Secure Style, PWB-related Gratitude and SWB-related Engagement as Predictors of Affect Balance among Social Science Students in Malaysia: A Pilot Study

Nor Ba’yah Abdul Kadir*, Fatimah Omar, Asmawati Desa and Fatimah Yusooff

School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Affect balance is sometimes used as an indicator of overall well-being. Most well-being studies have focused on differences across a number of sociodemographic categories and big five personalities, while there have been relatively few studies examining the predictors on affect balance. Therefore, this study aims to examine the associations of secure style, psychosocial well-being on affect balance and to examine secure style, psychological well-being-related gratitude and social well-being-related engagement as predictors of affect balance among social science students. This cross-sectional study was conducted on 166 social science students. A set of self-reports measuring affect balance, secure style, psychological well-being-related gratitude and social well-being-related engagement was self-administered and returned upon completion. Factorial analysis was used to examine factor loadings of items, Pearson correlations were used to see the relationships of variables to affect balance, and stepwise multiple regression was used to examine predictors of affect balance. A total of 166 (83%) social science students responded to this study. Pearson correlations showed that all variables studied were significantly correlated to affect balance. Results showed that psychological well-being-related gratitude, insecure style, and social well-being-related engagement were the strongest predictors of affect balance. The study concludes that low scores on insecure style, high scores on psychological well-being-related gratitude, and social well-being-related engagement all contributed to affect balance.

Keywords: Well-being, positive feeling, negative feelings, secure style
INTRODUCTION
The positive feelings of university students in Malaysia are decreasing (Zaid et al., 2007; Swami et al., 2007) and more students report having depressive symptoms during university life transition (Mohd Sidik et al., 2003). The prevalent rates of depression among university students in Malaysia for instance were reported around 10% with severe depression and 27% with moderate depression (Shamsuddin et al., 2013) and the overall prevalence of depression for male and female medical students was 30% (Yusoff et al., 2010). Similarly, studies in the United States reported that almost 16% of undergraduate students had depressive symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 2007), 15% in Nigeria (Adewuya et al., 2006), 43% in Central-Eastern and 31% in Western European (Wardle et al., 2004), 48% in Turkey (Aktekin et al., 2001), and 71% in Egypt (Ibrahim et al., 2012). The associations of risk factors including stressful life events (Aktekin et al., 2001), loneliness (Deniz et al., 2005), social skills (Cooley et al., 2010), and transition to university (Ames et al., 2011) were established, but the underlying problem of university students is scant. To-date very few studies have examined self-report assessments of secure style, psychological well-being-related gratitude (PWB-related gratitude) and social well-being-related engagement (SWB-related engagement) with affect balance in a Malaysia context, so this study is intended to fill this research gap. This study aims to examine the associations of secure style, PWB-related gratitude and SWB-related engagement on affect balance and to examine predictors of affect balance.

A considerable amount of research focused on secure/insecure style in relation to affect balance (Kafetsiou & Sideridis, 2006; Lopez & Gormley, 2002). Secure individuals were found to be well-adjusted concerning measures of positive feelings, as stated by Hazan and Shaver (1990), whilst insecure was reported to be less adjusted. Various studies have shown that insecure style was consistently negatively associated with positive feelings (Mikulincer and Florian, 2001), reporting that high levels of negative feelings are strongly connected with anxious or preoccupied styles but lower with Secure and Avoidant style (Burge et al., 1997). In contrast, both avoidant and anxious styles have shown high correlations with negative feelings (Wei et al., 2004) and loneliness (DiTommaso et al., 2003). Relationship factors have also been investigated by having a close relationship with partner/spouse or a close others (e.g., Confidants, siblings, relatives, peers) are seen to have an impact on positive feelings in medical patients (Cicirelli, 1989; Davis et al., 1998). Shiota and colleagues (2006) found that there is an association between attachment styles and different kinds of emotions. However, none of these studies have explored positive/negative feelings and different styles of attachment to look for patterning. As a result, there is still no clear evidence which attachment styles are associated with positive or negative feelings and how they relate to social and psychological well-being. Also there has been little use of composite scales of
Secure Style, PWB-related Gratitude and SWB-related Engagement as Predictors of Affect Balance

