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PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS: THE VOLUNTEER APPROACH

Abstract

The article focuses on examining the impact of volunteer activities on the psychological well-being of students in higher education. The theoretical framework is based on Carol Ryff's model of psychological well-being, which includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, life purpose, and self-acceptance. The study involved 425 students from the South Kazakhstan University named after M. Auezov. Their psychological well-being was measured using Ryff's scale. Additionally, for a more in-depth analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 student volunteers. These interviews provided insights into their subjective experiences of participating in volunteer activities and their perception of volunteering as a factor influencing psychological well-being.

The results confirmed a significant positive impact of volunteer activities on cognitive functions, stress reduction, strengthening social connections, and increasing student motivation. The study highlights the importance of integrating volunteer programs into the educational process as an effective way to enhance students' quality of life and their adaptation to the social environment.

Keywords: psychological well-being, volunteer activities, students, stress reduction, social skills, personal growth, academic motivation.

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СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ ПСИХОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ САУЛЫҒЫ: ВОЛОНТЕРЛІК ТӘСІЛ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақала жоғары білім беру жүйесіндегі студенттердің психологиялық жағдайына волонтерлік қызметтің әсерін зерттеуге арналған. Теориялық негіз ретінде Кэрл Риффтің психологиялық жағдай моделі алынған, ол автономияны, қоршаған ортаны басқаруды, жеке дамуды, позитивті қарым-қатынастарды, өмірлік мақсаттар бар болуды және өзін-өзі қабылдауды қамтиды. Зерттеуге М.Әуезов атындағы Оңтүстік Қазақстан университетінің 425 студенті қатысты. Олардың психологиялық жағдайы Рифф шкаласының көмегімен өлшенді. Сонымен қатар, 15 студент-волонтермен жартылай құрылымдық сұхбаттар жүргізілді. Бұл сұхбаттар олардың волонтерлік қызметке қатысуының субъективті тәжірибесін және оны психологиялық жағдайға әсер ететін фактор ретінде қабылдауын анықтауға мүмкіндік берді.

Нәтижелер волонтерлік қызметтің когнитивті функцияларға, стрессті төмендетуге, әлеуметтік байланыстарды нығайтуға және студенттердің мотивациясын арттыруға айтарлықтай оң әсерін тигізетінін растады. Зерттеу волонтерлік бағдарламаларды оқу үдерісіне студенттердің өмір сапасын жақсарту мен әлеуметтік ортаға бейімделуінің тиімді әдісі ретінде енгізудің маңыздылығын атап көрсетеді.

Кілт сөздер: психологиялық саулық, волонтерлік қызмет, студенттер, стрессті төмендету, әлеуметтік дағдылар, жеке даму, академиялық мотивация.

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ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ БЛАГОПОЛУЧИЕ СТУДЕНТОВ: ВОЛОНТЕРСКИЙ ПОДХОД

Аннотация

Статья посвящена изучению влияния волонтерской деятельности на психологическое благополучие студентов в системе высшего образования. В качестве теоретической основы используется модель психологического благополучия Кэрл Рифф, включающая автономию, управление средой, личностный рост, позитивные отношения, наличие целей в жизни и самопринятие. В исследовании приняли участие 425 студентов Южно-Казахстанского университета имени М. Ауэзова. Показатели их психологического благополучия измерялись с помощью шкалы Рифф. Дополнительно, для более детального анализа, были проведены полуструктурированные интервью с 15 студентами-волонтерами. Это позволило выявить их субъективный опыт участия в волонтерской деятельности и ее восприятие как фактора, влияющего на психологическое благополучие.

Результаты подтвердили значительное положительное воздействие волонтерской деятельности на когнитивные функции, снижение стресса, укрепление социальных связей и повышение мотивации у студентов. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость интеграции волонтерских программ в образовательный процесс как эффективного способа повышения качества жизни студентов и их адаптации в социальной среде.

