



# Family relationships and locus of control as predictors of students' mental well-being

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## ABSTRACT

Mental well-being of students is crucial for the development of the individual and attainment of his/her goals as well as contribution to the society. This study investigated family relationships and locus of control as predictors of students' mental well-being. One hundred and fifty-six university students (males = 97; females = 59), with age range between 17 and 28 years ( $M = 21.56$ ,  $SD = 2.46$  years), participated in this study. Measures for data collection were Index of Family Relation, Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale, and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. Regression analysis was utilised to predict students' mental well-being from the family relationships and locus of control. Results showed that family relationship was a negative predictor of students' mental well-being, while locus of control positively predicted students' mental well-being. It was concluded that stakeholders in education should consider the roles of the family environment and the students' control beliefs with a view to improving the mental well-being of students in higher institutions

## Introduction

Humans go through several milestones in life until they die. At every stage of life, students experience changes in their social environment, develop relationships and interact with family members who give them joys and challenges. When students learn to manage stress, understand their emotions and behaviors, and as well communicate effectively with others; it helps to strengthen their mental health, build connections to important people in their lives, and as well boost their overall self-esteem and well-being. Psychological or mental well-being typically results out of life satisfaction, control of self and events, social involvement, self-esteem, mental balance, sociability, happiness and positive affect (Ryff, 1989). Individuals with the ability to self-actualize, identify with others, be self-determining, be flexible in various environmental settings, have direction and purpose in their lives and who will continue to develop their potential, are judged to be in a state of good mental well-being, while those who struggle in these areas will be in a state of low mental well-being (Ryff, 1989).

According to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2012) mental health was defined to include both hedonic and eudemonic aspects of well-being across social, emotional and psychological domains. Increased susceptibility to mental health problems is thought to occur as young people begin to form their own identity, and as a result they may experience changes in their perception of self and others (Arnett, 2007; Ben-Zur, 2003). Mental health problems in young people presents a significant societal and economic challenge, in that those with poor mental health are less likely to achieve academically or gain employment, have poorer physical health and are more likely to engage in substance misuse or anti-social behaviour (Department of Health, 2013; Goodman, Joyce, & Smith, 2011).

The family's level of functioning and organization is an important element of the social environment that can potentially affect the student's effort to adapt to life stressors (Felner, Aber, Primavera, & Cauce, 1985). A family is an arranged group, where its members are either related by blood, marriage or adoption and everyone's roles is modified over time. Family relationships are typically long term and generally have a period in which common space is shared, and all families have a designed need to be nurtured and strengthened from time to time. A dysfunctional family environment, including dysfunctional patterns of interaction and problem solving, has been viewed as one of the most notable risk factors for the development of mental health problems (Winek, 2010), but the knowledge of the potential role of the family, and the way in which the family functions, on mental health or well-being is still limited and as well has been a growing area of research over the past decade (Butler, 2015). Extant literature indicates that family relationships play a central role in shaping an individual's well-being across the life course (Merz, Consedine, Schulze, & Schuengel, 2009).

A study on adjustment among young people reported that perceptions of family cohesion and family stress were significantly more powerful predictors of well-being than reported specific negative life events (Walker & Greene, 1987). Other studies have concluded that the quality and nature of the family environmental climate (e.g., levels of cohesion, conflict, and organization) are strongly associated with the style of coping adopted by the adolescent and its effects on adjustment (e.g., D'Arcy & Siddique, 1984; Moos & Moos, 1981; Rutter, 1983). Geggie, DeFrain, Hitchcock, and Silberberg (2000) stated that when individuals acknowledge existing family strengths it is a good starting point for addressing challenges and building stronger family relationships.

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Geggie et al. (2000) outlined some factors that contribute to strong family relationships, which includes: communication – when family members communicate and listen to one another with all openness and honesty; togetherness – in every family bonding is very vital and involves having a sense of belonging and sharing similar values and beliefs; sharing activities – in the family also, members spend quality time together to play, eat, discuss and many other hobbies they enjoy; affection – regular show of love and affection through encouraging words, hugs, assistance with domestic chores etc. furthers unites and bond members of the family; support – it is very encouraging when family members know that they can always receive and give support at any point in time; acceptance – knowing and understanding that every member of the family is unique and special in his/her own way, and also according each member respect and appreciation is also a priority in families; and commitment and resilience – in this case, members see family and each other's well-being as priority and is able to withstand difficulties willing to adapt to changing situations in positive ways.

Locus of control is the second independent variable in this study. Rotter (1966) described the locus of control to be the extent to which a person holds the belief that control of reinforcement is internal as opposing the extent to which it is external. When a person holds the belief that rewards are the results of his/her own behavior, it translates to an internal locus of control, while on the other hand, if a person holds the belief that rewards occur as a result of intervention by others, it translates to an external locus of control Morris (1979). Internal locus of control attributes success to his or her efforts and abilities. For instance, students who possess an internal locus of control readily take responsibility for their actions, they are not easily influenced by the opinions of others, and they often do better at assigned tasks especially when they are working at their own pace. Students who possess an external locus of control readily put the blame on surrounding circumstances when they make mistakes and give credit for their successes to luck and chance instead of their own efforts. These set of the students are easily influenced by the opinions of others and would readily pay huge attention to the status of the opinion-holder, while people with an internal locus of control pay more attention to the content of the opinion irrespective of who holds it.