Social and psychological well-being in association with the attachment style to look at predictive factors. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical investigation of secure/insecure style and affect balance in Malaysia (Kumaraswamy & Azizah, 2007). Those studies which do exist focus on the psychometric of spirituality (Imam et. al., 2009), wealth and life satisfaction among the orang Asli (Howell et. al., 2006), and women’s roles and well-being (Noor, 1997, 1999, 2004). Secure/insecure style studies in the Malaysian community are not extensive. Only one study reported on validated scales of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Ng et. al., 2005). Schmitt and colleagues (2004) found that Malaysians had higher rates of the dismissive style than other countries in cross-cultural studies in 62 cultural regions. The dismissive style was significantly correlated with life stress and psychological distress in East Asians (Chen et. al., 2002). This is likely to relate to early social experiences and exposure to high levels of socio-environmental stress (Schmitt, 2008) and the effects of the authoritarian parenting style (Ang & Goh, 2006). Therefore, identifying the secure style of the university students at the ground level using the attachment framework is particularly relevant for health psychologists, clinical psychologists, and mental health social workers who emphasize prevention and early intervention models. Furthermore, the results of this study will help professional practitioners to develop systematic primary intervention services to effectively meet the socialization needs of university students. This means that a specific evidence-based intervention method that works best with university students can be identified.

Gratitude is seen as a psychological coping strategy (Wood et. al., 2007) and a moral affect (McCullough et. al., 2001; Naito et. al., 2005) that is associated with happiness (McCullough et. al., 2002; Otake et. al., 2006; Watkins et. al., 2003) and lower levels of aggression (DeWall et. al., 2012). Gratitude was also reported to buffer against stress and depression (Wood et. al., 2008). Wood and colleagues suggested that the positive trait of gratitude directly fosters social support and protects individuals from stress and depression. Gratitude was also associated with reduction costs of materialism among adolescents (Froh et. al., 2011). The findings of the study also reported that other factors, such as academic achievement, social integration, life satisfaction, and happiness were all related to gratitude among adolescents. Chan (2013) reported that gratitude was significantly positively correlated with positive affect and negatively correlated with negative affect. The study also reported that gratitude added to the prediction with an incremental contribution of 6% for affect positive. However, little is known about how gratitude and other factors such as the secure style and SWB-related engagement factors for university students predict affect balance.

Studies on university students’ engagement in relation to affect balance are also scant. Engagement refers to the
behavioral intensity and emotional quality of a person’s active involvement during a task (Reeve et al., 2004). This definition involves a broad construct that may relate to the emotions, determination, and motivation experiences of the individuals, which reflect enthusiasm. Previous studies reported that commitment and positive emotions as well as a person’s voice and initiative all reflected engagement in various settings. For instance, Gilardi (2011) found that engagement styles influenced the attrition rates of continuing studies by being committed and engaged in campus activities. In contrast, disengaged students show their passivity by a lack of interest in campus activities and unawareness about the essentials of the learning experience. On the other hand, instructors’ motivation and supportive autonomy were also related to students’ engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Reeve et al., 2004). In university settings, engagement is important because of its function as a student’s behavioral pathway in enhancing their subsequent higher learning and education development.

METHODS
Participants
The demographic and socioeconomic status of the student participants was based on their parents’ employment status, marital status of the parents, and number of siblings. More than half of the participants have been given student sponsorship (75.9%), the remainders were self-sponsored. The sample had a mean age of 20.99 (range of 20 to 25) with a standard deviation of 3.60. The student participants consisted of 46.4% males (n=77) and 53.6% females (n=89). The marital status of their parents was examined as a proxy indicator of childhood or teenage disruption. Most of their parents were married (83.7%, n=139), only 2.4% (n=4) divorced/separated with 12% (n=20) of the sample reporting parental loss of either mother or father before the age of 18. About two thirds of the participants’ mothers were full-time housewives (81.3%, n=135) and almost all of their fathers were employed (80.1%, n=133). As many as half the participants had more than six siblings at home (n=94, 56.6%). The majority of the participants were Malays (80.1%, n=133) the remainder Chinese (14.5%, n=24) or Indian (2.4%, n=4).