Ключевые слова: психологическое благополучие, волонтерская деятельность, студенты, снижение стресса, социальные навыки, личностный рост, академическая мотивация.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being occupies a pivotal position within the domain of contemporary psychology, especially in relation to the challenges confronted by youth navigating through academic, social, and professional spheres. During their formative student years, individuals experience profound transformations that are critical to their development. These include the cultivation of autonomy, the acquisition of professional competencies, the establishment of social networks, and the fulfillment of personal aspirations. Each of these developmental milestones not only contributes to their overall growth but also presents unique challenges that can impact their mental health and emotional stability. These processes can be accompanied by high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional tension, highlighting the importance of finding effective methods to maintain psychological well-being.

Within the framework of positive psychology, psychological well-being is viewed as the ability of an individual to interact harmoniously with the world, achieve personal goals, and maintain emotional resilience in the face of life's challenges. These aspects form the basis for a subjective sense of life satisfaction and the ability to cope with stress (Balashov, 2022), academic (Avdeeva et al., 2021) and social success (Kovalenko et al., 2020).

Social interactions play a crucial role in shaping the psychological well-being of student youth. Positive relationships with others, a sense of social significance, and support from the educational environment contribute to reduced anxiety levels and strengthened emotional resilience (Geng et al., 2022; Kern et al., 2014). Individuals with stable social connections are less prone to the risks of developing depression and more often experience life satisfaction. This is particularly important during the student years, when social relationships influence adaptation to the academic environment (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

Volunteering emerges as a highly effective strategy for enhancing psychological well-being. This approach not only nurtures the formation of social bonds but also encourages the development of belonging, altruism, and empathy among individuals. These psychosocial gains significantly enhance emotional resilience and contribute to the reduction of stress levels, as detailed in research by Windsor et al. (2008). Additionally, the act of volunteering has been shown to positively impact cognitive functions and elevate self-esteem, further contributing to psychological health (Stepanyan & Asriyan, 2022).

Empirical evidence supports the notion that engaging in volunteer activities leads to an improved emotional state among participants, particularly students. For example, studies such as that conducted by Kern et al. (2014) have documented that students who participate in volunteer efforts exhibit elevated levels of life satisfaction, increased social engagement, and strengthened emotional resilience. This highlights the significant role that volunteering can play not only in enhancing individual well-being but also in fostering a supportive and interconnected community environment.

The aim of this study is to analyze the role of volunteer activities in shaping the psychological well-being of student youth. The research focuses on examining the mechanisms through which volunteering contributes to emotional resilience, the development of personal qualities, and improved social adaptation of students, emphasizing the importance of this topic for educational and social practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological well-being began to solidify as a focal point in psychological research in the mid-20th century, particularly with the advent of positive psychology. This branch of psychology marked a paradigm shift from primarily addressing psychological disorders to a more comprehensive exploration of personal strengths, resources, and the dynamics of optimal functioning (Bonivell, 2009; Seligman, 2006). Central to the ethos of positive psychology is the principle that well-being transcends mere alleviation of symptoms; it encompasses the creation of conditions conducive to flourishing and achieving substantial life satisfaction (Argyle, 2007).

Isabelle Bonivell articulated three principal catalysts for the burgeoning interest in well-being research. Firstly, a societal prosperity that emphasizes quality of life beyond mere survival; secondly, an escalation of individualism that places a premium on personal happiness; and thirdly, the innovation of reliable tools for measuring well-being, which solidified its status as a legitimate scientific discipline (Bonivell, 2009). These developments collectively propelled psychological well-being to the forefront of academic and practical psychology agendas. These developments laid the groundwork for defining psychological well-being as a multifaceted construct encompassing emotional, social, and personal dimensions.

The concept of psychological well-being, as initially posited by Bradburn, is intricately associated with the subjective experience of happiness and life satisfaction, intersecting significantly with other psychological constructs such as self-esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization (Seifert, 2004). This foundational understanding was further nuanced and expanded by Carol Ryff, who articulated a more comprehensive framework comprising six pivotal dimensions. These dimensions include self-acceptance, where individuals recognize and accept their strengths and weaknesses; personal growth, which involves a continuous process of self-improvement; autonomy, the sense of self-determination and independence; environmental mastery, which is the capability to manage and navigate complex environments effectively; positive relationships, denoting the ability to foster supportive and healthy interpersonal connections; and life purpose, reflecting a clear sense of direction and meaning in life. Ryff's elaboration on psychological well-being has enriched the academic discourse, providing a structured lens through which individual mental health can be assessed and understood. Her work provided a structured framework and validated tools for assessing well-being, which became foundational in psychotherapy and diagnostics (Ryff, 1995; Ryff, 1996).

