, Beard & Ragheb, 1980), (b) the Problem Questionnaire (PQ, Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), and (c) the Coping Across Situations Questionnaire (CASQ, Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), and (d) the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (BABS, Bradburn, 1965). Also included were questions related to adolescent health and well-being, leisure behaviour and leisure time use (adapted from Heintzman, 1999), adolescent school experience (adapted from Zuzanek & Mannell, 2001), and general demographic information such as age and gender. A 5-point Likert-type response format was used for rating all of the scale items in the survey. A total of 113 adolescents aged 13 to 19 were recruited from local high and junior high schools to participate in this next phase of the study. Correlation and regression procedures were used to examine linear
relationships between playfulness, perceived daily stressors, coping strategies, leisure and school experience, and health.

**Results**

Playful adolescents experienced higher levels of leisure satisfaction \((r = .69)\). All correlations and beta coefficients reported are significant at least at the \(p < .05\) level. Leisure satisfaction based on meeting social \((r = .59)\), educational \((r = .53)\), psychological \((r = .50)\), relaxation \((r = .51)\) and physiological \((r = .42)\) needs showed a positive association with playfulness (PF). During leisure, playful adolescents appeared to be

Less PF adolescents seem to experience more problems with their peers \((r = -.13)\) and issues related to the self \((r = -.17)\). Although high PF teens compared to less PF teens use active coping, internal coping and withdrawal mechanisms when dealing with different daily hazards they overall use different coping styles for different types of problems, particularly active socially \((r = .37)\), and physically \((r = .33)\) as well as the outdoors \((r = .31)\). In terms of school experience, adolescent PF is associated with higher participation on sports teams but not the number of hours participating. No association was observed with other extracurricular activities, or how well they do academically at school. However, playful teens like to go to school, are more likely to take school seriously and to regard secondary education as very important. Also, they appear to find opportunities to be playful at school \((r = .34)\). In terms of health and well-being, playful adolescents experience higher affect \((r = .44)\), high levels of self-confidence \((r = .31)\) and physical health \((r = .21)\), that is higher overall well-being \((r = .33)\).

**Discussion**

The analyses suggest that differences exist in the way playful adolescents experience their leisure and that they are particularly active socially, physically and the outdoors. They generally like going to school and take school and future academic expectations seriously. Except for participation on school sports teams they are not more involved in extracurricular activities both in type and degree of involvement. Playful adolescents actually felt that school offers them the opportunity to be playful. Overall, playful adolescents experience high mental and physical health. Less playful adolescents appear to experience problems with their peers and with issues related to self. When faced with daily hazards playful teens engage in a combination of coping strategies depending on the problems at hand. Playfulness appears to function as a positive mediator rather than an antagonistic force in the experience of stress and coping. No gender and age differences were observed.

**Practical Application**

Findings from this study are particularly relevant to the field of practice in suggesting the importance of promoting play and playfulness as an asset to positive adolescent development and well-being. The findings imply that playfulness functions as a type of dispositional resiliency during adolescence due to its stress-moderating properties particularly during leisure. Also, playfulness has the capacity to alleviate boredom, release tension and prevent aggression, and to promote group membership and civic engagement, which may enhance positive experiences at school, at home or during leisure. It is in the best interest of parents, educators, and service providers to collectively
work towards a reduction of short and long-term stressful life events in order to minimize an individual’s vulnerability to long-term physical and mental health problems. Investing in preventative, proactive developmental measures is socially and economically feasible and provides young people with a much-needed protective buffer against future stresses.

References


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