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Children's subjective well-being in relation to gender — What can we learn from dissatisfied children?

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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in subjective well-being (SWB) are a common finding in studies of children, but the nature, causes and effects of these differences remain unclear. This article draws on data from the Children's Worlds study, an international survey of child well-being across countries, to examine the structure of SWB drawing on different life domains, and comparing the effects of these domains on SWB for boys and girls. Structural equation modelling is used to examine differences between 12 year old boys and girls who reported low subjective well-being (bottom 25% of the sample). Findings reveal that the structure of SWB is comparable across the genders; girls' SWB was lower than boys'; and different domains of SWB vary in their importance for boys and girls. Specifically, girls' SWB appears to be more driven by relational factors, whilst boys' SWB is more driven by perceived academic achievement.

1. Introduction

This study examines the subjective well-being (SWB) of 12 year old children, focusing on children exhibiting low SWB. Its aim is twofold: to examine gender differences in SWB, and to explore the relationship between different life domains and SWB for boys and girls. The sample includes 5000 boys and girls across 16 diverse countries.

1.1. Subjective well-being

Interest in the SWB of children is growing, with increasing numbers of studies reporting findings relevant to social workers, psychologists, paediatricians, pedagogues, policy makers, and many others, as well as for society at large. SWB is defined as people's own perceptions, evaluations and aspirations in relation to their lives (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). It is typically considered to include three components – cognitive well-being, concerned with people's evaluations of their lives; affective well-being, concerned with moods and emotions; and psychological well-being, concerned with the realisation of basic needs and capacity to flourish (Rees & Main, 2015). For the purposes of this article, we will focus on cognitive well-being, measured using a modified version of Huebner, Gilman, and Laughlin (1999) Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (see below). SWB has three basic characteristics: first, it is grounded in each person's experiences and perceptions of those experiences; second, it includes positive measures (i.e. it is not only characterized by the absence of negative emotions); lastly, it includes an overall evaluation of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Thus SWB may relate to happiness, but focuses more broadly on people's subjective cognitive evaluations of their lives, as well as their affective experiences; this differentiates life satisfaction, which focuses on a more cognitive evaluation, from happiness which focuses on affect. In recent decades, there has been an increasing amount of research on children's and adolescents' well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes, & Korbin, 2014).

Ben-Arieh et al. (2014) describe the historical movement towards a child-centred perspective regarding children's well-being. According to Ben-Arieh et al. (2014), what is best for children has been traditionally decided by parents or by experts who “know” about children's needs from their own perspectives. Yet, little by little, the perspective of the child, which may differ from that of adults, has received increased attention in research. This movement towards a consideration of children's own perspectives has been driven by changing theoretical perspectives on childhood (Ben-Arieh, 2007), and has led to findings which both complement and challenge adult-based perspectives on children's lives (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2008).

Despite this increasing awareness of the importance of

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incorporating children's perspectives, research on child SWB from their own perspective is still limited (Ben-Arieh & Shimon, 2014). The current study takes on a child-centred perspective, using data which includes children's own reports of their life experiences and well-being. This approach is not only supported by the theoretical advances in conceptions of childhood noted above; it also adheres with Article 12 of the UN convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC), which requires countries to listen to children's own views and incorporate their voices in decisions concerning them (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

Many recent conceptualizations of children's SWB draw on ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), according to which children's well-being and development is dependent not only on caregivers but also on more micro, *meso*, exo and macro level variables (Ben-Arieh & Shimon, 2014). As Sarason (1997) notes, "wellness is an individual phenomenon, but it is always embedded in an interpersonal, social-familial, or institutional context" (p. 9). This is especially true for children; the right to family life is enshrined in the UNCRC in Articles 9 and 10, which alongside Article 20 make it clear that the normative expectation is that children will live within family units unless this is not feasible (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). However, other articles (for example Articles 26 and 27) embed a role for the state, alongside parents, in ensuring that children are provided for in line with their well-being and developmental needs. Thus children's family environments, and their broader social networks including schools, local area, national and global contexts, are important in developing an understanding of child well-being and locating the role of children's subjective reports within this. One important context affecting children through the various levels of the ecological model of well-being is gender, discussed below.

1.2. Gender differences in SWB

Many studies regarding children's SWB refer to gender as a demographic background variable (e.g., Cummins, 2014). However, feminist theory posits that gender is a powerful social construct which affects the lives of girls and boys as well as those of men and women (Baker-Miller, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Adopting this view encourages us to look at gender not only as a background variable, but as a significant social construct which merits closer examination.

Separating biological and cultural reasons for the apparent differences between boys and girls is extremely difficult. Traditionally, research on sex differences has focused on characteristics assumed to be biological and innate differences between males and females, while the sociology of gender has looked at the socially constructed nature of how boys and girls adopt gender roles (Frawley, McCoy, Banks, & Thornton, 2014). Over forty years ago, in a review of 1400 studies on sex differences, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) concluded that while some patterns are persistent, it is very difficult to disentangle the influence of stereotyping on individuals' perceptions of gender and their associated behavior. Many years later, Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) conclusion still seems to be highly relevant. That is, the ostensible distinction between sex as a biological fact and gender as a social construct is challenged by findings which reveal the inherent complexity in identifying and separating the effects of each.