Modern research emphasizes the dynamic nature of psychological well-being, reflecting an individual's ability to adapt and thrive amid challenges. High well-being is associated with enhanced resilience, effective stress management, and greater life satisfaction (Geng et al., 2022). Importantly, volunteer activities have been identified as a key enhancer of psychological well-being, promoting

altruism, empathy, and social connectedness. Engagement in volunteer activities substantially bolsters emotional resilience, instills a profound sense of purpose, and fortifies interpersonal bonds, as evidenced by studies from Tavakolizadeh et al. (2012) and Khairuddin & Mahmud (2020). This involvement not only enhances emotional resilience but also cultivates essential life skills such as self-regulation and goal management, which have been shown to positively influence academic achievement and overall mental well-being (Hanson et al., 2016). Students actively participating in such programs often exhibit increased levels of self-acceptance, enhanced leadership capabilities, and greater adaptability—traits that are indispensable for successfully managing the complexities of both educational and broader social settings (Morrison et al., 2019).

Additionally, volunteering plays a critical role in mitigating academic stress by bolstering social networks and diminishing psychological symptoms linked to isolation and stress (Torres et al., 2022). The balance of volunteer engagement is crucial; while moderate involvement has been associated with increased emotional resilience and overall life satisfaction, overcommitment can risk burnout (Windsor et al., 2008). Furthermore, volunteer programs that are grounded in empathy and mutual support not only cultivate positive personality developments but also significantly ease social adaptation processes (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

In essence, psychological well-being is intricately shaped by a confluence of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Volunteer activities emerge as a dynamic and effective strategy to enhance these dimensions. By integrating such activities within educational and societal frameworks, institutions are equipped to foster environments that promote not only resilience and adaptability but also a higher quality of life. This strategic integration positions psychological well-being as a fundamental pillar of contemporary education and health policy, aiming to cultivate more rounded, emotionally stable, and socially equipped individuals.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological foundation of this study was based on the main principles of both domestic and foreign psychology: the principle of the unity of consciousness and activity, the principle of development, the principle of determinism, and the psychodynamic principle. In our work, we relied on the concepts of psychological well-being by N. Bradburn and the structures of psychological well-being as proposed by C. Ryff, A.V. Voronina, P.P. Fesenko, T.D. Shevelenkova, and O.S. Shiryayeva.

Within the framework of this research, aimed at studying the influence of volunteer activities on the formation of students' psychological well-being, a *comprehensive methodological approach* was employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. This dual approach was essential to thoroughly examine both the objective regularities and the subjective experiences of students engaged in volunteer initiatives.

Research Methods: To address the research objectives, a complex set of methods was used: the method of theoretical analysis of scientific literature, testing method, interview method, content analysis method. To study psychological well-being and its dynamics, the "Psychological Well-being Scale" by C. Ryff, adapted by P.P. Fesenko and T.D. Shevelenkova, was utilized. This instrument assesses six key aspects of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, life purposes, self-acceptance, and positive interpersonal relationships. Such a multidimensional approach allowed for a detailed picture of the students' condition.

Sample representativeness was ensured by including 425 students from the "General Pedagogy and Psychology" department of the South Kazakhstan University named after M. Auezov, representing various educational directions. The sample included students from the following specializations: 6B01110 - Pedagogy and Psychology (10 people), 6B01101 – Psychology (12 people), 6B01911 - Special Pedagogy (25 people), 6B03130 - Psychology (155 people), and 6B03131 - Training of psychological consultants for the social sphere (223 people). The diversity of educational directions allowed for consideration of the specifics of students' professional training and assessment of the impact of volunteer activities in different contexts.