Procedure
A total of 200 students from year one and three were invited to participate in this cross-sectional study by using the convenience sampling technique. There was a high level of response rates with 83% respondents (n=166) completing a set of questions. All students were taking undergraduate courses in the School of Psychology and Human Development, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Access to the participants was provided by the course instructors. Announcements were made in the classroom by the course instructors together with the principle investigator. Letters of invitation to student participants were sent out to them two weeks before data collection. Online learning websites were also used to reach the participants. A brief explanation of the
study was also posted on online learning websites. The attachment styles and well-being measures were administered after four weeks of the new academic year to the student participants during the face-to-face session in a classroom. An information sheet was attached to the questionnaire pack to provide signed informed consent with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. No extra credit or compensation was given to participants for taking part in this study. The level of corporation was high (83% out of 200 respondents, 34 refused to complete the questionnaire). The student participants took the questionnaires to complete in their own time and returned it in the following week to the principle investigator or course instructors. Completion of the survey questions lasted approximately thirty minutes. No information was available on students who refused to participate in this study. Ethical permission approval was granted from the University Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and Action/Strategic Research Committee.

Measures

The Relationship Style Questionnaire (RSQ) was developed by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) as a self-report to assess secure style among young adults. The RSQ was selected because this scale has been validated among college students (Deniz et al., 2005), psychiatry patients (Agrawal et al., 2004), and general populations (Magai et al., 2001). The RSQ consisted of 30 items rated on 5-point Likert scales to indicate how much the participant agreed with each statement about close relationships. The scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to endorse the items. The RSQ has four subscales: Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful. Examples of Preoccupied RSQ were “I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others”, “I worry that others don’t value me as much as I value them”, “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.” Examples of Dismissing RSQ were “It is very important to me to feel independent”, “I am comfortable without close emotional relationships”, “It is very important to me to feel self-sufficient.” Examples of Fearful RSQ were “I find it difficult to depend on other people”, “I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others”, “I find it difficult to trust others completely.”

The reliability analysis was carried out to examine the internal consistency of the items. The value of Cronbach’s alpha of RSQ was .75, after items with the corrected-item total correlation of more than 0.30 were selected and items less than 0.30 were removed. Using this technique, we removed 12 items to increase the value of Cronbach’s alpha (Value of Cronbach’s alpha before item deletion was .68). Thus, all remaining items of insecurity RSQ represent a measure of satisfactory internal consistency (Streiner & Norman, 2008).

We used the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989) to measure psychological well-being and Social Well-being scale (SWB; Keyes, 1998) to measure social well-being. The PWB scale consisted of 18 items to measure psychological
aspects of well-being (self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Originally, the minimum score was 18 and the maximum score 54.

The reliability analysis was carried out to examine internal consistency of the items. The value of Cronbach’s alpha of PWB was .76, after items with the corrected-item total correlation of more than 0.30 were selected and items less than 0.30 were removed. Using this technique, we removed 6 items to increase the value of Cronbach’s alpha (value of Cronbach’s alpha before item deletion was .53). Thus, all remaining items of PWB represent a measure of satisfactory internal consistency.

The Social Well-being Scale (SWB: Keyes, 1998) measures social aspects consisting of 15 items (social coherence, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, social integration). The positive and negative feelings consisted of 6 positive items and 6 negative items (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Originally, the minimum score was 15 and the maximum score 45.

The reliability analysis was carried out to examine internal consistency of the items. The value of Cronbach’s alpha of SWB was .73, after items with the corrected-item total correlation of more than 0.30 were selected and items less than 0.30 were removed. Using this technique, we removed 8 items to increase the value of Cronbach’s alpha (value of Cronbach’s alpha before item deletion was .58). Thus, all remaining items of PWB represent a measure of satisfactory internal consistency.

The affect balance was measured using general positive and negative feelings, including specific feelings that may have unique labels in a specific culture (Diener et al., 2010). This scale is a brief 12-item scale, with six items devoted to positive experiences and six items designed to assess negative experiences. Examples of positive feelings were “happy, joy, happy.” Examples of negative feelings were “bad, sad, angry.” Each item is scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents “very rarely or never” and 5 represents “very often or always”. The summed positive and negative scores can range from 24 to 24. The value of Cronbach’s alpha for affect balance was .78. Thus, the internal consistency of this scale was achieved satisfactorily.

**RESULTS**

Factorial analysis was used to determine factor loadings of items. The Pearson correlation analysis to test associations of the variables studied, and stepwise multiple regression analysis were used to examine predictors of affect balance.