Studies examining gender differences in SWB of children remain inconclusive in their findings. Some studies found no significant gender differences (Huebner, Seligson, Valois, & Suldo, 2006; Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003) while others report such differences (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, & Goswami, 2011). When such differences are reported, girls usually show higher SWB (Casas, Bello, Gonza'lez, & Aligue, 2013; Cummins, 2014; Tomyn & Cummins, 2011), although some have found boys to have higher SWB (Bradshaw & Keung, 2011; Rees, Bradshaw, Goswami, & Keung, 2010). One factor explaining these differences, and the lack of a consistent pattern of SWB according to gender, may be the location of the particular study, explored next.

These aforementioned studies have been carried out within the context of a specific country. However, if gender is a social construct, then cross-cultural and cross-societal research could shed light on the factors accounting for gender differences in SWB (Tesch-Romer, Motel-Klingebiel, & Tomasik, 2008). The ways in which gender is constructed and performed in different national contexts will depend on prevailing social norms, likely to interrelate with SWB along the lines of, for example, the extent to which gendered characteristics and activities are associated with differential status or levels of participation in society. Despite this potential Tesch-Romer et al. (2008) determine that there is little cross-cultural research on gender differences in SWB, although their study showed that among adults, the larger the gender inequality in a society, the larger gender differences in SWB. Recently, through the first wave of data collection in the Children's Worlds study, an international survey of over thirty thousand children worldwide (aged 6–14), girls reported higher SWB than boys overall (Dinisman & Ben-Arieh, 2016) but effects varied between countries in their strength and in the direction of association (Rees & Main, 2015).

Measurement tools may be an important factor in understanding why SWB varies between girls and boys: Casas et al. (2013) found girls to be more satisfied than boys using a multi-item domains scale (domain-specific), while no differences were found when using context-free, general overall life satisfaction measures. The meanings of such findings – that is, whether girls and boys are interpreting questions differently, and/or whether the domains included in multi-item scales are not effectively and equally covering the aspects of children's lives important to girls and boys, indicate the need for further qualitative research with children around their interpretation of measurement tools and their ideas on what other aspects of life should be included. When questions refer to differing life domains, this may also impact findings; some studies have found that girls have higher SWB when it comes to school and interpersonal relationships (Bradshaw et al., 2011; Casas et al., 2013; Grigoras, 2013), while the SWB of boys is higher in regard to self-image, self-confidence and appearance (Casas et al., 2013; Rees et al., 2010). The emerging picture is that the association between gender and SWB is complex, and different factors such as biology and culture to name just two may impact associations and interact with one another to produce complex findings.

2. Importance of various life domains to girls and to boys

One hypothesis regarding gender differences in SWB is that gender has no direct association with SWB, but rather that the process of SWB formation and maintenance might be different for boys and for girls (Chui & Wong, 2016). This hypothesis reflects the complexity noted above. Some of the domains addressed in existing literature are now detailed.

2.1. Satisfaction with relationships

Gilligan's (1982) developmental theory suggests that social resources might play a more significant role in the mental health of girls, in comparison to boys. More specifically, girls might value relational intimacy in a different way or to a different degree than boys, and might invest more time and effort in social relationships than boys.

In their comprehensive review of gender differences in peer relationship processes, Rose and Rudolph's (2006) findings support these theoretical underpinnings. They found girls' relationships to be characterized by prosocial behavior to a greater degree than boys, and, for some indices of prosocial behavior, the gender difference appears to increase with age. Additionally, their results indicate that girls' relational orientation style is characterized by stronger interpersonal engagement than that of boys. Specifically, girls tend to care more about dyadic friendships, to adopt more strongly connection-oriented goals in peer contexts, to feel more empathy for others, and to demonstrate heightened concerns about the status of relationships and about peer

evaluations. Girls are not necessarily engaging more frequently than boys in dyadic interactions, but these interactions are more extended. This may explain why, at least by adolescence, girls report greater self-disclosure in their friendships than do boys. Finally, girls are more likely than boys to receive several types of provisions in their friendships, including higher levels of closeness, affection, nurturance, trust, security, validation, acceptance, and enhancement of worth.

Such gender differences were explored by Chui and Wong (2016), in a study exploring how different variables contribute differently to adolescent boys and girls in Hong Kong. When predicting happiness, they found that among the relationship variables, only the number of close friends was found to be significant in all specifications. However, this factor was much more significant—both statistically and in terms of effect size—for girls than boys. The estimate of the size of the coefficient among girls was about two times that of boys. In addition, parents' marital status was associated with happiness as well as with life satisfaction among girls but not among boys. Chui and Wong (2016) conclude that relationships factors (the number of close friends and parents' marital status) seem to matter much more for the happiness of girls.

