

# Expat University Professors' State of Psychological Well-being and Academic Optimism towards University Task in UAE

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the state of psychological well-being and academic optimism in relation to university tasks among one hundred sixty-nine (169) professors in selected UAE universities, utilizing mixed quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The quantitative aspect primarily employed descriptive correlation method which used quantifiable data through survey instruments on psychological well-being, academic optimism, and university tasks. The qualitative analysis was used through a focused group discussion among nineteen (19) key informants. Six (6) areas of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance were measured through the Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being. Academic optimism scale measured three (3) subscales: efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis. University tasks were categorized into three (3) major areas: student centered work, professional development work, and community centered work. The moderator variables considered were age,

gender, length of teaching experience, length of experience in the UAE, and area of specialization. The results showed that the participants tend towards high scores in the subscales of autonomy, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. The academic optimism scale showed prominent high scores in efficacy and trust. Among the university tasks, student-centered work was the most fulfilled. Using the focused-group discussion, most expat university professors lament on the lack of time, management support, and lack of funding to pursue professional development, particularly research and publication. The regression analysis showed that there is a significant correlation between psychological well-being and academic optimism. Both psychological well-being and academic optimism predicts fulfillment of university tasks.

**Keywords:** Psychological well-being, Academic Optimism, Expat University Professors

## INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a multi-faceted construct that impacts on a person's mental health and quality of life. Studies confirm that a high level of psychological well-being is positively related to work satisfaction, competence, passion and commitment (Vallerand, 2012). Addressing teacher well-being is not a new idea, bearing in mind that teachers are highly vulnerable to burnout (Ahammed, 2011) with enormous work demands and unpredictable environments (Helsing, 2007) that put them at risk of functional disequilibrium. Teaching is a complex job. If not managed properly, it can become chaotic (Snowman et al, 2009) and can harmfully affect one's personal and professional life. Teacher's well-being and academic optimism are often symmetrically weighted to gauge quality teaching performance. Hoy, et al's study (2007) epitomizes that when teachers do not experience a sense of well-being in their work, they may feel inadequate on competence which may translate into the quality of their job performance. Purposely, this paper investigated psychological well-being and academic optimism as potential predictors to satisfactory fulfillment of university tasks among expat professors in UAE. Considerably, the multicultural perspectives of the work, the novelty of experience of many in the Middle Eastern culture as well as the diverse personalities of teachers from varying cultural orientations and competencies are important areas to look into. There are however valid concerns which the universities must address for continual improvements. Students' expressed concerns about teachers who are perceived to be lacking vigor and drive to bring about the desired outcomes of student learning engagement, especially among those who are difficult or unmotivated must be appropriately dealt with in order to maximize professors' satisfactory performance. Needless to emphasize that when teachers experience high levels of well-being and optimism, the university and its stakeholders benefit. With these in mind, it is hoped that through this study, preventative measures can be employed before they become damaging to the individual and the university.

### Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the levels of Expat University Professors' state of psychological well-being and academic optimism towards school tasks for the school year 2014-15.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of expat university professors' state of psychological well-being in the areas of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance when taken as a whole and when grouped as to sex, age, length of teaching experience, length of experience in the UAE, and area of specialization.?
2. What is the level of expat university professors' academic optimism towards university tasks in the following areas: self-efficacy, trust and academic

emphasis when taken as a whole and when grouped as to sex, age, length of teaching experience, length of experience in the UAE, and area of specialization?

3. Is there a significant relationship between the levels of expat university professors' state of psychological well-being and their academic optimism towards university tasks?

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on the theories espoused by positive psychology. Positive psychology is grounded in scientific inquiry as the study of human strengths and optimal functioning. It was advanced in the late 1990s by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association. Positive psychology deals with happiness, excellence and optimal human functioning. It deviates from older approaches to personality that paid no attention to human strengths and virtues and focused on abnormalities, defensiveness, weaknesses, and negative motivations- on what's wrong with people rather than on what's good or what's right. (Shultz & Shultz, 2009) Ryff (1989) made sense of psychological well-being by breaking it down into six dimensions, each of which contributing to people's experience of wellbeing: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self- acceptance. On one hand, teacher academic optimism was advanced from general work on positive psychology, which shifted its focus on illness and pathology to look at human experience in terms of well-being, hope, and fulfillment. Academic optimism (Hoy, et al, 2006) is a multidimensional construct with three important and related facets: self-efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study utilized the descriptive research design – combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Two major data sourcing were involved in the procedures: the use of the survey questionnaires on psychological well-being, academic optimism, and university tasks, and the employment of focus group discussions with key informants among the participants to gather pertinent qualitative information to validate the quantitative findings.

