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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL SKILLS AND WELL-BEING AMONG DORM-DWELLING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between social skills (SS) and psychological well-being (PWB) among dorm-dwelling university students at a public University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 50 students at two time points: a) when they moved into the dorm; and b) after living there six months. Participants completed the Social Skills Inventory and Psychological Well-being Scale. Analyses revealed the PWB scores declined over time ( $t(49) = 2.504, p < 0.05$ ). SS and PWB scores were positively correlated at both time points (Pre:  $r = 0.634, p < 0.001$ ; Post:  $r = 0.762, p < 0.001$ ). Findings suggest that a positive relationship exists between social skills and psychological well-being.

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## INTRODUCTION

The access of low-income people to public universities in Brazil has increased as a result of a number of public policies that have been confronting social inequalities over the last 10 years. Data reported by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) in the second quarter of 2017 showed that investment in higher education is an important factor for social changes. The IBGE results demonstrated that the average salary of individuals who have completed higher education is 2.8 times higher than those who just completed high school or have incomplete higher education. Children's schooling is influenced by the level of education of the adults in the family. The rate of schoolchildren between 4 and 5 years of age coming from households where one of the residents has completed higher education is 96% (IBGE 2017). Studies by Ribeiro (2017), Santos (2017), Moura and Tamboril (2018)

show that the inclusion of the population in higher education institutions should be closely monitored by psychosocial support agents due to the proven difficulties regarding academic adaptation that affect new students. Research conducted with elementary school students indicates that social support from family and community when associated with a good repertoire of social self-control skills may increase life satisfaction indicators (Achkar, Leme, Soares, & Yunes 2016). In addition, recent studies show direct associations between social skills, life satisfaction and student achievement. (Del Prette, & Del Prette 2017; Soares et al. 2019). There are few studies on the effects of student housing on the personal development of young adults. There are even fewer studies on the relationship between social skills and psychological well-being of such population. Recent surveys developed in public college residence facilities (Garrido 2015; Lacerda, & Valentini 2018; Delabrida, Santos, & Barletta 2018), indicated that living close to campus favors the student's participation in a higher number of academic

activities. Therefore, it improves their grades, reduces stress and affects well-being in a positive way. However, interpersonal relationship issues in the context of the university residence are reported as important detractors of the quality of life index of the students (Lacerda, & Valentini 2018). These results brought the interest in understanding the effects of living in dorms on the personal development of young people who leave their original support network (family, friends and other emotional references) to face the challenges of moving to a new social and relational environment in the Halls. In addition to adapting to the academic life, the student needs to adapt to the terms of collective living and learn to share space with people whose habits may be very different from their own. All of this requires tolerance, respect for differences, commitment, negotiation skills and social participation that can impact on the individuals' well-being (Imperatori 2017). Psychological well-being is a construct defined by six dimensions: Self-acceptance, Positive relations with others, Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Purpose in life and Personal growth (Ryff 1989; Ryff, & Singer 2008). In order to objectively assess this construct, the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB, Ryff 1989) was developed. In a study by Machado and Bandeira (2013), this Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB) was adapted and validated in a sample of Brazilian university students and proved to be a valid and reliable instrument for appreciation and analysis of the phenomenon since self-reported observed psychological capacities and resources signal the pathways to cope with everyday situations and life-long challenges (Leme, Del Prette, & Coimbra 2015).

This research is based on the concepts of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (1979) and the Process-Person-Context and Time (PPCT) model. Thus we understand human development based on personal issues such as interests, skills and social and relational needs called Processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998). These are the so-called proximal processes that comprise the person/environment and person/person interactions, considered by the authors as human development drivers. Context is defined in four overlapping and concentric levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem is the scenario of proximal processes and the mesosystem is defined by the interrelation of two or more microsystems frequented by the developing person. The exosystem is a sphere that is not frequented by the developing person, but affects him/her indirectly. The macrosystem encompasses culture, beliefs, ideologies, religions, and forms of government that cross and directly influence people's daily lives in all their contexts. The Time factor, or Chronosystem, allows tracking the development and relates it to the life cycle and to historical events (Bronfenbrenner 1979/1996).