Garber and Seligman (1980) maintained that external locus of control is correlated with higher levels of stress while Grob (2000), observed that an individual only feels stressed when he/she sees the situation as beyond his/her coping abilities making the ongoing stress to have a negative effect on subjective well-being. Locus of control can be described as an individual's belief system as it concerns the causes of his or her experiences and the factors to which that person attributes success or failure. Similarly, Brandtstadter and Baltes-Gotz, (1990) argued that the locus of control affects individual's well-being and it is related to coping strategies. Review of extant literature revealed that locus of control as a personality trait has a close association with different physical and mental illnesses as well as positive mental health features (Arslan, Dilmaç, & Hamarta, 2009; Coyne, & Thompson, 2011; Field, & Kruger, 2008; Nabors, McGrady, & Kichler, 2010). The objective of this study is to find out to what extent family relationships and students' internal/external locus of control will predict mental well-being. It is hypothesized in this study that family relationship will significantly predict mental well-being among undergraduate students, and the locus of control will predict mental well-being among undergraduate students.

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample of 156 undergraduate students (males = 62.2%, females = 37.8%) from Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi state, in South-eastern Nigeria participated in this study. Ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 28 years with a mean age of 21.56 years ( $SD = 2.46$ ).

### Instruments

Participants completed the Index of Family Relation (IFR: Hudson, 1982), Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (N-SLCS: Nowicki & Strickland, 1973), and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS: Warwick & Edinburgh, 2006).

The IFR is a 25-item inventory designed to measure the extent, severity, or magnitude of the problem that family members have with their relationship with one another. The IFR assesses family distress/discord, and the impact of family disharmony on individual clients. There is direct scoring and reverse scoring of the items. The direct score items are: 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 22, 24, and 25; while the reverse score items are: 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, and 23. The scale is scored by summing responses to each item answered on a 1 (rarely or none of the time) to 5 (most or all of the time) Likert scale. Higher indicate poor family relations, while lower scores indicate appropriate family relations. The instrument was validated in Nigeria by Elusiyan (1994). For the reliability, Hudson (1982) reported an alpha coefficient of .95 while the present researchers obtained a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .89.

The N-SLCS is a 40-item inventory designed to measure the internal and external locus of control of an individual. The items are scored directly by adding together the "yes" or the "no" responses that are correctly shaded. The correct yes items are; 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38, and 39. While, the correct no items are; 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 15, 20, 22, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 40. Higher scores indicate external locus of control, while lower scores indicate internal locus of control. Jaiyeoba (1992) obtained a concurrent validity coefficient of .25 by correlating N-SLCS with an index of self-esteem (ISE) developed by Hudson (1982). However, Nowicki and Strickland (1973) reported six-week internal test-retest reliability coefficients of .63, .66, and .71 for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students respectively. Afolabi and Akinmade (2013) also obtained a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .57 while, the present researchers obtained Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .74.

The WEMWBS is a 14-item scale of mental well-being covering subjective well-being and psychological functioning, in which all items are worded positively and address aspects of positive mental health. The scale is scored by summing responses to each item answered on a 1 to 5 Likert scale. The minimum scale score is 14 and the maximum is 70. Higher scores indicate better mental well-being, while lower scores indicate worse mental well-being. WEMWBS has been validated for use in the UK with those aged 16 and above. Validation involved both student and general population samples and focus groups. The present researchers obtained a convergent validity coefficient ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ) WEMWBS with Psychological Well-Being (PWB) Scale by Ryff's (1989). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient was .87 in this study.

### Procedure

The three sets of questionnaires were administered to the student's participants after explaining the purpose of the study to them and obtaining informed consent. Further, assurances were also given regarding utmost confidentiality of participants' responses, and they were specifically instructed

not to indicate their names. This was done to increase the level of compliance in filling in the questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to be honest in their responses to the questionnaire. The questionnaires were self-administered and took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete.

**Design/Statistics**

The researchers adopted a cross-sectional design. We applied multiple linear regression analysis to predict students' well-being from family relations and locus of control. Multiple linear regression analysis is a statistical tool that allows researchers to examine how multiple independent variables are related to a dependent variable (Higgins, 2005).

**Results**

**Table 1:** Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of students' mental well-being, family relationship, locus of control, gender and age

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 MW	55.33	7.02	–				
2 FR	81.46	14.27	-.14*	–			
3 LOC	31.29	2.44	.17	-.03	–		
4 Gender	1.38	0.49	.09	.10	-.01	–	
5 Age	21.56	2.46	-.15	.16*	.05	-.27*	–

Note: \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .001

Table 1 below presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. As can be observed from Table 1, family relationship was negatively correlated with students' mental well-being, (*r* = -.14, *p* = .04). Locus of control was positively related with students' mental well-being, (*r* = .17, *p* = .02). Age was negatively correlated with students' mental well-being, (*r* = -.15, *p* = .03). Family relationship was positively related with age, (*r* = .16, *p* = .02). Gender was negatively correlated with age (*r* = -.27, *p* = .00).

