

Chapter #26

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES ACROSS ADULTHOOD: STABILITY, CHANGES, AND THEIR ROLE ON WELLBEING DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning is an integral part of human education and development and is the process through which everyone, children, and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence.

The main objective of the study was to observe how the different stages of the adult life are characterized by social and emotional skills. A second goal was to understand the relationships holding between Social and Emotional Competences (SECs), wellbeing experienced, and future time perspective.

A total of 212 adults living in Northeast of Italy were surveyed for their Socioemotional skills, future time perspective, and wellbeing. According to their age, three groups were identified, including young adults, adults and middle adults.

Results confirm the specificity of SECs across adult development. Regression-based mediation models evidence the role of SECs as mediator in the relationship between future time perspective and psychological wellbeing. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) reveal as an integral part of adult education and lifelong learning and a guide in prevention and support actions.

Keywords: socio-emotional competences, future time perspective, wellbeing, adult development, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adults live in a globalized society characterized by high insecurity, challenges, and rapid changes that include digitization and individualization, economic crisis, global competition and reshape their lives in a way that they struggle to predict (Balliester, & Elsheikhi, 2018). Additionally, the challenges and the transitions that adults face through their adult life are diverse: emerging adults face the transition of identity from student to the young worker and the achievement of an economic level that ensures independence; middle adults' life is characterized by challenges concerning the work and family environment. Later, adults play a constellation of roles from which derive many responsibilities as to the end of the working career. During adult development, life skills such as social and emotional skills, being able to achieve the set goals derived from the different roles can influence the ability to both manage daily challenges and project into the future and (Arnett, Robinson, & Lachman, 2020; Kjellström & Stålné, 2017; Robinson, 2020). It is important then to understand their role in adult positive development and wellbeing.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Socio-Emotional Competences and their Impact on Everyday Life

Socio-Emotional Competences (SECs) include the ability to understand and manage emotions, express emotions in appropriate ways, set and achieve positive goals, feel empathy and concern for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Social and emotional learning is an integral part of human education and development and is the process through which everyone, children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence (CASEL, 2020).

Five broad domains are proposed by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning's (CASEL): (a) self-awareness (recognizing own thoughts and behaviours, assessing own strengths and weaknesses), (b) self-management (regulating emotions and behaviors, working toward important goals), (c) social awareness (taking others' perspectives, understanding behavioural norms, utilizing social support), (d) relationship skills (creating and maintaining positive relationships, communicating effectively), and (e) responsible decision-making (making sound decisions in the context of internal and external demands (Weissberg et al., 2015).

In more recent studies (Davidson et al., 2018) Self-Awareness and Self-Management are proposed as the two main domains of analysis. Self-Awareness divided into (a) self-awareness of strengths/weaknesses, which involves capacities for accurately recognizing their own abilities, and (b) self-awareness of emotions, which captures students' abilities to recognize their own feelings and how those feelings impact their behaviours. Self-Management was separated into (a) self-management of emotion, which refers to the ability to manage negative emotions and control impulsive behaviours; (b) self-management of goals, which means the ability to set and work toward personal and academic objectives; and (c) self-management at work, which reflects the ability to focus on the requests and engage in behaviours that keep them on track in their work goals.

Literature suggests that the competence to adequately manage emotional challenges in the professional field is related to greater wellbeing experience (Dorociak, Rupert, & Zahniser, 2017; Mayordomo, Viguer, Sales, Satorres, & Meléndez, 2016). Professionals with high relational and emotional skills seem to have more resources at their disposal to deal with the challenges in their work context, thus maximizing their professional results (Sanchez-Gomez, Bresó, & Giorgi, 2021). Additionally, international organizations recognize the relationship between socio-emotional skills and social progress, with this last referring to various aspects of life, such as health, satisfaction, professional success, civic engagement (OECD, 2015).