For *qualitative analysis*, semi-structured interviews with 15 students involved in volunteer activities were conducted. These interviews aimed to explore the personal experiences and deep understanding of students' personal impressions and experiences related to their participation in volunteer activities, and to assess the impact of this experience on their psychological well-being. The interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes each, included questions about feelings, experiences, motivations for participating in volunteering, as well as questions about personal growth, social adaptation, and overall well-being. Participant responses were recorded and anonymized for further analysis.

Ethical Considerations: The research protocol was carefully designed to adhere to the highest ethical standards. Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's goals, the nature of their participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring that they were fully aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the first stage, testing was conducted using the "Psychological Well-being Scale" method by C. Ryff for two groups of students: those who are involved in any kind of volunteer activity (volunteers) and for those who are not (non-volunteers). Out of the total number of students (N=425), 297 students (70%) turned out to be volunteers, 128 non-volunteers (30%). Table 1 below shows the results of this test, expressed in the average value for each criterion of psychological well-being.

Table 1

Average Psychological Well-being Scores of Students Participating and Not Participating in Volunteer Activities

| Group | Autonomy | Environmental mastery | Personal growth | Positive relations with others | Purpose in life | Self-acceptance | Overall Well-being Index |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Volunteers (297 students) | 80.3 | 92.9 | 80.2 | 88.4 | 71.4 | 77.6 | 78.7 |
| Non-volunteers (128 students) | 61.1 | 78.6 | 57.9 | 50.4 | 66.1 | 61.6 | 58.45 |

The results of testing on the Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale show that participation in volunteer work significantly improves various aspects of students' psychological health. The difference in the "Overall Well-being Index" between volunteers - 78.7 points and non-volunteers - 58.45 points was 20.25 points. This stark difference highlights that volunteering can significantly enhance mental health and emotional resilience.

The largest difference of 38 points was shown by data on the "Positive relations with others" scale, where volunteers had 88.4 points and non-volunteers had 50.4 points. This indicates that participating in volunteer programs develops students' ability to maintain supportive and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Both groups received the highest results on the "Environmental mastery" scale, which determines the ability to effectively manage and navigate a complex environment. In the group of students who are involved in any kind of volunteer activity, the average was 92.9, and in the second group who are not engaged in volunteering - 78.6. Such high indicators indicate that, in general, students face many different situations at the university and are able to adapt to them. Due to the fact that volunteers are involved in various projects and activities not only inside the university, but also outside it, they are much faster and better able to adapt to a new environment and feel confident in it.

On the “*Personal growth*” scale, the difference between the averages of the two groups was 22.3 points (volunteers - 80.2, non-volunteers - 57.9). This can be explained by the fact that volunteering develops a variety of skills and abilities that, in general, develop a person comprehensively.

The other two scales – “*Autonomy*” and “*Self-acceptance*” - also showed significant differences in average scores between volunteers and non-volunteers. On the “*Autonomy*” scale, the difference was 19.3 points, which indicates that students who participate in volunteer activities usually experience a greater sense of independence and self-confidence. This confirms the idea that volunteering helps people develop the ability to act independently and make their own choices, strengthening their psychological health. On the “*Self-acceptance*” scale, the difference was 16 points. This suggests that volunteers have a higher level of self-acceptance, which includes a more positive attitude towards themselves and self-satisfaction. Volunteering probably contributes to this by offering experiences that validate a person's worth through meaningful contributions and feedback from others, thereby enhancing their self-esteem and overall psychological well-being.

The students showed *the smallest difference* between the indicators of psychological well-being at 5.3 points on the “*Purpose in life*” scale, where volunteers had 71.4 points and non-volunteers - 66.1 points. This means that volunteering has the least effect on having a life goal and ideas about the direction and meaning of life.

In the second stage of the experiment, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 15 volunteers to determine how their participation in volunteer activities affected their lives (Table 2). The questions were both open and closed, so the students could give many answers. The students' responses were divided into categories - aspects of influence. Single responses are reflected in the “Others” category.

