

Personal self-concept and satisfaction with life in adolescence, youth and adulthood

Eider Goñi Palacios, Igor Esnaola Echaniz, Arantzazu Rodríguez Fernández and Igor Camino Ortiz de Barrón
Universidad del País Vasco

Abstract

Background: The main aim of this study was to explore the relationships between personal self-concept and satisfaction with life, with the latter as the key indicator for personal adjustment. The study tests a structural model which encompasses four dimensions of self-concept: self-fulfillment, autonomy, honesty and emotions. **Method:** The 801 participants in the study, all of whom were aged between 15 and 65 ($M = 34.03$, $SD = 17.29$), completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and the Personal Self-Concept (APE) Questionnaire. **Results:** Although the four dimensions of personal self-concept differ in their weight, the results show that, taken together, they explain 46% of the differences observed in satisfaction with life. This implies a weight that is as significant as that observed for general self-esteem in previous research studies. **Conclusions:** This issue should be dealt with early on, during secondary education, in order to help prevent psychological distress or maladjustment.

Keywords: personal self-concept, personal adjustment, satisfaction with life, adolescence, adulthood.

Resumen

El autoconcepto personal y la satisfacción con la vida en la adolescencia, juventud y edad adulta. **Antecedentes:** el principal objetivo de esta investigación consiste en precisar las relaciones entre el autoconcepto personal y la satisfacción con la vida, asumida como el indicador central del ajuste personal, sometiendo a prueba un modelo estructural que contempla cuatro dimensiones del autoconcepto: la autorrealización, la autonomía, la honradez y las emociones. **Método:** los 801 participantes en el estudio, quienes tienen edades comprendidas entre 15 y 65 años ($M = 34.03$; $DT = 17.29$), respondieron a los cuestionarios Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) y Autoconcepto Personal (APE). **Resultados:** aunque el peso de cada una de las cuatro dimensiones del autoconcepto personal es diferente, los resultados muestran que en conjunto explican un 46% de la satisfacción con la vida. Ello supone un peso tan significativo como el de la autoestima general, según lo hallado en otras investigaciones previas. **Conclusiones:** esta cuestión debiera abordarse ya desde la Educación Secundaria para trabajar de forma preventiva el malestar o desajuste psicológico.

Palabras clave: autoconcepto personal, ajuste personal, satisfacción con la vida, adolescencia, vida adulta.

It is now widely accepted that self-concept includes references to how one sees oneself, not only physically and from an academic/professional and social perspective, but also within the most private and personal spheres of life. Nevertheless, there is a clear lack of models that aim to integrate the various different components or dimensions of personal self-concept that may, together, provide a fuller and more accurate account of this construct (Goñi, Madariaga, Axpe, & Goñi, 2011).

One of the first allusions to *personal self-concept* appears in the various versions of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, by Roid and Fitts (1988). However, psychological research has focused mainly on two dimensions of personal self-perception: moral self-concept and emotional self-concept (Goñi, 2009).

A change in this trend was noted in a study which aimed to specify the internal structure of *personal self-concept*, understood as “each person’s perception of the most private and individual aspects of his or her personality” (Goñi et al., 2011). This study provided empirical evidence corroborating the four-dimension proposal (Goñi, 2009) based on the perception of *self-fulfillment* (how people see themselves in relation to achieving the aims and objectives of their life), *autonomy* (how people see themselves in relation to being equal to yet different from others, as self-sufficient individuals with the capacity to decide for themselves), *emotions* (how people perceive themselves in the emotional dimension, in relation to the most impulsive and reactive aspects of their personality) and *honesty* (how people see themselves in relation to being honorable and trustworthy).

No matter how much explanatory power self-concept has in relation to human behavior, it nevertheless operates in constant interaction with other personal and contextual characteristics that either facilitate or hinder individuals’ adjustment to both themselves and their environment. The term *psychosocial adjustment* has no specific, commonly-accepted definition and is measured through more specific dimensions such as personal

and school adjustment, and personal maladjustment and emotional symptomatology (Jauregizar, Bernaras, Ibabe, & Sarasa, 2012). Moreover, in many cases, it is used as an equivalent of *personal and social adaptation* (Mruk, 2006; Shavelson et al., 1976) or *psychological maturity and well-being* (Mestre & Fernández-Berrocal, 2007; Ryff, 1989).

