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Polish Students Are Feeling Better and Better. A Research Report

Abstract: The study aimed to test how Polish students assess their average mood. The research was based on American and Polish studies conducted several years ago. In the U.S. study, students rated their mood as better than usual, while the Polish students in the 1990s rated theirs as worse than usual. Participants in our study were 82 people (mean age $M = 20$ years, $SD = 1.21$). For 30 consecutive days they rated their mood using a 7-point scale. It turned out that the participants tended to rate their mood on a given day as the same as the average one. These results are different from those obtained for Polish students several years ago.

Key words: mood, Poland, students

Introduction

In 1996 in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and in 1997 in the Polish journal *Przegląd Psychologiczny* Dariusz Doliński (1996, 1997) published an article presenting a replication of Winifred Johnson's (1937) American study. In these studies, students were asked to assess their typical mood. In the study by Johnson (1937) students rated their mood for 65 consecutive days. The students in Doliński's study estimated their mood on a 7-point scale, in the evening, for 100 consecutive days. The results showed that Americans tended to declare that they felt better than usual, while the Poles in Doliński's study claimed that they felt worse on a given day than they usually did. We thought that it would be interesting to ask a similar question about Poles' typical mood 16 years after the publication of those findings and to check whether the mood assessment would reveal any changes in our attitude towards reality. It is worth noting that in 2000 Bogdan Wojciszke (2003) asked adult Poles the same question. He found that most of them felt the same as usual and 30% felt worse than usual. This effect appeared mainly in the group of adults, whereas young respondents assessed their mood as neither better nor worse than usual. We decided to concentrate on the representatives of a younger generation, born after communism and raised in times of relative economic and political stability.

What about our typical national characteristics? Poles are regarded as a nation that has a tendency to complain. This is the way we perceive ourselves and the way we are perceived by people of other nationalities (Szarota, 2004). Are there any benefits of complaining? There is a general belief that complaining may help in relieving tension and reducing dissatisfaction, but the study by Wojciszke and colleagues (2009) showed that complaining may in fact have negative impact on our mood. Still, a complaining individual will be perceived by interlocutors as a person who is likeable and sensible and knows much about life (Szarota, 2004). The conclusion to be drawn from this is that complaining about life will not change your mood, let alone your life, but will bring you social acceptance and sympathy.

The Present Study

The aim of the study was to check how students assess their mood nowadays and whether there have been any changes in their perception of the world compared to the results obtained by Doliński (1996) on a group of 24 students, where young Polish people, as opposed to their U.S. peers, typically rated their mood as worse than usual. In Doliński's study there were 24 students aged from 19 to 24 years (12 of them were married with children and 12 were single and childless). They all assessed their mood for 100 consecutive days.

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Sample

The sample consisted of 82 first-year psychology students of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, 54 women and 28 men. Their mean age was 20 years ($SD = 1.21$). They were all single and had no children.

Procedure

The participants were asked to assess their current mood for 30 consecutive days in comparison to what they regarded as their usual mood, using a 7-point scale (1 - distinctly worse, 2- worse, 3 - rather worse, 4 - the same, 5 - fairly better, 6 - better, 7 - distinctly better). Their mood was assessed at the same time of each day: in the evening (between 6 and 7 pm). The research was conducted between November and December 2012.

Results

The participants tended to describe their mood as the same as usual. The lowest mean value for mood was $M = 3.12$ and the highest was $M = 6.53$. The average mood for the whole sample was $M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.63$. On the other hand, in Doliński's study students tended to evaluate their current mood as worse than usual ($M = 3.41$). It seems that the declared mood has changed over several years, showing a tendency to improve. In order to identify the differences between women and men, a t-test was performed for independent samples. No significant differences were found between genders in the experience of mood, $t(82) = .09$; $p = .932$, *ns*. The mood was $M = 4.30$ ($SD = 0.59$) in the female group and $M = 4.28$; ($SD = 0.72$) in the male group. The whole group showed a positive bias in assessing their typical mood: 68% of the participants scored above 4.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that Polish students feel better than several years ago, but not yet as well as American students. The source of the differences between our results and Johnson's may be sought in cultural factors. In Poland, the culture of complaining and pessimism is dominant (Szarota, 2004; Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005). Wojciszke and Baryła (2005) believe that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are expressed differently in different cultures. In America, the affirmation rule is cultivated, which says that people should be happy and satisfied. However, in different cultures people are expected to conceal their emotions. In the Polish culture, it would not be appropriate to show happiness or to tell others about your successes. This is called the Polish negativity rule. Poles do not believe in their success in life; Poland is regarded as a country of malcontents and pessimists.

Mood assessment might have been influenced by the time of day. David Watson and colleagues (Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999) claim that the line showing the daily fluctuations of positive mood has an inverted U shape: in the evening, positive mood starts to decrease. On the other hand, negative mood maintains a similar level during all day. In their study, positive mood gradually increased during the day, reaching its peak eight hours after waking up, and then gradually decreased in the afternoon. Mood fluctuation is an individual issue and depends on the sleep-wake pattern as well as on everyday routine.