College-based student housing programs create an environment of wide cultural diversity, given the different origins of its residents. As main microsystem frequented by the student, it should be emphasized that daily life in this environment can lead the student to place himself/herself in the definition of rules of coexistence previously stipulated and to negotiate situations of personal disagreement. This can cause, over time, the need to develop new social skills to ensure a healthy and successful life in this transition (Lopes, Dascanio, Ferreira, Del Prette & Del Prette 2017). Some authors consider that living in an environment distant from the

original affective nucleus can be indicative of an important risk factor for the mental health of university students (Padovani, Neufeld, Maltoni, Barbosa, Souza, Cavalcanti & Lameu 2014). A total of 43% of the students of the *Institutos Federais de Ensino Superior* (IFES, Federal Institutes of Higher Education) reports facing difficulties in adapting to the city, the housing and the distance from their families (FONAPRACE 2011). Therefore, the need to investigate those relationships, as well as the acquisition of new relational skills is emphasized, since those relationships can have a direct impact on the everyday life of student Halls' residents. Social skills are developed to achieve social competence. Behavior is considered as socially competent when it enables individual goals to be successfully achieved, in a balanced manner and with respect for personal and collective interests that respect human rights (Leme, Del Prette, Koller, & Del Prette 2016). These social skills can be presented in five major blocks: assertive conversation (self-affirming skills in coping situations, dealing with criticism and praise, public speaking, expressing dislike and requesting behavior change), the affective-sexual approach (skills of maintaining conversation with new acquaintances, declaring love and approaching for sexual intercourse), expressing positive feelings (skills to show affection and love, making and thanking compliments, defending someone in a group, among others), self-control and coping (aimed at dealing with difficult situations such as disagreeing within a group of acquaintances or with people in authority, respond to unfair criticism, or defend someone being criticized).

Finally, social resourcefulness encompasses a set of skills that, when present, give the subject the social resourcefulness and disinhibition required in general interactive situations. Studies with university students by Feitosa (2013) and Braz, Teixeira and Del Prette (2018) found that deficits in social skills are accompanied by states of psychological distress. This suggests that a good repertoire of social skills can act as a factor in the protection and promotion of mental health. Other investigations by Soares and Del Prette (2015) and Bauth, Rios, Lima and Resende (2019) indicate that the development of social skills favors students' adaptation to the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the plurality of environments, such as university admission, the transition to living in student Halls and in the future initiation in the job market. In line with these ideas, recent results obtained by Del Prette and Del Prette (2017) indicate that a good repertoire of social skills is associated with the development of healthy and productive relationships. Other researchers on the subject (Bauth, *et al.* 2019) indicate that, as time goes by, a significant number of students from the 10<sup>th</sup> period compared to students from the 2<sup>nd</sup> period of some undergraduate courses show an evolution in the social skills repertoire, suggesting that time and context may be able to foster this aspect of development.

The promotion of public policies aimed at understanding and fostering the development of students who experience fully the university environment is urgent, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty (Juliano & Yunes 2014). Thus, assessing the psychological well-being of students residing in public student housing can alleviate the coping with difficulties and promote mental health. Given the above, the present study aimed to evaluate the relationship between social skills and the psychological well-being among students residing in a Hall of a Public University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The goal was to assess the relationship between social skills (SS) and

psychological well-being (PWB) among dorm-dwelling university students at two time points: when they moved into the dorm; and six months later. We hypothesize that (H1) social skills and psychological well-being will be positively correlated; (H2) there will be variability in social skills and psychological well-being over time.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study carried out at two time points: a) before the students enter the Hall - called Pre; and b) after six months of residence - called Post. The order of presentation of the details of this section is: Participants /the characterization of the sample and the inclusion and exclusion criteria; Instruments/ the general characteristics of the instruments and Procedures /Ethical Considerations and Data Analysis Collection.

**Participants:** All 72 students joined University's student housing program in December 2018 were invited to research participation. Of these, 52 responded to the instruments at first time. At second time, one student moved to another university and another one gave up from research, totalizing 50 attendees both times of the study. The fifty students aged between 18 and 42 years ( $M = 22.6$  years old and  $SD = 4.66$ ) participated, mostly women (62%) and black or mulattos (74%).