2.2. Satisfaction with school

School plays an important role in facilitating or inhibiting successful lifelong development (Cartland, Ruch-Ross, & Henry, 2003; Schaps & Solomon, 2003). Gender differences in levels of school satisfaction have been revealed in some studies of American students (Huebner, 1994; Park, 2004), whereas other similar studies have revealed no significant gender differences (Huebner, Ash, & Laughlin, 2001; Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000). Internationally beyond America, most studies point to a gender difference: studies of adolescents in China (Liu, Mei, Tian, & Huebner, 2016), Spain (Casas et al., 2007) and the UK (The Children's Society, 2012) reveal higher satisfaction with various aspects of school life among girls than among boys.

The lower school satisfaction of boys can be explained by several mechanisms. It is widely acknowledged that boys tend to underperform at, and often dislike, literacy work (Martino, 1999; Millard, 1997; Ofsted, 2009). Some research has shown that boys are less motivated at schoolwork, spend less time doing homework, have lower expectations and are less enthusiastic about furthering their studies, than girls (Barber, 1996; Cox, 2000; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Warrington, Younger, & Williams, 2000). Historically, boys have tended to have lower grades than girls (Halpern, 1997) and drop out of school more than girls (Ainley, Foreman, & Sheret, 1991). Boys' disaffection with schooling is often described as a response to the gendered culture in which boys find themselves: some boys identify with a set of 'macho' values that reject the value of education (Mac an Ghaill, M., 1994; Martino, 1999).

Gender differences will interact with teachers' perceptions of and behaviours towards boys and girls. Hughes & Im (2016) found that teachers report more warmth and less conflict in relationships with girls than with boys. Other scholars posit that boys have more behavior problems in school and are usually restless, unlike girls, who behave better at school and are more gregarious (Liu et al., 2016). As a result, boys are more likely to be criticized by teachers, resulting in lower satisfaction with school for boys as compared to girls. Findings indeed show that teachers' descriptions of boys and girls demonstrated polarizing of boys as troublesome and girls as compliant (Jones & Myhill, 2004).

Interestingly, a recent study showed some puzzling links between gender, academic satisfaction and SWB. Among adolescent boys and girls in Hong Kong, Chui and Wong (2016) found that higher academic satisfaction leads to higher happiness for boys but not for girls. Conversely, academic satisfaction matters for the life satisfaction of girls but not of boys.

2.3. Satisfaction with self

In many countries, current cultural preferences in relation to appearance emphasise thinness for women and leanness and muscularity for men. This emphasis is shaped and reinforced by the mass media, through an increasing over-representation of perfected images that do not reflect the majority of the general population (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999; Sypeck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004). Media aimed at girls, adolescents, and young women are replete with extremely thin models that portray an ideal that is unattainable to most (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Idealised media images are routinely subjected to computer manipulation techniques, such as airbrushing (e.g. slimming thighs and increasing muscle tone). The resulting images present an unobtainable 'aesthetic perfection' that has no basis in biological reality. Exposure to, and internalisation of, the current cultural appearance ideals portrayed in the mass media are robust predictors of short-term changes in body dissatisfaction (Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Tylka, 2011).

Research has shown that these social messages regarding appearance are affecting children's perceptions at a very early age. Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) found that by 6 years of age, a large number of girls desired a thinner figure. They conclude that girls aged 5–8 are already aware of cultural messages about their bodies, with both peers and the media influencing body image and dieting awareness. Recent comprehensive literature reviews have implicated this preadolescent body dissatisfaction as a risk factor for subsequent lower self-esteem, decreased psychological well-being, increased eating disorder symptomatology, dieting behaviours, obesity and depression (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Smolak, 2004; Smolak & Levine, 2001).

Body image is a strongly gendered phenomenon. This does not mean, of course, that boys and men do not have issues regarding body image. Nonetheless, it is evident that the nature, risk factors, outcomes, and probably the developmental course of body dissatisfaction differ by gender (Smolak, 2004). In a UK survey (The Children's Society, 2012), children's feelings about their appearance varied significantly with age and gender: at 10, only a quarter of children (boys and girls alike) often worry about their appearance. By the age of 15, worrying often about appearance is reported by around a third (32%) of boys and an alarming 56% of girls.

It must be noted that the vast majority of the aforementioned studies draw on data from the UK, the US and other 'western' countries. Thus the extent to which findings can be generalised to diverse international contexts is debatable. However, rapid globalization and enhanced mobility have paralleled increased identification of eating disturbances in numerous Western and non-Western countries as well as in ethnic and socioeconomic groups previously thought to be immune to such disturbances (Thompson, 1994; Littlewood, 1995).

In summary, gender is acknowledged to be an important factor in understanding children's SWB, but the nature and cause of associations between gender and SWB are complex and potentially indirect. The purpose of this study is to further examine links between different aspects of children's lives, gender, and SWB.

3. Research questions

In keeping with the dual aims of the present study, and in light of the above review, two hypotheses are addressed in our exploratory analysis of data from the Children's Worlds study. Specifically, based on existing literature, we hypothesise that:

1. Girls will report lower overall SWB than boys.
2. Girls will report higher satisfaction with peers, family and school, and lower satisfaction with self, compared to boys.