In addition to the clinical and psychopathological approach, over recent decades, the question of psychological well-being has been the object of much attention within the field of psychology, as the result of a renewed interest in the positive dimensions of psychosocial adjustment (Madariaga & Goñi, 2009; Cava, Buelga, Musitu, & Murgui, 2010) and their relationship with variables such as quality of life (Molina, Meléndez, & Navarro, 2008). Two main approaches have emerged from this: one focusing on *psychological well-being* and the other on *subjective well-being*.

In relation to the former, it was Ryff (1989) who first proposed that *psychological well-being* is associated not only with short-term affective states, but also with higher levels of psychological development, such as, for example, the sense of personal direction and self-fulfillment (Cuesta, 2004).

Studies on *subjective well-being*, on the other hand, tend to focus on hedonic well-being, happiness and/or satisfaction with life (hedonic tradition). The most widespread version within this second trend (Diener, 2009; Rodríguez & Goñi, 2011) views subjective well-being, or happiness, as a reality made up of two components: a cognitive one (*satisfaction with life*) and an affective one, called *affective balance* (or hedonic level).

In either case, talking about adjustment from this perspective requires the term to be defined in a positive manner and necessarily alludes to its more personal aspect. Personal adjustment may therefore be manifested in variables such as satisfaction with life and psychological well-being.

The results of previous research on the relationship between self-concept and adjustment (Fuentes, Fernando, Gracia, & Lila, 2011) are still relatively recent (Martínez-Antón, Buelga, & Cava, 2007), and those carried out from a multidimensional conception of self-concept are even more recent (Mruk, 2006). Moreover, they focus more on the social side of adjustment, taking social behaviors, eating and consumption habits and social integration, etc. as correlates of good self-concept (Fuentes et al., 2011).

Despite this, however, an increasing body of evidence exists to support the idea that self-assessment plays a key role in the personal side of adjustment. In other words, the perceptions people have of themselves predict satisfaction with life, subjective well-being and self-acceptance (García, Musitu, & Veiga, 2006; Goñi & Infante, 2010; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000). Individuals with a better self-concept assess their life more positively (Moreno, Estévez, Murgui, & Musitu, 2009; Rodríguez, 2008). In specific terms, high self-concept is directly related to greater satisfaction with life in adolescents, whereas low self-concept is associated with a negative assessment of one's life (Furr & Funder, 1998) and has a detrimental effect both on family problems (Arranz, Olabarrieta, Yenes, & Martín, 2001) and academic performance (Rodríguez, Cabanach, Valle, Núñez, & González-Pienda, 2004).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the relationships between these psychological variables still need to be specified in more detail. While previous studies have analyzed the relationship between satisfaction with life and the physical (Goñi & Infante, 2010) and emotional dimensions of self-concept (Garaigordobil, Durá, & Pérez, 2005), none have yet focused on the relationship

between this variable and personal self-concept. Moreover, the majority of the results reported pertain only to adolescents.

The main aim of this study is therefore to analyze the personal adjustment of adolescents, youths and adults (measured through satisfaction with life) in accordance with the dimensions of personal self-concept. For this purpose, the study tests a MIMIC model (Figure 1) with the following independent variables: self-perceptions of self-fulfillment, honesty, emotions and autonomy. The aim is to verify the model, or in other words to determine whether satisfaction with life varies in accordance with individuals' perceptions of their self-fulfillment, autonomy, honesty and emotions.

Method

Participants

Participants were initially 1,003 individuals resident in the Spanish Autonomous Region of the Basque Country, although the final sample group numbered 801 participants. All were members of different institutions and social groups: high schools (one public and two public with some state funding in the province of Álava – 98 participants-; and three public high schools in the province of Bizkaia - 91-); universities (faculties and colleges of the UPV/EHU – University of the Basque Country, including the Teacher Training College and the Faculty of Physical Education in Álava – 81 -, the Teacher Training College and Social Education Faculty in Bizkaia – 59 – and the Faculty of Education in Gipuzkoa – 93-); NGOs and associations (55), dance groups (46) and music groups (88) from Bizkaia, and an Arts and Crafts School (116), the fire brigade (20), gymnasiums (36) and an Adult Education School (26) in Álava.