### Participants of the Study

The participants in this study were one-hundred sixty-nine (169) expat university professors from selected universities in the UAE, These professors answered the survey questionnaires while nineteen (19) of them were chosen to serve as key informants in the focus group discussions. The selection criteria/guide for participants in the focus group considered the following: that in the composition, both male and female, new and tenured,

young and old adult would be included, and furthermore, that proper representation per every university must be observed.

## Measures

This study utilized the following standardized instruments:

1. Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being (Medium Form) (1996), a theoretically grounded instrument that specifically focuses on measuring multiple facets of psychological well-being. These facets include the following components: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance
2. Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale by Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001) to measure self-efficacy
3. Omnibus T-Scale (to measure trust)
4. Organizational Climate Index (to measure academic emphasis)

## Procedures

Survey questionnaires were distributed to the one hundred sixty-nine professors to gather quantitative data. The quantitative results data were utilized as bases for structuring discussion protocols employed during the focus group discussions to gather pertinent insights from some selected participants and to validate the quantitative findings. The discussion protocols underwent critiquing and validation from three experts and suggestions given were taken into consideration. Separate sessions in focus group discussion were conducted which ranged from one hour in length on the average. While the approximated duration was set based on the interview guide, enough latitude however was provided to allow the interviewer a chance to explore potentially insightful avenues.

Interview analyses consisted of detailed readings of participants' responses from recorded and transcribed audiotapes on their perspectives on the different dimensions of psychological well-being and academic optimism. The open-ended questions were phrased in a way that would permit varying responses from the participants.

## Data Treatment and Analysis

To find out the level of professors' state of psychological well-being and academic optimism when grouped into areas and when taken as a whole and when grouped according to variables, the mean was used. To examine the significant relationship between the levels of professors' state of psychological well-being and academic optimism towards school tasks, the Pearson Product Moment of Correlation Coefficient (PPM) was used. For the analytical component of qualitative data, both descriptive and relational schemes were used. Particularly, qualitative data were analyzed using a modified thematic-descriptive analytical scheme.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When taken as a whole, professors' state of psychological well-being was found to be *high* in all areas: Autonomy, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, Purpose in Life and Self-Acceptance, and Environmental Mastery, with the area on Positive Relations as the highest and Environmental Mastery as the lowest. Participants in this study manifested a strong tendency for autonomy, demonstrated by their self-determining and independent attitude. They are able to resist social pressures and can think and act as they desire and can self-regulate these behaviours. According to Ryff, as cited by Ponterotto et al. (2009), autonomy can be viewed as the ability to evaluate oneself according to personal standards without looking for others' approval. It refers to one's self-determination, self-regulation and independence. Ponterotto (2009) summarized the concept of environmental mastery as having the competence in managing one's environment, the ability to control a complex array of external activities and to use available resources and opportunities, and the skill to negotiate surrounding contexts to meet needs. When one achieves mastery, one feels in charge of the situation in which he lives, successfully cope with the demands of everyday life, fit in with the people and the community around, and have a home and a lifestyle that is very much to one's liking. Participants expressed their strong inclination to adapt and fit with people around them. They showed no difficulty in relating with people, however, there is a pressing concern on demands and responsibilities that go with their work. This could mean that professors feel the strain and eventually get overwhelmed with demands and responsibilities so much so that when these get in the way, the manner they manage everyday affairs was affected. This confirms Maslach's view that teachers are professionals highly vulnerable to burnout, and demanding and unpredictable environments (Helsing, 2007) and pressures of performativity (Ball, 2003). Given emphasis was that burnout is a long-term process that results from prolonged exposure to chronic job stressors. These factors, with all probability, take away the meaningfulness that teaching provides to one's life and thus reduce the likelihood of teaching satisfaction contributing to life fulfillment (Ahammed, 2011). Evident in results of this study is the silent presence of stress in the professors' work place and personal life. In many researches, the negative correlation between stress and state of psychological well-being was established. Specifically, in the study conducted by Nasit (2012), secondary school teachers' state of well being was dampened by their stressful life and work.

