

Positive Psychology in Turkey: A Review Study of Postgraduate Theses

Bülent Baki Telef

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the trends of postgraduate theses in psychology, psychiatry, and education related to positive psychology in Turkey. The sample consisted of 204 masters' and doctoral theses written in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and education in relation to positive psychology between 2005 and 2015 for which access was permitted. The "Thesis Classification Form" prepared by the researchers was used as a data collection tool. The findings are presented with percentage and frequency tables. The content analysis technique was used for analysis. Studies conducted in the field of positive psychology have increased in recent years. Studies were mostly conducted on the subject of life satisfaction, based on the quantitative method and screening model, in the field of psychology, with university students. The findings obtained in this study will contribute to the work of researchers who study positive psychology.

Keywords.

Positive psychology, happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, positive emotion, negative emotion, psychological well-being, content analysis.

Corresponding author:

Bülent Baki Telef, Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey.

✉ bakitelef@gmail.com

The question of “What is a good life?” has long been at the forefront of human thinking. The good life is directly related to well-being and happiness. In ancient Greece, Aristotle wrote that the most important effort of people is the pursuit of happiness. Nowadays, the interest in good life has increased in the social sciences (van Dierendonck, Díaz, Rodríguez-Carvajal, Blanco & Moreno-Jiménez, 2008). Positive psychology was officially named in 1998 by Martin Seligman, the president of the American Psychological Association, although there have been studies on what a good life is since the ancient Greeks (Seligman, 1998). In fact, positive psychology is not a new idea. Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, and Victor Frankl, the pioneers of humanistic psychology, emphasized the importance of focusing on normal human functions in their theory, practice, and studies (Faller, 2001). Positive psychology is a discipline of psychology that investigates the processes and conditions that contribute to the high-level functions or happiness of people, groups, and institutions (Sheldon & King, 2001; Gable & Haidt, 2005). The aim of positive psychology is to facilitate the development of individuals and societies and to increase and determine the human powers and virtues that make life valuable (Froh, 2004).

Positive psychology at a subjective level emphasizes well-being, pleasure, and satisfaction (past); hope and optimism (future); and flow and subjective experiences, including happiness. At the personal level, it embraces positive personal characteristics such as love, vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it investigates the virtues and institutions that lead a person to become a better citizen, such as responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

There has been some criticism of positive psychology. Lazarus (2003) stated that positive psychology does not consider the negative aspects of people and has a pollyanna approach. Harvey and Pauwels (2003) stated that positive psychology ignores the energy and constructive developments that may arise from the pain and losses of people. Despite these criticisms, positive psychology is not always positive, happy, nor does it always adopt a pollyanna approach. It does not only focus on the positive aspects and feelings of a person. Most importantly, it does not deny negative psychology (Lyubomirsky & Abbe, 2003). In recent years, researchers have emphasized that positive psychology should synthesize positive and negative aspects in order to sustain itself (Linley, Stephen, Harrington & Wood, 2006).

In studies on happiness, well-being is presented with two general perspectives: subjective well-being (hedonic) and psychological well-being (eudaimonic; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Subjective well-being is the assessment of a person's own life. This assessment is both cognitive and emotional (Diener, 2000). The life satisfaction that constitutes the cognitive factor is the general judgment that people have made by considering their lives as a whole. The emotional dimension of subjective well-being consists of the presence of mostly ongoing pleasurable emotions (due to the positive evaluation of ongoing events) and the presence of rarely unpleasant emotions (as a result of momentary negative evaluations; Diener, 1994).