Studies underline the relevance and complexities associated with maintaining psychological wellbeing across the life span and the challenging role of these competences (Charles, 2010). Although the number of studies addressing both social and emotional competencies are limited, good emotional management, greater motivation, and awareness of oneself and the people around us, seem to impact the quality of life experienced, that is the satisfaction and participation, hence wellbeing in everyday life (Gupta, & Sharma, 2022). Finally, older adults are aware of the limited time they have remaining, and so to maximize social and emotional gains they prioritize emotional meaning over knowledge acquisition (Littman-Ovadia, & Russo-Netzer, 2019). The maintenance or even growth in psychological wellbeing that occurs with age (Charles & Carstensen, 2008) may reflect their role.

2.2. Future Time Perspective and its Role in Adult Life

Future Time Perspective is defined as a person's conceptualization of and link to the future. Based on this concept, two aspects of FTP have been emphasized: value and connectedness. The ability to foresee, anticipate, and plan for future desired outcomes which involves attributing high value to future goals, and connectedness is the cognitive aspect of FTP, which involves predicting, in the present, the long-term outcomes of a potential action (Shell & Husman, 2001).

Being able to achieve future goals influence the ability to both manage daily challenges and successfully project themselves into the future (Arnett et al., 2020; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Significant relationships have been also evidenced between intraindividual characteristics and future time perspective (Henry, Zacher, & Desmette, 2017). Thinking about the future is considered vital to the successful building of a career, making important career decisions, and adapting to changes in a career path (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

People with stronger future orientation have expectations, aspirations, and plan. Changes in time perspective may lead them to focus more on emotion-regulating or redirect their social interactions toward few close relationships (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Similar patterns emerge in younger adults who perceive limited time due to impending relocation, health threats, socio-political changes, or graduation (Fung & Carstensen, 2004). Older adults view the future less positively when compared to younger and middle-aged adults and score lower than younger adults in measures related to positive evaluations of the future, demonstrating a more limited future time horizon or perceiving a limited time left in life (Coudin & Lima, 2011; Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Webster, & Ma, 2013).

2.3. Objectives

Results in the literature highlight the relevance of addressing changes across the life course in the specific dimensions under study. Wellbeing, in fact, changes over time and in particular the environmental mastery and autonomy increase over the course of adult life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). At the same time the social-emotional sphere becomes increasingly important in positively orienting individuals towards the future (Carstensen, 2006).

It is then worth to observe how the different stages, or phases, proposed by recent models of adult development, are characterized in terms of social and emotional skills. We expect that some SECs are stable across adulthood while other may be more sensitive to age related functioning hence may reveal changes.

A second goal is then to understand the relationships holding between SECs and respectively wellbeing experienced, and components of future time perspective. SECs are then expected to play a mediating role in the relationship between future temporal perspective and wellbeing experienced.

Addressing these two quite distinct questions, will help understanding the changes adults face or are expected to face in the resources and the positive experience they go through. At the same time identifying the determinants of wellbeing among the dimensions under study, might inform applied research studies and psychoeducational actions.

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants and Procedures

A total of 212 participants participated in the study; 68.4% were female and 31.6% were male. Their age ranged from 19 to 60 years. To capture life-course differences three groups were identified: emerging, young and middle-aged. As for schooling, 6.1% up to 8 years of education, 40.6% have a secondary school diploma (from 9 to 13 years of study) and 53.3% have a three-year or higher education degree (from 13 years of study upwards).

Forty-two (21.7%) carried out social and health or psycho-educational professions, 61 (28.8%) were in the technical-organizational field, 48 (22.6%) were students and 61 (28.8%) were involved in other professions. As regards relational life, 80 (37.7%) described themselves as single or unmarried, 125 (59%) mentioned a stable relationship, 7 (3.3%) are widowed or divorced.

Participants did not refer being under continuous treatment for medical diseases, suffering from psychological distress or disability.