Moreover, in the wake of ambiguous findings, we explore the relationship between SWB and these different domains in order to

examine whether they contribute differently to the SWB of boys and girls.

4. Methods and data

4.1. Children's worlds data

This study uses data from the Children's Worlds survey, an international study of children's SWB (ISCWeB: www.isciweb.org) in diverse countries. In most countries, samples were representative of the entire country and in some cases samples were representative of a specific region (regions are specified in parenthesis): Algeria (Western region), Colombia (Antioquia), Estonia, Ethiopia, Germany, Israel, Malta, Nepal, Norway, Poland (Wielkopolska), Romania, South Africa (West Cape), South Korea, Spain (Catalonia), Turkey (Istanbul), United Kingdom (England). The study has collected representative data on topics relating to children's lives and daily activities, their time use, and in particular their own perceptions and evaluations of their well-being.

The data were collected by means of group-administered questionnaires within schools. Different versions of the questionnaires were used for different age groups (8, 10 and 12 year olds), and the current study employs data from the 12 year old children. An international committee supervised data collection and sample design in order to guarantee appropriate representativeness of the data from each region or country. More details on the data collection procedure in each country can be obtained through the project's aforementioned website (see also Rees & Main, 2015).

In each country, approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committee prior to data collection. The children were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously, that any information given would be considered confidential, that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop answering the questionnaire at any time.

Paper questionnaires were used in 14 countries, while in the United Kingdom (England) and in cases in Spain (Catalonia) the survey was administered online.

The original questionnaire was written in English. In countries other than the United Kingdom the questionnaires were translated into other languages as required. The translation process involved an initial translation from English, a translation of the resulting questionnaire back into English and then a resolution of any resulting anomalies in wording between the original version and the back-translation. This resolution included, where possible, discussions with children, and the knowledge of the local research teams.

One methodological issue in researching SWB (as well as similar constructs such as happiness or life satisfaction) is that distributions tend to be heavily negatively skewed (Casas, 2011), meaning most children have SWB above the mean. Hence, comparing mean scores may not be reliable (Bradshaw & Keung, 2011). As a result, we used Bradshaw and Keung's (2011) approach for analysing trends in the proportion of young people with very low SWB scores. As a threshold we took those children from the sample exhibiting lowest SWB (bottom 25%) of the aggregate data. This sample of least-satisfied children (see Table 1) resulted in 2311 boys (46.2%) and 2689 girls (53.8%). Other than in Table 1 which compares the sub-sample with low SWB to other children in the sample, all analyses are performed on this subsample of children.

Table 1 shows the gender distributions within the overall sample of 12-year-old children compared to those whose SWB is in the bottom 25%. The proportion of children with low SWB varies between countries and by gender, with South Korea standing out as having by far the largest proportion of children with low SWB, at 24% of boys and 30% of girls. Across the whole sample, there is also an over-representation of children who do not live in two-parent families among those whose SWB is in the bottom 25%.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the sample.

		Boy (N:%)		Girl (N:%)	
		Overall	Bottom 25%	Overall	Bottom 25%
Algeria (Western)		735 (7.7)	153 (6.6)	548 (5.7)	99 (3.7)
Colombia (Antioquia)		487 (5.1)	79 (3.4)	488 (5.0)	89 (3.3)
Estonia		519 (5.5)	155 (6.7)	509 (5.3)	150 (5.6)
Ethiopia		491 (5.2)	163 (7.1)	489 (5.0)	148 (5.5)
Germany		403 (4.2)	96 (4.2)	446 (4.6)	155 (5.8)
Israel		459 (4.8)	47 (2.0)	463 (4.8)	40 (1.5)
Malta		455 (4.8)	65 (2.8)	486 (5.0)	95 (3.5)
Nepal		498 (5.2)	185 (8.0)	497 (5.1)	149 (5.5)
Norway		415 (4.4)	61 (2.6)	556 (5.7)	92 (3.4)
Poland (Wielkopolska)		495 (5.2)	136 (5.9)	518 (5.3)	148 (5.5)
Romania		772 (8.1)	46 (2.0)	731 (7.5)	51 (1.9)
S Africa (W Cape)		517 (5.4)	155 (6.7)	614 (6.3)	184 (6.8)
S Korea		1228 (12.9)	555 (24.0)	1369 (14.1)	811 (30.2)
Spain (Catalonia)		880 (9.3)	188 (8.1)	787 (8.1)	186 (6.9)
Turkey (Istanbul)		466 (4.9)	89 (3.9)	552 (5.7)	108 (4.0)
UK (England)		670 (7.1)	138 (6.0)	639 (6.6)	184 (6.8)
Total		9490 (100.0)	2311 (100.0)	9692 (100.0)	2689 (100.0)
Family structure	Two-parent	8052 (85.8)	1856 (81.6)	8045 (83.7)	2104 (79.0)
	Single parent	1.171 (12.5)	359 (15.5)	1392 (14.4)	496 (18.6)
	Other	161 (1.7)	60 (2.6)	188 (2.0)	64 (2.4)
	Total	9490 (100.0)	2311 (100.0)	9692 (100.0)	2689 (100.0)

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. Socio-demographic data

Some basic questions on children's age, gender (boy or girl[1]) and living arrangements were including in the study, and details of adults with whom children live with were included in this analysis.