Since the study focuses on adulthood as well as on youth and adolescence, in addition to the usual academic spheres (high schools and universities), participants were recruited from different groups with a wide range of characteristics, and an effort was made to locate individuals involved in some kind of organized activity. The sampling process was carried out on the basis of convenience (in accordance with participants' accessibility), with a cluster design (since we looked for natural groupings of participants) and following a quota-based criterion (each sex and age subgroup had to contain at least 30 subjects in order to ensure a reasonable degree of representativeness) (see table 1).

After eliminating those subjects who failed to respond to at least 90% of the items and outliers or cases with extreme or inconsistent responses, the sample group consisted of a total of 801 participants aged between 15 and 65 ($M = 34.03$; $SD = 17.29$). Of these, 329 (41.1%) were men and 472 (58.2%) were women (Table 1).

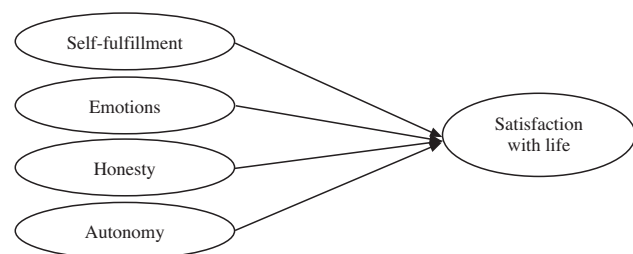


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the theoretical model (page 8)

Table 1
Distribution of participants according to age and sex (page 9)

	15-17 (secondary school)	18-20 (under- grads)	21-24 (postgrads)	25-34	35-49	50-65	Total
Men	44	57	48	59	40	81	329 (41.1%)
Women	83	78	50	91	58	112	472 (58.9%)
Total	127 (15.9%)	135 (16.9%)	98 (12.2%)	150 (18.7%)	98 (12.2%)	193 (24.1%)	801

Instruments

Satisfaction with life refers to participants' global satisfaction with the different areas and conditions of their life, to their current and achieved goals and the events of their past. To measure this (with a single scale), we used the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985), translated into Spanish by Atienza, Pons, Balaguer and García-Merita (2000). In both the original version and the translation, the psychometric properties of the instrument are adequate, offering in the latter case an internal consistency of .82 and an index of .831 with the data of the present study. Response options range from *Strongly disagree*, scored with a 1, to *Strongly agree*, scored with a 7.

Personal self-concept, understood as people's perception of themselves as individual beings, independently from their physical and social environment, was measured using the Personal Self-Concept Questionnaire (APE). In its initial version (Goñi, 2009), the questionnaire comprised 22 items, although later adjustments (Goñi et al., 2011) led to a definitive version containing 18 items, all of which are scored on a Likert-type response scale. The internal consistency of the instrument in its original version is .834, while the figure obtained in the present study was .821.

Procedure

The schools in which the questionnaires were administered were mainly public ones, to which a letter had previously been sent explaining the study and type of participation being requested. Once the principals of the schools in question had given their permission, they contacted the parents of participating minors in order to request their authorization.

The questionnaire was administered to each group or class in face-to-face sessions lasting approximately 20 minutes. These sessions were conducted by a member of the research team. Emphasis was placed on the fact that participation was strictly voluntary and respondents were assured that the data obtained would be completely anonymous. Furthermore, the single blind criterion was followed, thus preventing participants from knowing the aim of the research study being carried out.

This study obtained a favorable report of the Commission of Ethics of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).

Data analysis

After collecting the completed questionnaires, subjects who, despite the preventive measures adopted, were considered not to

have provided reliable and valid responses were eliminated, along with all respondents over the age of 65. Three criteria were used to eliminate subjects with non-reliable and/or invalid responses: random and insincere response item analysis, total number of items responded to and response consistency.

The second criterion used for eliminating participants from the database was failure to answer an appreciable number of items, regardless of the positive or negative nature of their responses. This was because said behavior often denotes a lack of sincerity or, at least, a certain degree of apathy in relation to the test.

The third criterion was also vital in order to process the questionnaires of subjects with extreme or missing responses, as well as to ensure the multivariate normality required for this type of statistical analysis. This normality is assessed by both the Mardia index and the analysis of missing values and multivariate outliers detected using the Mahalanobis distance. To this end, different software packages that enable the use of SEM methodologies were used simultaneously: SAS, Mplus, EditPlus, EQS, LISREL, etc.

The most commonly recommended procedure for testing the fit of a structural model is structural equation modeling (SEM), in which a set of observed variables influence one or more latent variables. Within this type of procedure, we opted for a MIMIC model, which enabled us to determine which (independent observed) variables may be influencing each of the latent (dependent) factors included in the theoretical model (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004).