In the context of this study, while stress may be threatening to the professors' state of well being, nonetheless, the existence of their good and fitting relations with people around permits them to maintain the desired balance and stamina to manage every situation. This is indicative of their strong tendency to have warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others, to be concerned about the welfare of others, to be capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy and to understand

give and take in human relationships. The ability to love is viewed as a central component of mental health. Maslow (1968) posits that self-actualizers are described as having strong feelings of empathy and affection for all human beings and as being capable of greater love, deeper friendship, and more complete identification with others. Adult developmental stage theories like Erikson (1959) also emphasized the achievement of close unions with others (intimacy) and the guidance and direction of others (generativity). Thus, the importance of positive relations with others is repeatedly stressed in the concept of psychological wellbeing. Results of the present study show that professors regard social support from family and friends as most important in their psychological functioning. This illustrates that the quality of teachers' social relationships is crucial to their well-being and that teachers' supportive, positive relationships and social belonging help sustain their well-being as well.

### **State of Psychological Well-being According to Variables**

Results show gender differences in psychological well-being between males and females. In sum, males generally demonstrated higher level of psychological well-being than females. Zangmo (2005) corroborates these findings in his study of psychological well-being of people in Bhutan where analyses revealed that men were more satisfied than women in the different measures of psychological domains. He posits that these findings reflect women's present life conditions to be dramatically different from what they were just a few decades ago. Working women embrace multiple roles in life. The dual responsibility at home and work amplify the pressure and stress experienced by women and these factors may greatly impinge on their well-being. Males on the other hand, are reported to perceive themselves as better equipped with intrapersonal strength. This could predict traditional perceptions of masculinity according to which men define their manhood through qualities such as independence, socially-endorsed success, competitiveness, fearlessness, invincibility or a lack of vulnerability (Good, et al, 2000), which are all traits of an individualistic identity. On the other hand, taking into account age as a variable, results point that the middle adults gained higher states than the early adults. This could account to the fact that advancement in age, given a nurturing environment, allows one to have mastery of works and surroundings. Such mastery provides the impetus for him to feel capable and empowered, a ground which may lead him to have greater independence and security, and consequently, autonomy. Antoniou et al. (2006, cited in Holeyannavar, 2009) studied age differences in occupational stress and professional burnout between primary and high school teachers. Results revealed that younger teachers experienced higher level of burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion and disengagement from profession. These findings agree with the present study as indicated by the participants' lower ratings on Autonomy and Environmental Mastery.

Professors with both shorter and longer tenure gave high ratings on their psychological well-being.

Results however show that those with shorter service gained a little advantage over the longer tenured ones. This posts a contradiction to the common expectation that those with longer service, as shown in the study of Petegem, et al. (2006), were more experienced and therefore, must have developed a better sense of wellbeing as compared to their less experienced colleagues. Speculation however can be considered for professors with many years of experience, they being in the service for a long period of time must have suffered from boredom.

### **On Academic Optimism**

Taking as a whole the three areas on self-efficacy, trust on students and parents, and academic emphasis, professors' academic optimism in sum garnered a high rating, with Self-Efficacy ranked as highest. A high self-efficacy is interpreted as the teachers' strong personal beliefs about their ability to accomplish tasks. Specifically, teachers articulate a strong belief that they can help students value learning. Teacher's belief is a powerful force in classrooms (Woolfolk, 2006), and it was found that teachers' beliefs have significant effects on student achievement. Congruent to this, the theory of self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997) states that if people believe that they are capable of performing certain tasks, they attempt and actually perform them as a result of such belief. This belief empowers the individual towards achieving his goals and often performs at high level. His thoughts determine his course of actions to the direction of completing the tasks with greater success. This belief influences the teachers' sense of efficacy and is considered a crucial factor when crafting a learning environment to maximize the learning of students. The level of Academic Optimism of both male and female professors registered on high level, with females obtaining a higher over-all rating than males. The results can be attributed to sex stereotyping in the teaching profession (Sturm, et al, 2012). Teaching is traditionally believed as a lady profession, and by number, it is female dominated. History would always portray mothers as first teachers and guide. With age as variable, results show that middle adults notably registered a higher level of self-efficacy than the early adults. Woolfolk-Hoy (2000) supports this when she found in her study that efficacy and optimism rise during teacher preparation, and internship, but feel with actual experience as a teacher. It can be inferred that the burdens and pressures experienced by teachers in the actual field may diminish optimism and self-efficacy. On one hand, Sims'(2011) contradicted this view when he asserted that teaching expertise is often associated with years of experience, that expert teachers commit their time and energy to maximizing learning for all students, and hence student achievement improves.