### Instruments

**Social Skills were assessed by IHS2-Del-Prette (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2018):** This instrument consisted of 38 items that assess social performance in situations of interpersonal relationships in work, leisure, family and everyday contexts. The respondent is asked to indicate how often he/she experiences the action or feeling as described in the item, considering the total number of times he or she has been in a situation such as "At home, I express feelings of affection through words and gestures to my family members". If the respondent has not experienced the situation, he or she must imagine the situation. In order to check the answer, a five-point Likert-type scale is presented, ranging from never or rarely (A) to always or almost always (E). The new factor structure (obtained via Exploratory Structure Equation Modeling - ESEM) retained 30 items with excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.944$ ) and a five-factor structure with satisfactory to high consistency: F1 - Assertive Conversation ( $\alpha = 0.934$ ), F2 - Affective-sexual approach ( $\alpha = 0.774$ ); F3 - Positive feeling expression ( $\alpha = 0.894$ ), F4 - Self-control / Coping ( $\alpha = 0.840$ ) and F5 - Social resourcefulness ( $\alpha = 0.840$ ). The total scale explained 59.8% of the variance ( $F1 = 20.8$ ;  $F2 = 6.2$ ;  $F3 = 16.2$ ;  $F4 = 6.9$ ;  $F5 = 9.7$ ), with good overall and local fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 1823,539$ ;  $df = 295$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 4.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.966; TLI = 0.950; RMSEA = 0.037 (90% CI = 0.033 - 0.037). The factorial structure presented configural and scalar invariance between genders and between the two age groups (18–38 and 39–59 years). The item analysis (Item Response Theory) allowed to describe the main parameters (difficulty and fit indices, participants' characteristics and theta), demonstrating the adequacy of the instrument. As the 30 items of the present version are the same as those of the original scale, the previous test-retest stability is considered very good ( $r = 0.90$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ) and the validity convergent with the Rathus Inventory ( $r = 0.79$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

**Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB, Machado & Bandeira, 2013):** This is a self-report instrument that investigates how prepared an individual feels to face life's challenges from the perspective of positive psychology (Ryff 1989). The scale was adapted and validated in Brazil by Machado, Bandeira and Pawlowski (2013) by applying it to a sample of 312 university students of both genders. The adapted scale is made up of 36 items, which aims to assess psychological well-being in the dimensions: positive relationships with others, autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, purpose in life and self-acceptance. The respondents are asked to point out how often they experience the action or feeling as described in the item, considering the total number of times they have found themselves in a situation such as "I believe I have grown up a lot as a person over time". Items are answered on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The adapted scale met the theoretical expectation that the best fit model for the instrument is that of six oblique factors, with an acceptable internal consistency rate ( $0.63 \leq \text{Cronbach's } \alpha \leq 0.75$ ).

**Socio-demographic questionnaire.** Students were asked to give some information divided into sections: (a) Personal: age, gender, color, if they are the first in the family to go to college and if they visit their family regularly); (b) Academic (course, enrollment period, if participating in another student aid program) (c) Household family number of members, per capita income, municipality where they live and parental education).

### Procedures

**Ethical Considerations:** The research project was submitted and approved, according to Opinion No. 3.290.208 - CAAE: 08285819.0.0000.5289, by the Research Ethics Committee of the Salgado de Oliveira University - UNIVERSO. This investigation sought through its instruments and procedures to ensure the physical and moral integrity of the participants, covering the ethical aspects considered essential in research with humans according to Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council. All participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), and thus the investigator assured the students enrolled full confidentiality including on the information that was collected through the instruments.

**Data Collection:** The investigator personally contacted the University Dorm selected for convenience to present the research project and request permission from the Coordinator to carry out the data collection with students. With permission granted, the investigator verified the interest of the students who had been selected in December 2018 to fill a vacancy in the college dorm as of the year 2019. Then, the presentation of the investigation was scheduled with the students. At this time, the research objectives, data collection procedures, and confidentiality assurance were clarified, and two copies of the Free and Informed Consent Form were given to those students who expressed interest in participating in the study. Data collection was performed collectively on campus.

**Data Analysis:** For data analysis, it was performed descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistical analyses. In the latter, the association between SS and PWB variables was measured by Pearson's correlation test. The comparison between the scores of the two variables at the time

of admission to the dorm and after six months was performed using the t-Student Test. Finally, a hierarchical mixed model was performed in which the SS scores were kept constant (Fixed Effect Omnibustests), which allowed to evaluate the effect of SS on the PWB.