Results

Before testing the MIMIC model representing our hypothesis (Figure 2), we checked and corroborated the unidimensionality of the items corresponding to the observed predictor variables; this enabled the use of representative parcels for each variable.

Once the prior conditions had been ensured, the model's fit indexes were calculated. The Chi squared value ($X^2 = 46.59$; $df = 21$) indicated a significant fit of the data to the MIMIC model, since the division of the two indicators is between 2 and 3 (2.81). However, since this index is slightly biased, attention was also paid to others, all of which indicated a good fit: RMSEA .039 ($p = .88$), NNFI and CFI = .99 and SRMR = .02.

The standardized solution revealed factor saturations of .63 for *self-fulfillment*, .11 for *honesty*, .06 for *emotions* and .03 for *autonomy*. However, the T values indicated that not all relations were significant. Thus, the observed variables *self-fulfillment* and *honesty* defined the latent variable *satisfaction with life*; however, the T values corresponding to the indicator variables *emotions* ($T = 1.88$) and *autonomy* ($T = 1.01$) indicated that these are not so important for explaining the variability observed in the latent variable.

Furthermore, the structural equations indicated that 46% ($R^2 = .46$) of the variance observed in relation to *satisfaction with life* can be explained, while the remaining 54% of the error variance is not explained due to variables not included in the model. The T values of the structural equation coefficients (Table 2) indicate that neither *emotions* nor *autonomy* significantly predict satisfaction with life at a confidence level of .05; however, *self-fulfillment* ($T = 18.38$) and *honesty* ($T = 3.40$) were found to predict satisfaction with life to a greater extent.

Bearing all these results in mind, and in the interests of parsimony, the model was then flexibly modified to obtain a better

fit. In order to identify the complex relationships which best explain satisfaction with life, we decided to eliminate from the MIMIC model (Figure 3) the two variables that did not significantly predict satisfaction with life: emotions and autonomy.

On this occasion, the Chi squared value was 42.74 (df = 13; p = .00005), indicating a worse fit of the data to the MIMIC model,

since the division of the two indicators was over 3 (3.29). In relation to the other indexes, all indicated a good fit: RMSEA .053 (p = .88), NNFI and CFI = .99 and SRMR = .023. Nevertheless, both the RMSEA and the SRMR indicate a worse fit for the model which includes only two variables, in comparison with the previous one which contemplated all four observed variables (Table 3).

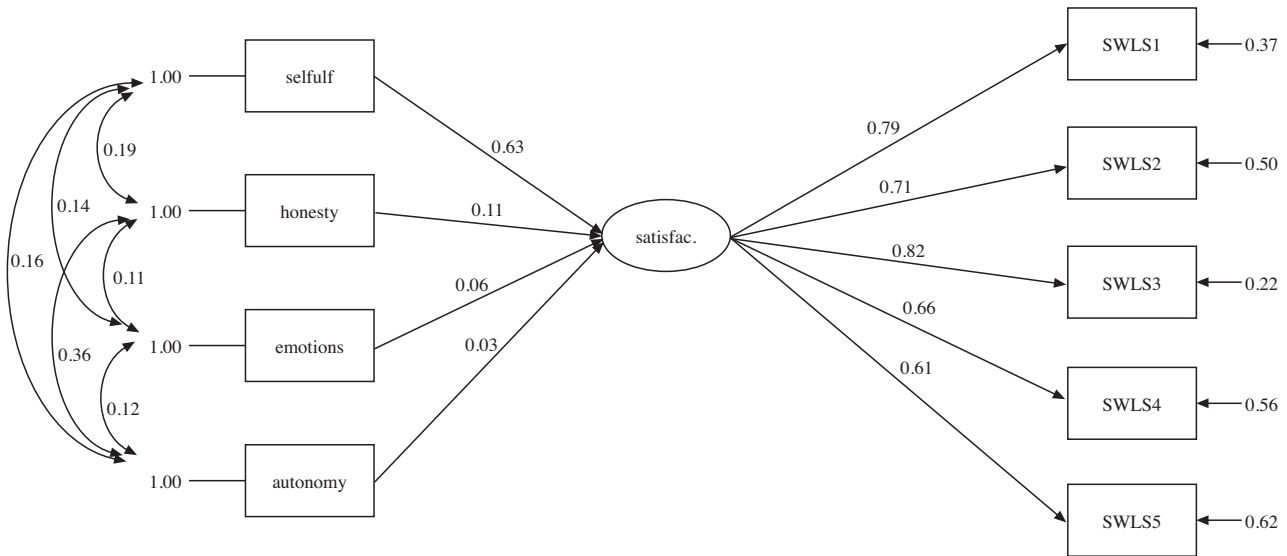


Figure 2. MIMIC model that relates personal self-concept with satisfaction with life (page 11)