4.2.2. SWB

A modified version of Huebner's (1991) Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) was employed as a measure of SWB. The original scale consists of seven items designed to assess context-free life satisfaction, and respondents are asked to agree or disagree with them. The initial version used a four-point frequency response scale, but a six-point agree-disagree scale was subsequently recommended by the author. The scale has been shown to have good reliability and validity with general samples of young people (for a summary, see Huebner & Hills, 2013). In order to make the instrument more sensitive and capture more variance, unlike the original version, an 11-point scale ranging from '*Do not agree at all*' to '*Totally agree*' is used in the current study.

During the piloting of this scale in different countries and with different languages it was decided that only four of the original items would be used (*My life is going well; My life is just right; I have a good life; I have what I want in life*) and that one more item would be added (*The things in my life are excellent*) adapted from the SWLS (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Smith, 1985), in order to improve the scale's reliability. While the survey has employed several measures of SWB, preliminary analysis has shown that using the specific modified SLSS version displayed promising results due to the fact that its correlations and regressions appeared to be comparable among all countries in the sample (Casas, 2016). Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and was found to be 0.73 for boys and 0.80 for girls.

[1] Children were asked if they were a boy or a girl and not given other response choices (e.g. transgendered). Authors are aware of this limitation, yet in certain countries and certain subcultures of the current study, giving other response choices would not have been possible in a school-based survey.

4.2.3. Satisfaction with self

Children were asked to rate their satisfaction with the following nine aspects of themselves and their lives: time use, freedom, amount of opportunities, health, appearance, body, free time, being listened to by adults in general and self-confidence. These items were measured on an 11-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 = '*not at all satisfied*' to 10 = '*totally satisfied*'. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.84 for boys and 0.85 for girls.

4.2.4. Satisfaction with family

Satisfaction with family was measured using three items: "My parents or other carers listen to me and take what I say into account", "We have a good time together in my family", and "My parents or other carers treat me fairly". Each of these was rated on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = '*I do not agree*' to 4 = '*totally agree*'. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.74 for boys and 0.78 for girls.

4.2.5. Satisfaction with peers

Satisfaction with peers was assessed by two items: "my friends are usually nice to me" and "I have enough friends". Each of these was rated on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = '*I do not agree*' to 4 = '*totally agree*'. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.70 for boys and 0.68 for girls.

4.2.6. Satisfaction with school

Children's satisfaction with school was measured using three items; "My teachers listen to me and take what I say into account", "I like going to school", and "my teachers treat me fairly". These items were measured on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = '*I do not agree*' to 4 = '*totally agree*'. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.74 for boys and 0.74 for girls.

5. Statistical analysis

In this study, multi-group structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test invariance in causal structure across genders. Theoretically, group comparison is performed with increasing constraints imposed on the model, varying from constraints only on the same model structure across groups to constraints on the same model structure, parameters, residuals, and variance–covariance (Bollen, 1989).

In this study, testing for invariance across groups was performed using the built-in multi-group analysis program in AMOS 19.0. Three different assumptions of group equity are tested in the case that the baseline model does not have a measurement component. These three assumptions are equal structural weights, equal structural covariance, and equal structural residuals across groups. Correspondingly, three hierarchical models are tested: the model with constraints only on equal structural weights, the model with enforcement on equal structural weights and covariance, and the model imposed by equal structural weights, covariance, and residuals.

To perform multi-group analysis in the study, two baseline models were first constructed for boys and girls, respectively. Multi-group analysis based on the two baseline models was conducted to test invariance of causal structures across gender. Using structural equation modelling to explore models across different groups requires that certain kinds of invariance are established (Hong, Malik, & Lee, 2003). For comparisons to be meaningful, the underlying data and patterns must have certain similarities across the groups being compared, and the extent to which such patterns are similar dictates the kinds of comparison which can be reasonably drawn. Without establishing invariance, it is not clear whether the same indicators are measuring the same constructs in the groups being tested; this compromises the meaning of comparisons, since for models to be compared, it must be established that the same underlying constructs are being measured.

Table 2
Means, standard deviations of main study variables *t*-test showing gender difference.