Table 2

Qualitative Interview Results of Students Participating in Volunteer Activities

| Impact Aspect | Number of Responses | Percentage of Total Volunteers |
|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Communication skills | 15 | 100.00% |
| Social connections | 15 | 100.00% |
| Flexibility | 13 | 86.67% |
| Self-confidence | 12 | 80.00% |
| Belonging | 10 | 66.67% |
| Adaptability | 10 | 66.67% |
| Good academic performance | 9 | 60% |
| Support confidence | 8 | 53.33% |
| Life satisfaction | 7 | 46.67% |
| Loneliness reduction | 7 | 46.67% |
| Study interest | 5 | 33,33% |
| Professional goals | 4 | 26,67% |
| Others | 9 | 60% |

The results obtained during the interview allowed us to better understand the personal experience and perception of the volunteers of the importance of their activities and its impact on their lives.

The aspect that all students (100%) noted is “*Communication skills*” and “*Social connections*”. And together with the results of the first test, according to which the volunteers scored significantly more points on the Positive relations with others scale than the other group, we can confidently speak about the direct impact of volunteer activity on the psychological health of students. Volunteering acts as a powerful catalyst for the development of interpersonal communication skills, which are necessary in both personal and professional spheres. As the students noted, it was thanks to volunteering that they met many people – peers from other universities, active citizens, and even the city administration.

Of the other social benefits of volunteering, students noted “*Belonging*” (66.67%), “*Support confidence*” (53.33%), “*Loneliness reduction*” (46.67%). Volunteering helps people integrate into supportive communities where students feel they have reliable resources — people they can turn to in times of need. For many, volunteer collaboration provides regular social contacts that can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness, which is especially important for mental health during the difficult years of college.

The development of “*Flexibility*” and “*Adaptability*” through volunteering is another significant finding. Notably, 86.67% of the students acknowledged an increase in their flexibility, while 66.67% noted improvements in their ability to adapt to various conditions and life situations. These skills are vital as they enable students to navigate through the complexities of modern life and diverse professional environments effectively. Engaging in volunteer activities immerses students in a diverse array of experiences and challenges that compel them to adapt their behaviors and refine their perspectives. Through interactions with a wide spectrum of individuals—including peers from other educational institutions, community leaders, and representatives of local government—students not only broaden their social networks but also develop the critical ability to navigate unfamiliar and often complex situations. These encounters demand quick thinking, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, fostering a sense of adaptability and self-efficacy.

80 percent of the students noted that their *Self-confidence* increased due to volunteering, which correlates with the 77.6 average score on the *Self-acceptance* scale on the previous test. This is because volunteering often puts students in situations where they have to take the initiative, lead projects and solve real problems, contributing to a stronger sense of their capabilities and achievements. Such an experience can be incredibly useful, strengthening their self-confidence.

It is interesting to say that 9 out of 15 students noted an improvement in their academic performance after joining volunteer groups, and 7 students reported an increase in their study interest. At first, many students thought that volunteering will take up their time for academic studies and they would not have enough time to study. But in practice, it constantly gives them a lot of strength and energy, and generally contributes to Life satisfaction (46,67%).

The correlation between their volunteer activities and professional aspirations was noted by 4 students (26.67%). That highlights an important aspect of how volunteering can impact career development. And although the indicators for this aspect are small, and according to the first test there was no significant difference between the two groups, for some students, volunteer experiences are not just extracurricular activities but pivotal experiences that influence their professional goals and career paths.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, it can be argued that the conducted research has convincingly proved the significant positive impact of volunteer activity on the psychological well-being of students. Volunteering especially contributes to the development of such important aspects as the ability to effectively manage the environment, personal growth and strengthening social interactions. Participation in such initiatives allows students to master practical skills that not only contribute to their professional and personal development, but also strengthen social ties, increase self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus, volunteer activity forms a stable and multilevel basis for general well-being.

The obtained results emphasize the need for systematic integration of volunteer programs into the educational processes of universities. Such integration will allow not only to maintain a high level of academic achievements, but also to contribute to the improvement of the psychological state of students, preparing them for the successful solution of the tasks that a modern, dynamically changing society poses to them. In this context, universities and colleges should actively use the potential of volunteerism as a tool for educating holistic, emotionally mature and socially responsible citizens. As a result, students will be able not only to achieve high academic results, but also to become emotionally stable, socially active participants in society, able to make a significant contribution to its development and prosperity.

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