	Self-fulfillment	Honesty	Emotions	Autonomy
Coefficients	.63	.11	.056	.032
Standard errors	.034	.032	.030	.045
T values	18.38	3.40	1.88	11.96
R ² satisfaction	.46			

In short, the results indicate that the four-observed-variable model (i.e. the initial one) has a better fit. In other words, although emotions and autonomy do not have as much weight in explaining satisfaction with life, the two-observed-variable model does not seem to provide a better representation of the responses given by participants, since the difference between the two models is not statistically significant, bearing in mind that the RMSEA of one is included in the confidence interval of the other.

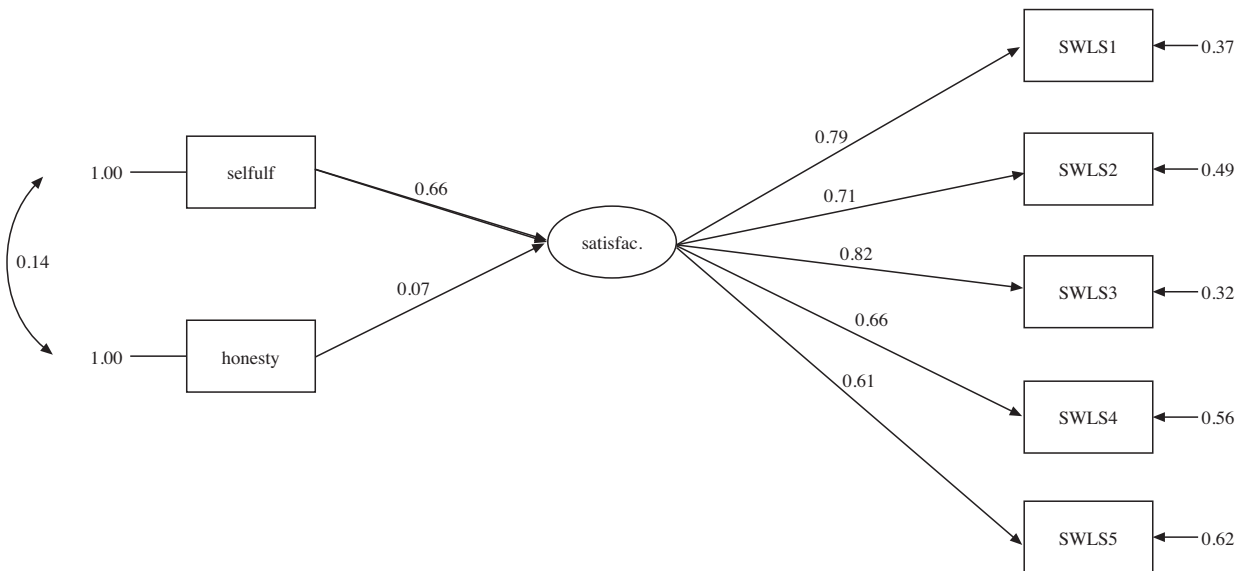


Figure 3. Modified MIMIC model (page 13)

Table 3
Goodness of fit parameters for the hypothesized models (page 13)

	X ²	df	p	div	RMSEA (confidence interval)	NNFI	CFI	SRMR
Mod4obs	46.59	21	.0016	2.81	.039 (.024 - .054)	.99	.99	.02
Mod2obs	42.74	13	.00005	3.29	.053 (.036 - .071)	.99	.99	.023
Recommended minimum				2-3	<.08 - <.05	>.90 - >.95		<.08

Discussion

Satisfaction with life is an indicator of personal adjustment that reflects the extent to which people value their life positively and feels satisfied with what they have achieved in it. It is very important to expand our knowledge of what may affect this satisfaction, and here, the weight of personal self-concept has been clearly established. In specific terms, the four dimensions of personal self-concept explain 46% of the variability observed in said construct. No previous results have been reported in this respect, since personal self-concept is the least studied of the self-concept domains, although the findings of some previous correlational studies did seem to indicate its importance (Goñi, 2009).