Another perspective on well-being, psychological well-being, studies the development perceived when faced with the existential challenges of life (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002). Psychological well-being includes many positive variables that provide the individual's development and happiness (Sarı & Tunç, 2016). Psychological well-being is a multidimensional structure that includes one's positive evaluation of past experiences and

oneself (self-acceptance), the ability to manage his/her life and the world around him/her (environmental mastery), having qualified relationships with others (establishing positive relationships with others), believing that his/her life is purposeful and meaningful (life purpose), self-determination (autonomy) and personally maintaining his/her development (personal development; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

In the literature, few studies have used meta-analysis to examine the field of positive psychology. Upon examining these studies, most have examined variables related to well-being. For example, Nes and Roysamb (2015) found out in their meta-analysis study conducted with 13 studies, that 40% of subjective well-being was determined by hereditary factors and the remaining 60% was determined by unshared environmental factors. DeNeve and Cooper (1998) revealed the relationship between subjective well-being and personality traits in their meta-analysis. Chu, Saucier, and Hafner (2010) determined that there is a significant but low-level relationship between well-being and social support in 246 studies in which they examined the relationship between well-being and social support in children and adolescents. The relationship between social support and well-being increased with age. In another study that revealed the relationship between well-being and social support, Yalçın (2015) reviewed 35 theses and articles. There was a moderate positive relationship between well-being and social support. In meta-analyses on positive psychological interventions, it has been found that positive psychological interventions increase well-being and reduce depression (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Postgraduate studies in positive psychology in Turkey have increased in recent years. The aim of this study was to examine the trends of postgraduate theses on positive psychology in Turkey. It is thought that the findings obtained will be important in guiding researchers who want to work in the field of positive psychology.

Method

Procedure and Measure

This study was conducted based on the screening model. The population of the study comprises of theses written in the field of positive psychology in the YÖK National Thesis Center. The sample consisted of 204 postgraduate and doctoral theses written in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and education in relation to positive psychology between 2005 and 2015 for which access was permitted. Screenings were performed based on the concepts of “happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, emotions, psychological well-being” used in the field of positive psychology. Inaccessible theses were not examined.

In order to prepare the data collection tool to be used in the study, first, the publication and thesis classification forms (Sözbilir, Kutu & Yaşar, 2012; Göktaş et al., 2012) used previously in different fields were examined. Then, the “Thesis Classification Form” to be used in the study was created. The thesis number, thesis year, study area, research method, research model, sample group, its level, and the field in which the thesis was written are included in the form.

Data Analyses

In the data analysis, the content analysis technique was used. The content analysis combines similar data under certain concepts and themes and organizes and interprets them in a way that the reader can understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). According to Saban (2009), content analysis includes the systematic screening of printed, visual, and other materials and the thematic analysis of them in terms of certain categories. The stages of content analysis

are as follows: determining objectives, defining concepts, determining analysis units, determining the location of related data, developing a logical structure, determining a sample, determining coding categories, and analyzing the data (Büyüköztürk et al., 2009). The data were analyzed with SPSS 16. The findings obtained are presented as percentage and frequency figures.

Results

In this study conducted to examine the postgraduate studies in the field of positive psychology in Turkey between the years of 2005 and 2015, the following findings were obtained. The analysis of the studies by year is shown in Figure 1.