Following suggestions from the literature (Arnett et al., 2020) participants were grouped into young adults (or emerging adults, age range 19-29) involving 104 people (49.1%); Adults (from 30 to 45 years) consisting in 64 participants (30.2%) and Middle adults (from 45 to 60 years) including 44 adults (20.8%).

The study was conducted via an online survey created on the Google Forms platform. Local family associations, vocational training schools and networks were proposed the project for approval. The participants involved were invited through the sharing of the survey link.

3.2. Measures

Several tools were proposed to study participants tapping dimensions under study:

Social-Emotional Competencies (from Davidson et al., 2018). The tool investigates social-emotional skills with 40 items. The tool is characterized by 8 subscales that identify the different SECs: Self-awareness of one's own strengths, Self-awareness of one's emotions, Management of emotions, Management of goals, Management at work, Social Awareness, Social Skills and Decision Making. Participants are asked to express the easiness of their experience for each statement on a 5-point scale where 1= very difficult, 2= quite difficult, 3= neither easy nor difficult, 4= quite easy, 5= very easy.

Psychological Wellbeing Scales (PWBS; Ryff, & Keyes, 1995). The 18-item questionnaire covers six dimensions of eudaimonic wellbeing (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance) with a 4-point scale (1= very much in disagreement, 2= in disagreement, 3 = agree, 4 = very agree).

Future time perspective (Zacher, & Frese, 2009). The tool investigates the orientation to the future according to its 3 dimensions: breadth of the future, the perceived limits and the opportunities that can be seen. It consists of 10 items scale. Participants are asked to express the degree of consensus on 4 points (1= very much in disagreement, 2= in disagreement, 3 = agree, 4 = very agree).

3.3. Results

Data analysis was realized using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27 and *jamovi* version 1.6.

Socio-Emotional Competencies Across Adulthood: Stability, Changes, and their Role on Wellbeing Dimensions

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) conducted between the different stages of adult life compared to SECs dimensions showed a main significant effect [Wilks Lambda: 0.842, $F(3,211) = 2.262$, $p < .005$]. Specifically, a significant effect of age comparing groups respectively for Self-awareness [$F(1vs3) = -3.74$, $p < .05$; $F(2vs3) = -3.22$; $p < .05$], and Management [$F(1vs2) = -3.50$; $p < .05$] were found. As regards Self-awareness, older adults showed a significantly higher mean level than the other two age groups, while for Management the group of adults showed a significantly mean level in comparison with the young group (Table 1).

The results show a significant difference between groups in Self-awareness of one's strengths ($F(1vs2) = -0.86$; $p < .05$, $F(2vs3) = -.88$, $p < .05$), Self-awareness of emotions ($F(1vs3) = -2.29$; $p < .05$; $F(2vs3) = -1.70$, $p < .05$), Emotion Management ($F(1vs2) = -1.07$; $p < .05$,) and Management at Work ($F(1vs2) = -1.53$; $p < .05$). For the first two scales the middle adults show a significantly higher level of SECs for the first two, while for the second two were the adults of the intermediate age group to present a higher score.

Table 1.
Means and Standard Deviations (SD) in scores reported in the dimensions addressed and summary of pairwise comparisons. Significant differences are in bold italics.