	Gender	N	Mean (SD)	*t*-Test	Indicators	*t*-Test
SWB (SLSS)	Boys	2311	28.57 (8.41)	**4.60*****	**Life going well**	**4.17*****
	Girls	2689	27.42 (9.15)		**Life just right**	**4.92*****
					Have good life	**3.46*****
					Have what want	− 0.35
					Things life excellent	**4.45*****
Satisfaction with self	Boys	2305	60.42 (15.86)	**5.83*****	Time use	1.32
	Girls	2681	57.73 (16.60)		**Appearance**	**8.25*****
					Body	**9.64*****
					Freedom	1.42
					Opportunities	1.36
					Health	**2.11***
					Free time	**4.21*****
					Listened to	9.28
					Self confidence	**8.18*****
Satisfaction with family	Boys	2291	8.21 (2.96)	0.97	Parents listen	1.45
	Girls	2670	8.12 (2.99)		Good time together	− 0.11
					Parents treat fairly	1.04
Satisfaction with peers	Boys	2291	5.44 (2.02)	0.14	**Friends nice**	**− 2.94****
	Girls	2672	5.44 (2.05)		**Friends enough**	**3.02****
Satisfaction with school	Boys	2301	7.19 (3.11)	− 1.93	Teachers listen	0.07
	Girls	2684	7.36 (2.97)		**Like school**	**− 3.43*****
					Teachers fair	− 1.80

Bold font indicates a significant difference found between girls and boys regarding each indicator.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

6. Findings

6.1. Gender differences and descriptive statistics

First, descriptive statistics are presented for all variables used in the model – SWB, satisfaction with self, satisfaction with family, satisfaction with peers and satisfaction with school. Next, the variables included in this model were tested for significant differences between boys and girls. Results are shown in Table 2.

As can be seen from Table 2, several significant gender differences were observed. For overall SWB, boys had higher scores than girls (this trend was also true for four of the five items comprising the overall SWB score), thus confirming the first hypothesis. Boys were also more satisfied with self – girls were less satisfied regarding their appearance, bodies, health, free time and self-confidence. No gender difference was found regarding satisfaction with family. Satisfaction with peers reflected two opposing trends: Boys were more inclined to agree that they have enough friends; however, girls felt their friends were nicer to them. Finally, the overall satisfaction with school was similar across genders. However, looking at the three items which comprise this domain, there was a significant gender difference in one of these, with girls reporting liking school more than boys. Hence, excluding satisfaction with family, the second hypothesis was also supported by the data.

Table 3
Goodness of fit indexed for two-group structural model.

	χ^2 (DF)	CFI	NFI	TLI	RMSEA
Boys	2085.45 (199)	0.87	0.86	0.83	0.06
Girls	3084.46 (199)	0.86	0.85	0.82	0.07

6.2. Structural equation model

6.2.1. Tests of configural invariance, metric invariance and scalar invariance

A multi-group structural equation model was set up to test the exploratory analysis regarding the effects of children's satisfaction with self, school, family and peers on their SWB. First, we tested whether a baseline model fit the data for both boys and girls reasonably (see Table 3). The purpose of this model is to test for configural invariance.

The baseline model proved a reasonable fit for the data for both genders, indicating that one common model is plausible across the genders. Configural invariance is attained, supporting the idea that the pattern of fixed and non-fixed parameters is identical across genders.

In the next step the measurement model was tested. The factor pattern coefficients were constrained to be equal, resulting in an increase in χ^2 values from 5121.3 to 5217.1, and gaining 6 degrees of freedom. As a result of the nesting of the metric invariance model within the baseline model, a χ^2 test was performed, with a result of $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.8, \Delta df = 6, p > 0.1$. This supports metric invariance (shown in Table 4). Although the χ^2 test is widely used to compare the fit of nested models, it has been observed that one should not rely exclusively on the χ^2 difference test as it suffers from the same well-known problems as the χ^2 test for evaluating overall model fit (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Marsh & Grayson, 1990; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). Thus, RMSEA, NFI, TLI and CFI were also considered. These indices confirmed metric invariance across boys and girls. That is, the measurement model based on metric invariance was supported as a better fit than the baseline model, indicating that different groups respond to the items in the same way and thus it is possible to meaningfully compare ratings obtained from different groups.

Following the tests based on metric invariance, a scalar invariance model was tested. This was done by constraining the intercepts of the four indicators to be the same across the two groups, which would indicate that group differences in the means of the observed items should stem from differences in the means of underlying constructs. As above, a χ^2 test was used to establish whether the scalar invariance model was supported. Results were $\Delta\chi^2 = 284.97$ ($\Delta df = 22, p > 0.5$). The significance of the difference of the χ^2 statistic indicates that scalar invariance is supported (see model 3 in Table 4).

6.2.2. Comparison of gender differences in SWB

Given that the assumptions of configural, metric and scalar invariance were satisfied, the next step was to test for differences between boys and girls. Since analysis in the first section of these findings has shown that boys tend to report higher SWB, this part of the analyses examines more specific results including comparing the effect sizes in relation to differences between boys and girls (see Fig. 1).

As can be seen from Fig. 1, all the domains examined in this study are related to children's SWB, but the size of the effect is different across genders. Girls' satisfaction with self has greater effect on their SWB than boys' satisfaction with self. Regarding satisfaction with peers, this affects children's SWB, but once again the size of the effect is different between genders. Boys' satisfaction with peers has less of an effect on their SWB when compared to girls' satisfaction with peers. A similar trend emerges when examining satisfaction with family. The size of the effect is different between boys and girls, with girls' satisfaction with family having a bigger effect on their SWB. Finally, there were significant differences in one path coefficient between the two groups, namely, the path linking satisfaction with school to SWB. For boys, this path was significant, but for girls it was not. This finding suggests that satisfaction with school only significantly affects boys' SWB, not girls' SWB.