A principle components exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed on the insecurity RSQ. Two factors were extracted, which explained 31.34% of the total variance. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 3.87 that
accounted for 20.36% of the variance. The second factor had an eigenvalue of 2.09 that accounted for 10.99% of the variance. Following Tabachnick and Fidell’s (1996) recommendation of .32 as acceptable factor loading cutoff for interpreting item salience, this resulted in a consistent pattern of insecure styles, where both insecure anxious and insecure avoidance were loaded either on factor 1 or factor 2 or both. It was decided that whole items that are called as insecure style to be used. Therefore, it was expected that those who scored lower on insecure style would have high secure style.

A factorial analysis was then performed because PWB had not been previously tested among Malaysians. Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the factor loadings of items using a maximum likelihood extraction method with varimax rotation. Based on criterion interpretation, 2 factors were retained. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 3.60 that accounted for 29.96% of the variance. The second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.41 that accounted for 11.74% of the variance. Seven of the 12 items loaded formed PWB-related gratitude and 5 items loaded formed PWB-related conscientiousness. Examples of PWB-related gratitude items were “People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others”, “I like most parts of my personality”, “I have confidence in my opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think.” Examples of PWB-related conscientiousness items were “I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live”, “Life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth”, “I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.”

The exploratory factor analysis for SWB was also performed. Two factors were retained. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 2.67 that accounted for 38.10% of the variance. However, the second factor had an eigenvalue less than 1 (EV=.96) that accounted for 13.78% of the variance. All items loaded had created new dimensions of social well-being. Four items loaded on factor 1 to form SWB-related awareness and 3 items loaded on factor 2 to form SWB-related engagement. Examples of SWB-related awareness items were “I feel close to other people in my community”, “Society has stopped making progress.” Examples of SWB-related involvement items were “Society isn’t improving for people like me”, “I have nothing important to contribute to society.”

Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations, and Pearson correlations of the variables studied. All psychological and social well-being dimensions were significant positively correlated to affect balance whilst insecure style was significant negatively correlated to affect balance. This indicated that those who scored lower on insecure style would have high affect balance as well as those who scored highly on PWB-related gratitude and SWB-related engagement would score high on affect balance.

Using a stepwise regression analysis to examine predictors of affect balance, results showed that PWB-related gratitude ($\beta=.23$, $p<.01$), SWB-related engagement ($\beta=.17$, $p<.05$) and insecure style ($\beta=-$...
.24, p<.01) to significantly explain 23% of the variance in affect balance with PWB-related gratitude being the stronger predictor when controlling demographics (e.g., marital status of parents, siblings size, parents’ income, parents’ employment). This indicated that those who scored highly on PWB-related gratitude and SWB-related engagement and low on insecure style were found to have high affect balance. Socio-demographic factors did not contribute to affect balance.

**DISCUSSION**

The study sought to examine predictors of affect balance among social science undergraduate students. Our results supported most of what we expected, indicating attachment quality (low insecure style), gratitude, and engagement in the community as well as the relationships between these factors and affect balance. Evidence provided shows that the low insecure style is significantly related to affect balance, even when controls for social class, gender and family disruption applied. The insecure style negatively contributes to affect balance analyses. Socio-demographic factors did not contribute to affect balance.

**TABLE 1**
Correlations, means, and standard deviations for scores on the RSQ insecure, social well-being, psychological well-being and affect balance as outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Affect balance</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insecure style</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>44.52</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWB-related gratitude</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>37.88</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWB-related conscientiousness</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>28.73</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB-related awareness</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>20.39</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB-related engagement</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>16.11</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlations significant at 0.01 level (2 tailed); * Correlations significant at 0.05 level (2 tailed)**

**TABLE 2**
Predictors of self-report affect balance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affect balance</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictors</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWB-related gratitude</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure style</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td></td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB-related engagement</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R²                                    | .13     | .21     | .23     |
F                                      | 24.70** | 21.41** | 16.16** |
R² change                             | .13     | .07     |         |
F change                              | 24.70** | 14.94** | 4.70*   |

*p<.05; **p<.01
outcome. This is important in showing that attachment principles are important in determining affect balance. This adds an additional developmental and social aspect to the affect balance literature. Thus, the secure style indicates healthy development and positive socialization. It also denotes positive orientation towards others, an expectation of love and support and better adjustment in peer relationships. Secure students may think positively about themselves, able to initiate new friendship and are more constructive in terms of solving problems. This seems stable across different cultures. In Malaysia which has a collective culture, the most important sanction is societal approval (Hofstede, 1991). Here we concluded that to “maintain harmony with others by coming to terms with their needs and expectation” (Suh et. al., 1998) and social acceptance and appropriate behavior are very important. Individuals in collectivist cultures tend to react accordingly to what other think, expect and feel. Perhaps we can conclude that the collectivist culture plays a vital role in experiencing well-being. It seems that society or community remained the main concern for individuals rather than the self.