Previous studies have identified the close relationship which exists between satisfaction with life and self-esteem (Campbell, 1981), physical self-concept (Rodríguez, 2008) and the emotional dimension (Garaigordobil et al., 2005), and one study carried out using structural equations confirmed that satisfaction with life is explained by support from family and friends, mediated by academic self-concept (Rodríguez, Droguett, & Revuelta, 2012). It is also affected by general self-esteem, which is itself explained (to a large extent) by the individual's social climate and school adjustment during adolescence (Martínez-Antón et al., 2007).

However, with the exception of general self-esteem, no study has found any one variable to have such strong explanatory power in the explanation of satisfaction with life. The correlation between self-esteem and satisfaction with life varies in different studies between .30 and .40 (Huebner, 1991; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Ying & Fang-Biao, 2005). This should be taken into special consideration in the school environment, which tends to focus more on academic than on personal development. Whatever the case, it is clear that further analysis is required of the multidimensional perspective of self-concept in relation to psychosocial adjustment (Musitu & Herrero, 2003).

The results of this study indicate major differences between the contributions made by each dimension of personal self-concept, with self-fulfillment standing out from the rest. It is hardly surprising that self-fulfillment be the scale for which the strongest correlation was found; attaining a high level of well-being is the result of the growth that takes place as part of one's personal development (Ryff, 1989), which itself coincides with the humanist vision of development, the high point of which is self-fulfillment. However, this study focuses on the predictive capacity of this dimension in relation to satisfaction with life, the result of which was .63.

While the affective-emotional dimension of self-concept seems to be important in satisfaction with life (Garaigordobil et al., 2005; Martínez, González-Arratía, Oudhof, Domínguez,

& Olivos, 2012), it is not surprising to find that it seems to have less weight than the other factors, since, in accordance with Diener's well-being model, an individual's emotional environment is measured by the balance of positive and negative affect. In other words, if there is indeed (as there seems to be) a parallel between personal self-concept and psychological well-being, the self-fulfillment dimension would explain the cognitive-evaluative dimension of well-being (satisfaction with life), while emotional self-concept would explain the affective dimension (positive and negative affect). This may constitute a working hypothesis for moving forward in our exploration of the relationships which exist between two different yet complete models: well-being and self-concept.

In relation to honesty, the relationship between self-concept and development or moral maturity has been acknowledged for decades (Mestre, Pérez-Delgado, Samper, & Martí, 1999), with moral maturity being understood as an indicator of psychological well-being. More specifically, adolescents with a more post-conventional level are also those with a higher self-concept (especially moral self-concept) and a greater degree of self-satisfaction (Pérez-Delgado & Mestre, 1995). Nevertheless, no studies exist which either corroborate or refute the result found in this study, namely that, while significant, the weight of this dimension is not the highest of the four.

Finally, it is also worth highlighting that only a very few studies exist which focus on the role people's perception of their own autonomy plays in their well-being. In the field of physical-sporting activity, autonomy is considered an explanatory variable, as it is understood that giving sportspeople responsibility, and therefore autonomy, fosters the development of their intrinsic motivation, which in turn has an effect on satisfaction with life, mediated by self-esteem (Contreras, González, Cechini, & Carmona, 2004). Thus, it can be concluded that developing individual and social responsibility through education (both physical and general) helps to foster satisfaction among students (Moreno & Vega, 2011).

It should be remembered that the results presented herein refer to adults, a segment of the population that is difficult to access due to its broad-ranging nature and dispersion. Consequently, the sample group used in this study (selected by convenience and on a quota basis) limits the generalization of the results and a greater standard error should be assumed than in other types of probabilistic samples.

Future research should aim to overcome this limitation and analyze how the introduction of curricular development models affects adolescent students' satisfaction with life. Working with adults is more complicated, but it should nevertheless be borne in mind that we now have a new target variable on which to focus, namely self-fulfillment. One way of working with this segment of

the population may be to establish agreements with institutions attended by or made up of adults, such as adult education centers, art and crafts schools and civic centers, etc. In any case, it is vital to determine whether or not this model remains stable across different age groups (adolescence, youth and adulthood), as differences will presumably exist.

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