### RESULTS

The relationship of social skills (SS) and the psychological well-being (PWB) of students was analyzed in order to better understand the social skills role. The first step consisted in describing and comparing the residents' (N=50) social skills (SS) and psychological well-being (PWB) upon admission to the collededorm (Pre) and after six months of living in this setting (Post). Table 1 presents the description of the scores of the two variables (SS and PWB) at both time points (Pre and Post). Both variables assessed show a reduction in the scores from the first to the second time point investigated.

slight reduction in the overall average, which was not significant ( $t(49) = 1.25, p > 0.05$ ). Analyzing the two scores of psychological well-being, it can be observed that they also suffer reduction and show high consistency at the two time points investigated. However, this mean difference is of greater magnitude and significant ( $t(49) = 2.504, p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the study participants experienced a reduction in PWB as a function of time and this effect was of moderate magnitude ( $r = 0.36$ ). In this connection, the second hypothesis was partially confirmed, because the difference for SS was not statistically significant. Despite the significant reduction in overall PWB scores, it is noteworthy that the Autonomy dimension was the only one with the highest overall average in the Post (4.29% increase). Finally, the study's third hypothesis predicted that high scores on social skills would be favorable to the presence of high scores on psychological well-being (H3). Thus, in order to evaluate the effect of social skills on psychological well-being over time, a

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of SS and PWB at PRE and POST time

Variable	PRE		POST	
	Mean (N=50)	SD	Mean (N=50)	SD
SS	39,50	27,11	36,26	29,65
PWB	166,38	23,02	160,94	25,35

Table 2. Fixed Effects Parameter Estimates

Names	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Df	t	p
				Lower	Upper			
(Intercept)	(Intercept)	148.059	3.8155	140.581	155.537	70.9	38.80	< .001
TIME	PRE - (POS)	3.313	2.2192	-1.037	7.662	40.2	1.49	0.143
	SS	0.435	0.0763	0.286	0.585	85.7	5.71	< .001

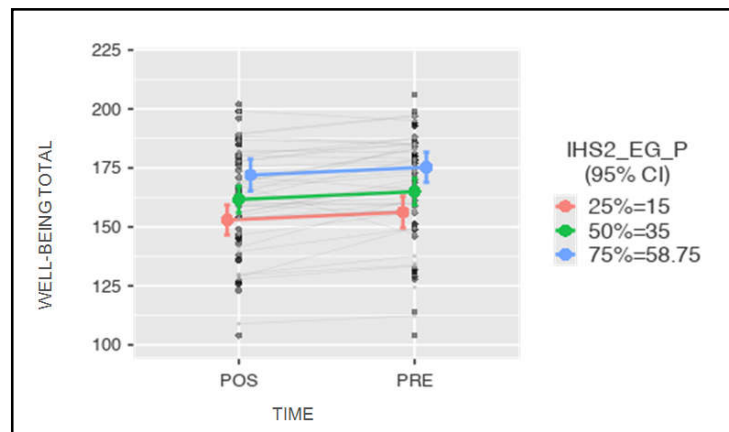


Fig. 1. Chart of PWB scores stratified by high (75%), medium (50%) and low (25%) SS groups

Once the distributions of the scores in the two variables and in the designed time frame were known, we sought to identify possible associations between the variables. The results confirmed H1, as social skills (SS) and psychological well-being (PWB) were strongly and positively correlated at both time points (Pre:  $r = 0.634, p < 0.001$ ; Post:  $r = 0.762, p < 0.001$ ). Considering the importance of time in the ecology of psychological phenomena, especially when subjects enter new frameworks, the next step was to compare and evaluate the magnitude of the differences between the means of SS and PWB at the two time points studied. The H2 of this study predicted to find significant differences between the SS and PWB averages of residents upon admission and after six months living in the students' facilities. When comparing the mean SS scores before and after entering the college dorm, there was a

hierarchical mixed model was used (Table 2), in which the SS parameters were kept constant (Fixed Effect Omnibustests). Under these conditions, the effect of time on psychological well-being was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) and was greatly reduced ( $r = 0.05$ ). Moreover, the effect of SS was significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) and moderate ( $r = 0.28$ ). In other words, if SS increases by 1 standard deviation, the PWB will increase by 44 points. As for the time variable, the increase in 1 standard deviation would imply a decrease of only 3.31 PWB points. It can be seen from Figure 1 that students who reported high SS scores also reported higher psychological well-being scores at both time points investigated, suggesting that a more developed repertoire of social skills assumes a protective role in psychological well-being.