The insecure style was negatively correlated with affect balance. Whilst rates of insecure style are often consistent cross-culturally, the type of style has more potential for cross-cultural variation. The interviews for instance show a parallel angry-dismissive style reflected in UK community samples, although less common than fearful style in female samples (Bifulco et. al., 2006). However, the insecure style in this present study was significantly correlated with affect balance outcomes. Another implication of low insecure style contributing to affect balance is related to emotion regulation under stress. Associated positive emotion is useful for coping with stressful life events (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Thus, another important component which requires more exploration is the extent to which secure individuals and those with high affect balance respond to threats by flexible adaptation and maintaining proximity to attachment figures for comfort and to alleviate distress (Mikulincer et. al., 2003).

PWB-related gratitude was significant and positively related to affect balance. This is consistent with other studies suggesting that more than 90% of adolescents and adult Americans indicated that expressing gratitude made them very happy (Wood et. al., 2010). This study added to the body of evidence that gratitude together with secure style and SWB-related engagement jointly contributed to the significant prediction of affect balance. A grateful attitude may build social bonds and friendship in a novel environment thus preventing isolation in campus life. Gratitude is not only pleasant feelings but it is also related to prosocial behavior (Froh et. al., 2010). Therefore, we suggest that gratitude is a vital source of affect balance that leads to positive youth development. As a collective society, PWB-related gratitude to affect balance is expected. Thus findings of this study add to the gratitude literatures.
SWM-related engagement is a significantly important contribution to affect balance, suggesting that this form of engagement shapes socialization skills. This finding was consistent with a development perspective where early adulthood constitutes an important state for social and identity development (Bowman et al., 2010). We concluded that the students not only devote to the academic experiences but also invest in positive social interactions with other students. This engagement involves different activities at differing levels (Junco, 2011) thus giving them the opportunities to interact with peers, making them happier or feel good.

In terms of social disadvantage, father’s employment, maternal employment or student grant eligibility did not contribute in any way. Indicators of family disruption were not associated with affect balance despite other studies showing weak associations (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Whilst marital status is only a proxy indicator for disruption, it seems that it does not impinge on the students’ sense of affect balance. It would seem Malaysian students are satisfied with their lifestyles and financial positions. Adults having higher incomes can be related to less time spent with family and longer work hours (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2001). This can negatively impinge on social relationships and thereby affect balance. Various studies of adults report that wealth, material and economic status were among the primary indicators of positive feelings (e.g., Howell & Howell, 2008; Dolan et al., 2008). This could vary by life stage and culture. Perhaps high income matters less in collective cultures than in the West (Hsee et al., 2009) with materialism diminishing positive feelings and negative feelings.

There are limitations of this study. First, this sample involved undergraduate students, who may not be representative of the population at large and who may be more privileged than their peers not attending university. This may increase their sense of positive feelings. Given no measure of life stress it is not known how resilient, as opposed to protected, they were. Second, the measures were all self-reports and associations could be artificially inflated by response styles. Third, no early life measures were included to further develop attachment themes in the genesis of secure style or affect balance. Further research is needed which uses mixed measures, on broader samples with extended measures of early life as well as stressful experiences.

CONCLUSION
In summary, affect balance refers to a range of positive attitudes to life, involving gratitude and engagement. These new dimensions of social and psychological well-being can be useful in consolidating the construct, increasing internal reliability and in association with other constructs. Using such measures on a young Malaysian sample, it was found that PWB-related gratitude is significantly related to affect balance, the strongest predictor of affect balance with insecure style and SWB-engagement. In terms of socio-demographic factors, no correlation was found to affect
balance. Future studies are needed which can further explore overlaps between developmental attachment approaches and cognitive ones reflected in affect balance (Seligman, 2000).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest arising from funding or publishing of the project. Our thanks are due to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for funding this research (Research grant UKM-PTS-045-2009).

REFERENCES


Hsee, C. K., Yang, Y., Li, N., & Shen, L. (2009). Wealth, warmth, and well-being: Whether happiness is relative or absolute depends on whether it is about money, acquisition, or consumption. Journal of Marketing Research, XLVI, 396-409.