### **Correlation between the Levels of State of Psychological Well Being and Academic Optimism**

A Pearson-Product Moment Correlation was used to find out if there is a significant relationship between the levels of professors' state of psychological well-being and their academic optimism towards

university tasks. The results pointed to a positive correlation between the two variables, significant at the  $p < .01$  level [ $r = .462, p = .000$ ]. With this positive correlation, it can be gauged that the level of state of psychological well-being influence the level of academic optimism in a direct proportionate manner, that is to say, that when the level in psychological well-being increases, a corresponding increase in the level of academic optimism takes place, and vice-versa. Conversely, professors' state of psychological well-being influences his views about the academic tasks.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Quantitative results were validated by the findings of the focus group discussions.

#### **On Psychological Well-being**

Expat professors generally assess their state of psychological well-being as relatively good in general. They are able to manifest optimal psychological functioning and independence, good in human relations, open minded and with determined purpose in life. They are generally able to cope, however, personal and work issues impact their psychological well-being and hamper positive daily functioning. Work assigned to professors outside of class responsibilities contribute to higher level of stress and burn-out. They believe that they thrive best when they are in an environment where they are valued and affirmed for their contribution and achievement

Collectively, participants concluded that they have not mastered environmental challenges. This mirrored the fact that professors are experiencing some difficulties in managing their everyday affairs. To some degree, they feel unable to change or improve their surrounding context, unaware of opportunities around them and feel helpless in controlling their external world. They feel overburdened by responsibilities and obligations, and the demands to juggle both their personal life and work. Most notable among the reasons for the inability to cope are extra tasks that are assigned to teachers apart from academic functions, problems encountered with students, misranking priorities, lack of financial management and the lack of affirmation from colleagues and superiors for jobs done. In addition, professors are expected to continually adapt and keep up with different types and functions of families and schools, transformation in types of work and the nature of employment, as well as new and different information and communication technologies. These factors were found to have the potential to continuously impact on teacher well-being. However, participants regard social support as most important in their psychological functioning. On a particular note, teachers reveal that they draw strength and inspiration from their family and friends and recognize the need and importance of strong social support especially in times of their difficulties. Supportive, positive relationships and social belonging help sustain their well-being. This clearly indicates that the quality of teachers' social relationships is crucial to their well-being.

### **On Academic Optimism**

Participants expressed belief in their students' capacity to learn. They see themselves as contributing to students' growth and development. Most particularly, they have a very strong belief that they can make a positive difference in students' learning; believing in themselves that they can make a difference in the academic performance of students by emphasizing academics and learning, by trusting parents and students to cooperate in the process, and by believing in their ability to overcome difficulties and react to failure with resilience and perseverance.

Varying perceptions on academic optimism emerged. Academic optimism was dominant among the female, middle adults and professors with shorter tenure. Middle adults, on the other hand, due to age and experience are viewed as more adept in decision-making and organization skills. Their wide experiences in life, higher mastery in the art of control over life and organization in their decisions and actions help them cope better. While the young and new teachers are observed to be more passionate and dynamic. They exhibit greater optimism and effort to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning. It can be inferred, however, that the burdens and pressures experienced by teachers the longer they stay in the field may diminish optimism and self-efficacy.

### **Recommendations**

Consequent upon the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made for the improvement of psychological wellbeing and academic optimism of Expat university professors:

1. There is a need for a school environment scanning and school system analysis to provide a setting for the universities to check on other factors which may have possible bearing on their professors' psychological well-being and views on academic optimism. A root-cause analysis, not palliative, but one that will allow an internal and external environment – system analysis can be conducted to review current system used by the university on faculty salary, faculty enhancement, policies, relationships, academic supports improvement so that corresponding supports in instruction be made possible and employable.
2. An over-all continuing faculty development program to reinforce academic optimism must be set in place. A high level of academic optimism among the faculty springs from the fact that they are given the proper training, the appropriate preparation that they are ready for the job, and competency enhancement to boost skills in classroom management.
3. Professors should be provided with genuine control over their work and an appropriate degree of self-management of workload. Roles should be clearly demarcated with well-defined responsibilities and expectations in order to avoid stress. A job audit must be done to essentially reassess position duties, compensation and qualifications. Conducting regular job audits ensures that the faculty are suitably matched to jobs that best utilize their skills and interests.

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