7. Discussion

Among the least satisfied children examined in the current study, boys reported higher overall SWB. This is interesting, since the SWB gender gap (i.e. the finding that boys are more satisfied than girls) has seemed to close over recent years in some contexts (Bradshaw & Keung, 2011). This may relate to a finding by Werner (1989), based on her longitudinal data from Kauai, which has shown that during the first decade of life, boys are more vulnerable while in the second decade of life girls become more vulnerable. Present findings also support previous findings that during adolescence girls' SWB is lower than boys' (Klocke, Clair, & Bradshaw, 2014).

Abrams (2002) claims that contemporary American adolescent girls face a variety of challenges as they negotiate the journey into adulthood. Our results show that this might be relevant for adolescent girls in many countries, not just the US. According to Abrams (2002), despite significant ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic variations in young women's life experiences, all adolescent girls mature in a society that privileges men over women. This is apparent in several contexts: the labour market, cultural life, high rates of violence against women and girls, contradictory messages regarding sexuality, and finally in the amount of pressure on girls to strive towards “feminine” ideals (Phillips, 1998; Pipher, 1994). Several studies have shown that young women exhibit internalized symptoms such as depression, deliberate self-injury, suicidal ideation, and eating disorders at alarmingly higher rates than young men (Phillips, 1998; Schoen et al., 1997). Abrams (2002) suggests that these may occur in response to these gender-related pressures.

Gender-related pressures might also be related to this study's current findings regrading girls' and boys' satisfaction with self. Compared to boys, girls were less satisfied with various aspects of themselves, including: appearance, bodies, health, free time and self-confidence. These findings are not unique in that previous research has shown that SWB of boys is higher in regard to self-image, self-confidence and appearance (Casas et al., 2013; Rees et al., 2010). At least three of these five aforementioned indicators might be related to unrealistic current ideals of feminine beauty (Grabe et al., 2008). Alarmingly, our findings reveal what appears to be an overarching cross-cultural trend. However, since our sample is not representative of all nations and European countries are overrepresented in it, these findings should be treated with caution. Work incorporating a yet more diverse range of countries, and qualitative research with children to facilitate a better understanding of the meanings of our findings, are indicated.

Satisfaction with self in the current study included an item

Table 4
Fit Indices for invariance tests and χ^2 difference tests.

	χ^2 (DF)	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Decision
Baseline model (model 1)	5212.36 (409)	0.85	0.83	0.86	0.04			
Full metric invariance model (model 2)	5217.18 (415)	0.85	0.83	0.86	0.04			Accept (model 1 vs model 2)
Full scalar invariance model (model 3)	5502.15 (437)	0.84	0.83	0.86	0.04	284.97	22	Accept (model 2 vs model 3)

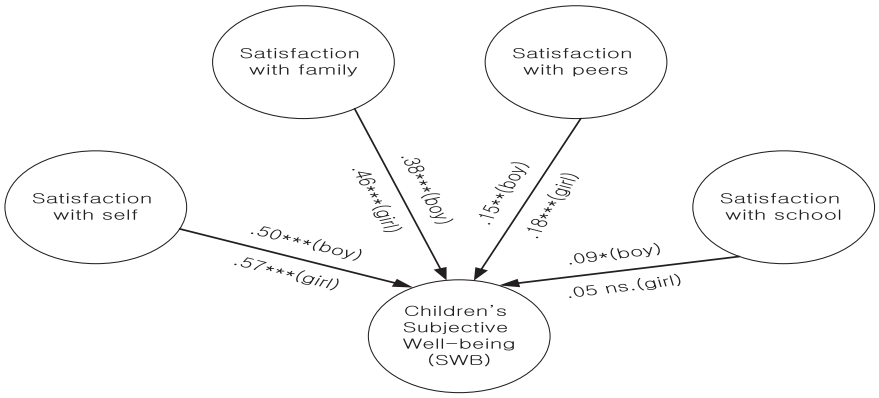

Fig. 1. Full scalar invariance model. (CFI ranges from 0.84 to 1.00, which is considered acceptable if sample size is over 200 (Bentler, 1990).)

regarding free time, which, in the current study, girls were less satisfied with compared to boys. Less satisfaction with free time may be linked to gendered expectations of time use for girls and boys. Research has shown that girls do more household work (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Gager, Sanchez, & Demaris, 2009). The type of household work done also varies according to gender: girls do more chores which are socially perceived as 'feminine' (e.g. cleaning and cooking) than boys (Gager, Cooney, & Call, 1999; McHale, Bartko, Crouter, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990) and boys do more 'masculine' chores (e.g. outdoor work, household repairs) than girls (McHale et al., 1990). It has also been shown that gender differences in housework persist even when parents are highly educated and subscribe to egalitarian gender ideologies (Gager et al., 2009).