The Polish participants might have estimated their mood as lower in comparison to the American sample in order to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2007). Americans are famous for optimism; the smile rule has become a factor behind their success, personal well-being, and coping (Szarota, 2004). If something is accepted in society and becomes the norm, people subscribe to the prevailing opinion because they want to avoid dissonance and be better adapted to society. Being a citizen of a large

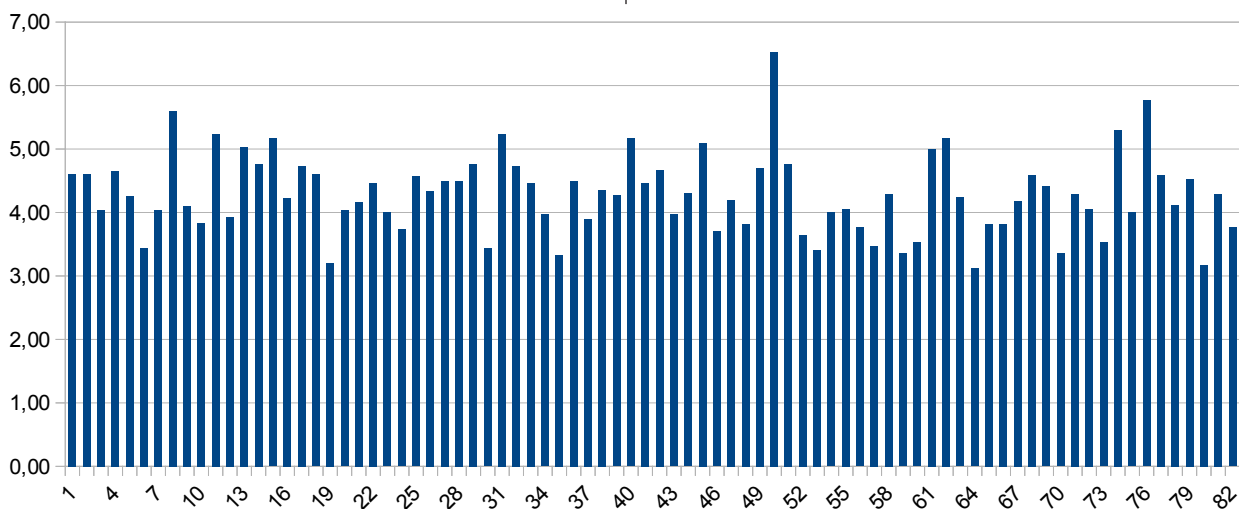


Figure 1. Diagrams with means of mood for 30 consecutive days (N = 82). As in the original study by Doliński (1997), point 4 means: "Today my mood is the same as my typical mood," while point 3 means: "Today my mood is rather worse than my typical mood."

country such as the United States gives a sense of pride and power. This is likely to translate into satisfaction with life. By contrast, in Poland – a country that was not independent for a long time, where various historical events may have affected the self-perception of the Polish nation as an oppressed one, and where the cult of martyrdom dominates (Szarota, 2004) – it may not be seen as appropriate to speak about oneself as happy or satisfied. As the presented research shows, there is an increasingly higher social acceptance for expressing satisfaction. The present study also reveals that young people feel increasingly better and have an increasingly better mood. This is consistent with the social diagnosis offered by Janusz Czapiński and colleagues, according to which Poles now experience more and more life satisfaction (Czapiński, Sulek, & Szumlicz, 2011). We can say that, in recent years, optimism and satisfaction have grown. In Boski's (2009) study, the participants specified in which historical period they wanted to live. The communist period (the Polish People's Republic, PRL) was estimated as the worst one to live in, whereas the period after joining the EU was rated as the best. Perhaps the awareness that we live in a better period is what improves the mood felt by Poles.

The limitations of the present study also include the lack of control while the participants were filling in the questionnaire. The procedure did not take place in the experimenter's presence. What makes it legitimate to suppose that our findings are reliable is Doliński's study, which found no differences between conditions involving the experimenter's presence and absence. Another possible limitation of the present study stems from the fact that women constituted a majority of the sample and that the respondents were of roughly the same age. Still, in Johnson's and Doliński's studies the respondents were also students.

It is worth noting, however, that in Doliński's study a half of the participants were parents as well as students. These two roles and the additional obligations that role of a parent involves may have influenced their self-assessment of mood. Another possible limitation of the present study is that the sample was composed of students from one university only. In future research the sample should be more diverse.

To sum up, the typical mood among Polish students turned out to be higher than 18 years before. Young people are no longer so negative in their perception of their mood; they are becoming increasingly similar to their American peers – perhaps not as positive as Americans yet, but is it possible to notice an improvement in their approach to life. This may be linked to the political, cultural, and social transformations in Polish society that have improved the standard of living and contributed to a greater ease of traveling or self-expression.

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