**Table 2:** Summary of regression analysis of family relationship and locus of control predicting students' mental well-being

Predictor	B	SEB	β	t	p
FR	-.05	.04	-0.11	-1.36	.18
LOC	.49	.23	.17	2.18	.03

2.18      0.03  
 Note. *R* = .26; *R*<sup>2</sup> = .07

Table 2 above shows the results of the multiple linear regression analysis which predicted students' mental well-being from family relationship and locus of control. Family relationship and locus of control were regressed on students' mental well-being. The results also indicated that locus of control was a significant predictor of students' mental well-being (*β* = .17, *p* = .03) and family relationship was not a significant predictor of negative influence on student's mental well-being (*β* = -.11, *p* = .18). The model was significant, *F* (4,151) = 2.70, *p* = .03, *R* = .26, with 7% of the variance accounted for by the predictor variables. Locus of control predicted students' mental well-being more strongly than family relationship.

**Discussion**

The present study examined family relationships and locus of control as predictors of mental well-being among undergraduate students. The finding of the study confirmed the first hypothesis that family relationship would be a significant predictor of mental well-being of undergraduate students. This finding is consistent with relatively previous research (e.g., Parke, MacDonald, Burks, Bhaugri, Barth, & Beitel, 1989)

that healthy family relationship and well-being are linked, in that family relationships influence children's well-being. Family conflict has been cited as an explanation for the effects of divorce and family instability on children (Fomby & Osborne, 2010; Jekielek, 1998). In other words, family dissolution is associated with diminished child well-being in part due to high levels of parental conflict that often ensue in the divorce process (Amato, 2000). A vast majority of research has focused on the negative and positive features of family relationship and as well has found that higher conflict and discord is associated with higher behavioral problems and maladjustment among children (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 2002; Reid & Crisafulli, 2001). Positive relationship with others is one of the major components of mental health, which is characterized by having warm and trusting interpersonal relationships and being able to love other people or having strong feeling of empathy (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

The finding of the study also confirmed the second hypothesis that locus of control will predict mental well-being among undergraduate students. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Brandtstadter & Baltes-Gotz, 1990) that locus of control affects individuals' well-being and it is very well related to coping strategies. Kulshrestha and Sen (2006) also noted the significant negative correlation between locus of control and subjective well-being, which is to say that individuals with an external locus of control are significantly less happy than their internal counterparts. Researchers (e.g., Pufal-Struzik, 1998; Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009) stated that mental well-being has direct, positive and linear association with internal locus of control. Findings from this present study support the opinion that, people with internal locus of control has more intimacy and a close affiliation with others.

The findings of the present study have some practical implications. First, family relationship is a significant factor in the mental well-being of undergraduate students. A practical implication for this finding is that students who experience harmony in their family relationship have better mental well-being than those who experience family disharmony. Again, the locus of control was found to be a significant factor in the mental well-being of undergraduate students. A practical implication for this finding is that students who possess a high internal locus of control will have better mental well-being than those who possess a high external locus of control. This link is not only in efforts in academic and social conditions, but also individuals with internal locus of control indicated that they are successful in health-related behaviours too, such as to stop smoking and looking health-related knowledge.

**Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

The present study did not test for the dimensions of the variables studied to find out their likely impacts as factors in mental well-being of undergraduate students. Another limitation is the generalizability of the findings of this study which may be limited to undergraduate students only, and to Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike (AE-FUNA) that served as the sample used for the study. There was no comparison made between these undergraduate students and the ones in other higher institutions at other locations within Nigeria. Finally, the potential risks and rewards family relationships have on mental health and well-being is over a life course. Additionally, structural constraints and family weakness place greater pressures on some families than others based on structural location such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, create additional difficulty and intergenerational transmission of inequality, but these variables were not included in the analysis.



Following the limitations highlighted above, the researcher makes the following suggestions for further or future research. Future researches on mental well-being should consider using participants from other universities within the country, while also increasing the number of participants for the study. Adequate attention should be paid to the dimensions of the variables studied to see if they could have predictions. Furthermore, in testing mental well-being, effort should be made in investigating the moderating or mediating roles of variables like personality, resilience, or social support, while the participants of different regions might be involved to check for predicting roles of the different dimensions of the variables independently. Future research should also take cognisance of greater complexity in family relationships, diverse family structures, and intersections of social statuses.

### Conclusion

This study investigated family relationships and locus of control as predictors of mental well-being among undergraduate students. Results of the study revealed that better family functioning predict positive mental well-being. There was also a significant positive relationship between locus of control and mental well-being of the participants. These findings contribute to well-being research by providing local or Nigerian evidence on the combination of family relations and locus of control consequences of well-being and adding to the growing literature on mental and psychological well-being.

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