## DISCUSSION

Given the scarcity of studies regarding college housing and its implications for the residents' psychosocial development, this study described indicators of social skills and psychological well-being in a sample of residents of a public college dorm. The results referring to social skills and psychological well-being are in line with a number of previous studies (Vilela & Lourenço 2019; Schotanus-Dijkstra, Pieterse, Drossaert, Walburg, & Bohlmeijer 2019; Leme, Del Prette, & Coimbra 2015) which also evidenced the positive correlation between those two constructs. Reviewing the comparison of the means of social skills results in the two monitored time points, it was verified that in contrast with the findings of Bauth, Rios, Lima, & Resende (2019), the results obtained in the second time point (Post) were not higher, considering that the SS variable is more stable than psychological well-being. Thus, it can be concluded that the exposure time in the academic setting may have not been sufficient to promote the development of social skills for most students. Among the factors of social skills, the one that exhibited the greatest impact in relation to the first measurement was factor 5 that assesses social resourcefulness, when associated with the dimension of psychological well-being, mastery over the environment, which was also the most affected dimension during the first 6 months of student housing residency. It could be stated that the new context reveals relational difficulties that were not perceived by students before their move and suggests that they found a more challenging daily life than expected. The reevaluation of their social skills and the impact on psychological well-being may be a product of this environment transition. These findings are in line with the study by Vilela and Lourenço (2019) which also indicated social resourcefulness as one of the most critical factors among university students.

Considering that a repertoire of solid social skills can favor the establishment of positive relationships, guided by assertiveness, empathy and trust, it is understandable that these skills act in a way to allow a better perception of psychological well-being (Leme, Del Prette, & Coimbra (2015). Observing that the measures associated with psychological well-being varied significantly when compared to the averages found in the two investigated time points, we sought to understand the results in the framework of the Bronfenbrenner (1996) PPCT model. Considering that the resident student is the person, the transition to college dorm is made up of processes; student housing is the main context observed and time is the period of 6 months between the samples; it stands out through the mixed model, that time has a significant influence on psychological well-being when assessed separately; however, when the variable SS is maintained constant, it is observed that the effect of time is no longer significant and social skills gain prominence to promote the psychological well-being of students. Still with regard to psychological well-being, it was found that the autonomy dimension was the only one that presented the highest average after admission to the housing facilities, suggesting that it is associated with the processes of transition to student housing and its challenges. These challenges are related to the conviviality over time that may have encouraged independence, the development of own criteria for the evaluation of personal experiences and self-determination. These results are in line with the investigations by Garrido (2014) and Lacerda & Valentini (2018) that showed that

students residing in student Halls report development of autonomy mainly due to the need to take control of their personal lives. From the perspective of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (1979/1996), considering that there was no investment focused on the promotion of social skills, the augmentations found may be the result of the proximal processes developed among the students within their microsystems, the relationships of these students within the whole setting of student housing such as its physical facilities, with the professionals who work there and the effect of time that articulates personal experiences with the macrosystem that surrounds and influences all the other settings. According to the data presented in the review, for 35% of the students, college dorm functions as a system that promotes human development.

### Final Comments

This survey contributed to shed light on the repertoire of social skills and the levels of psychological well-being perceived by students entering a collective college residence. It can be shown that the correlation between these two constructs is important for the personal, academic and professional lives of these young adults. The effects of ecological transitions have been discussed and described as peculiar since they can affect each individual differently, given the complex universe of the individuals' characteristics, their demands, expectations and resources to taste the experience and translate it into personal development. Despite the relevance and evidence presented by the data, some limitations of the present study should be considered. First, the results are specific of a convenience-selected sample from a group of students entering a public college housing unit located in the State of Rio de Janeiro. Second, the time interval between the two samples was only six months and may have interfered with the results. As a design, it was not possible to delimit the admission in the dorm as an influential variable, distinguishing it from the actual university experience. Finally, it should be considered that the current political scenario has imposed a harsh scrutiny to the academic community and in particular it has scrutinized some careers yielding a scenario of insecurity and hopelessness among students of some courses.

Considering the limitations mentioned above, the findings of this study highlight that students living in college dorms are the focus of little research in Brazil, a fact that spurts reflection on the implications of the lack of data on the needs of this population and therefore the lack of programs and public policies that would promote a harmonious and healthy coexistence in these settings. As verified in this study, social skills have shown to be protective of psychological well-being and this suggests that students' personal resources may be mobilized in future intervention programs that promote the development of social skills in order to promote psychological well-being among college Halls residents. Finally, it is noteworthy that this work does not exhaust the possibilities of investigations on the subject and also suggests that new investigations need to be developed to broaden institutions' understanding about the singularities of the development of this emerging adult population. In times of crisis we should use all the resources we have at hand to seek to understand and foster quality of life and well-being of those students who live plentifully the university environment with a cherished aspiration for social advancement through higher education.



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