Relationships are another important factor contributing to overall SWB. Interestingly, in this sample there was no gender difference regarding satisfaction with family. Regarding friendships, as was previously mentioned two opposing trends emerged: boys reported having more friends while girls felt their friends were nicer to them. These findings are in line with the social networks literature (e.g. Belle, 1989). Studies stemming from this tradition carried out more than forty years ago have already shown that boys have a tendency to play in groups of three of more, while girls more frequently choose dyadic interaction, with its greater opportunities for intimate emotional expression (e.g., Lever, 1976; Tietjen, 1982). It has also been found that boys seemed to profit more from extensive casual relationships, while girls thrived when they had more emotionally intensive relationships (Bryant, 1985). This is supported in our results.

Regarding school, the only gender difference that has emerged related to girls liking school more than boys. This finding might be linked to a long line of findings (Barber, 1996; Cox, 2000; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Warrington et al., 2000) which have shown girls' superior academic performance, which could very much relate to school satisfaction. This finding is just as alarming as findings regarding fields in which girls show inferiority. This finding, alongside many others from recent years, raises the question of whether existing school systems fit the needs of both genders. It lends support to the claim that policy makers must promote the development of a positive learning environment for students of both genders (Furlong & Christenson, 2008).

A unique contribution of the current study is the insight offered by our findings in relation to the different effect sizes that the different life domains have on children's SWB, according to gender. For girls, relationships with peers and with family as well as satisfaction with self, appeared to have a greater influence on their SWB when compared to boys. This supports feminist theories (Gilligan, 1982) which frame girlhood and womanhood in the context of relationships. These findings are highly compatible with Chui and Wong's (2016) conclusion that relationship factors (regarding both friends and family) seem to matter much more for the happiness of girls and women.

In contrast, satisfaction with school significantly affects boys' SWB, but no effect was found for girls. Similarly, Chui and Wong (2016) found that higher academic satisfaction only leads to higher happiness for boys but not for girls among their sample of adolescents in Hong Kong. Interestingly, in their study another finding was that academic satisfaction matters for the life satisfaction for girls but not for boys. Our findings therefore complement and extend those of previous research, in that we find support for the ideas that associations between gender and SWB are complex and contingent.

The current study is based on a multi-nation sample and has yet to resolve the nature of relations between constructs such as 'gender', 'culture', and 'country' in relation to children's SWB. For example, it should be borne in mind that as well as structural characteristics of a society (e.g. labour market participation, income) which might play a role in the context of gender, cultural factors such as gender stereotypes and attitudes are also relevant in understanding variation in the SWB of girls and boys (Tesch-Romer et al., 2008). Although it has been shown that the cross-cultural variation in attitudes towards women and men are connected with societal gender inequality (Glick et al., 2000), culture might be important in its own right (Tesch-Romer et al., 2008). Hence, differences between cultures and societies might be due to cultural or societal environments, which operate with universal mechanisms (Daatland & Motel-Klingebiel, 2006).

Specifically, girls' SWB appears to be affected by social relationships, while boys' SWB is more strongly associated with what could be considered more 'objective' measures of success, specifically doing well at school. As noted above, this may relate to social constructions around gender, and the type of life goals that are prescribed for different genders. An examination of these findings comparing different countries and drawing on cultural and national factors such as the level of gender equality within countries would be a valuable next step in understanding the causes of these differential findings.

8. Study limitations

Limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. One limitation is the use of a single method of data collection, i.e., self-report questionnaires, and a single source of data, i.e., the participants themselves. Future research should incorporate additional sources of data and instruments, possibly qualitative ones. Another limitation is the fact that the sample is a multi-national one, representing many cultures and subcultures. The breadth of this sample makes the findings highly interesting; however the scope of this article does not allow us to make context informed analysis among the different cultures and subcultures sampled in the current study. Also, the measurement of gender in the present study was binary (girls and boys), and children were not given other response choices (e.g. transgendered). Hence, the range of variation in self-perceived gender is not reflected in the present sample. Finally, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow us to infer causality. Longitudinal research on SWB is needed to fill this gap.

9. Implications of study findings

The study contributes new knowledge to the current literature on children's SWB. The role of gender in relation to SWB is valuable for clinicians and other professionals interested in bettering children's lives. The alarming findings regarding young girls' dissatisfaction with themselves, as well as their lower levels of overall SWB, cannot and should not be overlooked. In terms of policy, policy makers and advocates for children's rights should be aware that these disturbing differences may represent important social inequities and have long-term effects on children's lives and on the nature of the society in which children live. Policy makers in the educational arena should perhaps consider why so many boys dislike school and think of tailoring schools towards a better fit with the needs of both genders. Attempts should be made at changing the media's harmful messages regarding impossible beauty ideals, as well as developing education and prevention programs which help children create a more critical outlook on these messages. Finally, with respect to research on children, this study shows that using a child-centred measure helps reveal clear patterns regrading children's lives from their perspectives.

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