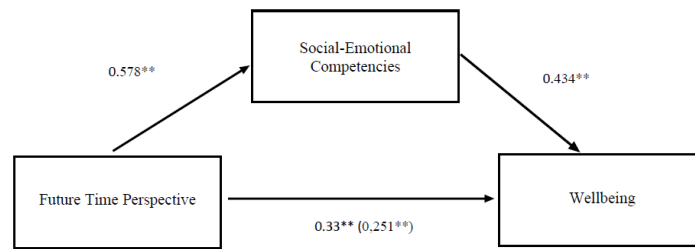
Dimensions	Young adults (1)	Adults (2)	Middle adults (3)	Multiple comparisons		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	1-2	1-3	2-3
Total SECs	142,21 (14,7)	146,55 (15,2)	147,86 (14,2)	-4,34	-5,65	-1,32
AWARENESS	53,60 (6,0)	54,12 (6,7)	57,34 (5,9)	-,519	-3,74*	-3,22*
MANAGEMENT	69,94 (9,1)	73,44 (8,3)	71,59 (7,7)	-3,50*	-1,65	1,85
Decision making	18,66 (2,5)	18,98(2,5)	18,93 (2,2)	-,32	-,27	,05
Self Awareness of Strengths	14,00 (1,7)	13,98 (1,9)	14,86 (1,8)	,02	-,86*	-,88*
Self Awareness of emotions	20,89 (3,6)	21,48 (3,7)	23,18 (2,8)	-,59	-2,29*	-1,70*
Management of Emotions	12,18 (2,8)	13,25 (2,7)	13,20 (2,2)	-1,07*	-1,02	,05
Management of goals	13,84 (2,9)	14,33 (2,3)	13,89 (1,9)	-,49	-,05	,44
Management of work	21,48 (3,9)	23,01 (3,3)	22,27 (2,8)	-1,53*	-,79	,74
Social Awareness	18,71 (2,5)	18,65 (2,6)	19,29 (2,5)	,06	-,58	-,64
Social Skills	21,73 (3,6)	22,84 (3,3)	22,23 (3,3)	-,40	,22	,62

To test the mediation role of SECs, *Path Analyses* were carried out based on regression models to observe the impact of SECs on the relationship between future time perspective and components of wellbeing. Before evaluating the hypotheses, intercorrelations between the study variables showed significant relationships between variables under study.

The mediating role of SECs in the relationship between temporal perspective and perceived global wellbeing was then analyzed (Figure 1). SECs seem to partially mediate the relationship between future perspective and wellbeing ($\beta=.251$, $p<.001$), although the direct effect between the two indices is greater ($\beta=.33$, $p<.001$). It is worth to highlight the predictive effect of the future time perspective ($\beta=.578$, $p<.001$) on SECs, which have a predictive effect on psychological wellbeing ($\beta=.434$, $p<.001$).

Figure 1.

Regression model of SECs and the relation with future time perspective and. Indirect effects are reported in parenthesis. Legenda: * $p<.005$, ** $p<.001$.



Consequently, future time perspective plays a role in the wellbeing of the person and this relationship is mediated by the SECs. Results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

Direct and indirect and mediation effects of Social-Emotional Competencies.

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		β	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
Indirect	<i>Future Time Perspective, SECs, Wellbeing</i>	0.255	0.0436	0.169	0.340	0.251	5.84	<.001
Component	<i>Future Time Perspective, SECs, Wellbeing</i>	1.437	0.1393	1.164	1.710	0.578	10.31	<.001
		0.177	0.0250	0.128	0.226	0.434	7.08	<.001
Direct	<i>Future Time Perspective, SECs, Wellbeing</i>	0.339	0.0622	0.217	0.461	0.334	5.45	<.001
Total	<i>Future Time Perspective, , Wellbeing</i>	0.594	0.0566	0.483	0.705	0.586	10.49	<.001

The model highlights the predictive effect of time perspective on SECs, which in turn have a predictive effect on psychological wellbeing. Thus, it is worth emphasizing the importance of Social-Emotional Skills as a coping mechanism.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Results described provide evidence for patterns of Social and Emotional Competences across adulthood and the hypothesized relationships. They however, open the attention to further research questions and their implications for practice and interventions.

As regards the life course patterns, adults from diverse age groups are certainly characterized by different involvement in work activities and experience with diverse work activities. The duration of permanence in specific activities in the work context and the type of work activities may have influenced patterns of SECs characterizing emerging and middle adults. Their role still calls then for further exploration.

The relationship between future time perspective and wellbeing is in line with the literature (Li & Hasson, 2020, Dorociak et al., 2017). In this first study eudaimonic wellbeing has been addressed using the Ryff's scale as a single global measure. Ryff's model and the derived scale include six components of different nature: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance. A study involving a larger group of participants in the diverse age groups may deepen the analysis and help addressing the question at the level of the single intraindividual or systemic dimensions called into play by Ryff's model. We expect these components to be differently sensitive to age related changes, both in terms if increase or decrease in the level of wellbeing experienced, and specifically related to attitudes towards future. What the work described adds is the specific role played by SECs. A specific mediating role of awareness and management related SECs or self vs others may then emerge.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results from the studies described in this work suggest two levels of reflections. The first is related to the evidence provided of age-related patterns in the constructs under analysis, and the second to the relationships emerging between dimensions.

Social and Emotional competencies vary both in the awareness and in management components. Emerging adults involved in the study show significantly lower levels in total SECs, but also in some Self-Awareness and Management components, that is Awareness of Emotion and Work Management. A closer look to data collected, shows that some awareness-related SECs seem characterized by a linear increase from emerging to middle adulthood. The dimensions of self-awareness we refer to here deal with awareness of personal strengths and emotions. Moving from emerging adulthood, that is the age of identity explorations, instability, feeling in-between and sense of broad possibilities (Tanner, & Arnett, 2016) to periods of established adulthood represented here by the other two groups of participants, seems to go together with an increase in self-knowledge both in terms of the processing of personal emotional experiences as well as the personal characteristics adults recognize themselves as unique and personal strengths (Cate & John, 2007).

On the other hand, some SECs related to management seem sensitive to change in a specific adulthood period. Management of emotions in general and specifically in the work context might be challenged, and at the same time stimulated, by contextual requests that adults from 30 to 45 years seem ready to address more effectively. This might be due to the longer experience in the world of work and the practice with management strategies they might have developed.

From a theoretical point of view, these results support the need for integration of a lifespan developmental framework that conceives human development as a continuous, multidimensional, and multidirectional process as well as individual action regulation and adaptation to changing environments and life course perspective which focuses on the interplay between systems and the individual (Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021).

The results also highlight the critical role of social-emotional skills for understanding the complex relationship between future time perspective and subjective wellbeing. In the face of the many daily challenges, the adult who has the highest skills to project himself/herself into the future and to manage emotions and goals, will be also able to experience greater psychological wellbeing. Although the study underlines the need for further extended studies on the issues addressed here, social and emotional learning should definitely be considered an integral part of adult education and lifelong learning.

More specifically, a significant mediation role of SECs between future perspective, wellbeing. Consequently, favoring the development of SECs adults might experience greater wellbeing in different contexts of life, as suggested by recent research studies (Taylor et al., 2017). With the progress of adult development, the relationship component becomes more and more important (Carstensen, 2006).

It is then suggested that adults who develop greater competencies in understanding and managing emotions and social aspects will experience an increase in their wellbeing. In particular, mastery of the environment might be related with the management of emotions in general and in the work context, thus emphasizing the importance for adults to cope with the professional and work challenges that arise in everyday life (Arnett et al., 2020).

Results also call for a reflection on the theoretical models on adult development. Age effects are detected and described, confirming recent theorizations of adult development that emphasize the importance of discerning the different stages of adult development, as they differ in physical and psychological characteristics (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020; Arnett et al., 2020; Robinson, 2020). However, the results do not show significant differences in the relationships at different stages of adult life. Since in the literature social support is proposed as a resource for the wellbeing of people, especially in the lives of adults (Matud, Bethencourth, Ibáñez, & Fortes, 2020), the specific patterns in awareness and management of one's own and others might be influenced by the social support experienced and more in general by the characteristics of the living contexts.

A final note on implications for practice is also relevant. Counseling programs aimed both at wellbeing and positive future orientation should focus on and aim at increasing awareness and management of social and emotional competencies. Study results, suggest that adult education and prevention actions should focus on self-orientation, orientation towards others, orientation towards development goals or adapting to change.

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