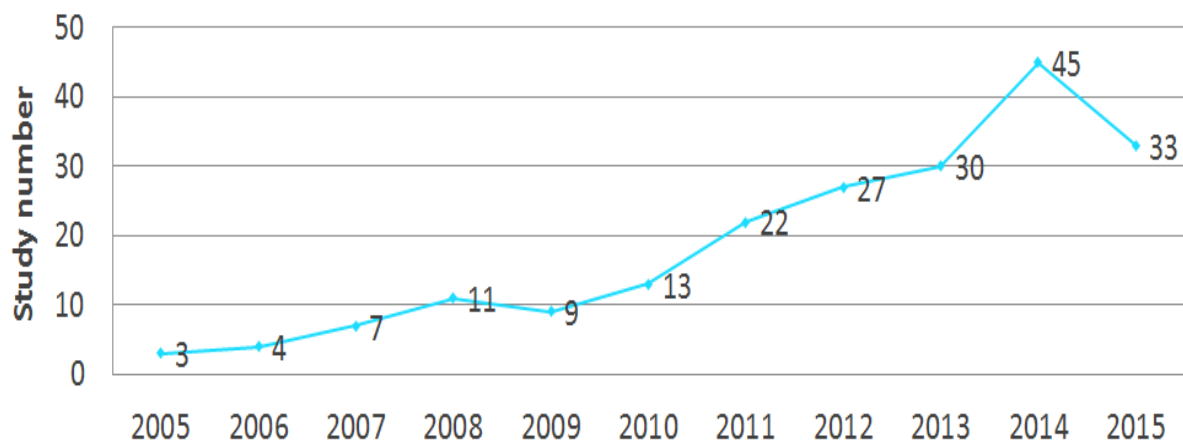


Figure 1. Distribution of the studies by year

Upon examining Figure 1, it is observed that studies have increased considerably since 2010. Three of the studies carried out (1.5%) were conducted in 2005, four (2%) in 2006, seven (3%) in 2007, eleven (5.4%) in 2008, nine (4.4%) in 2009, thirteen (6.4%) in 2010, twenty two (10.8%) in 2011, twenty seven (13.3%) in 2012, thirty (14.7%) in 2013, forty five (22.2%) in 2014, and thirty three (16.3%) in 2015.

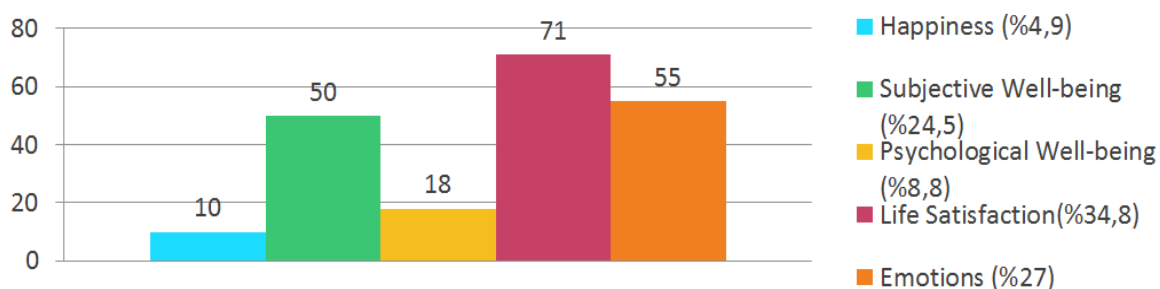


Figure 2. Research topics

The distribution of the studies by topics is shown in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, it is observed that studies were mostly conducted on life satisfaction ($f = 71$). Although studies on emotions ($f = 55$) and subjective well-being ($f = 50$) were also frequent, there were fewer studies on happiness ($f = 10$) and psychological well-being ($f = 18$).

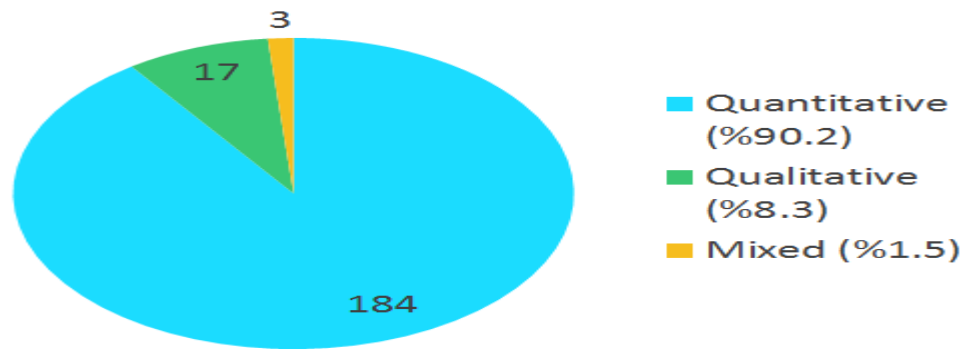


Figure 3. Research methods

The distribution of the studies by methods is shown in Figure 3. Quantitative studies ($f = 184$) constituted the majority at 90.2%, while qualitative studies ($f = 17$; 8.3%) and mixed method designs ($f = 3$; 1.5%) were less frequent.

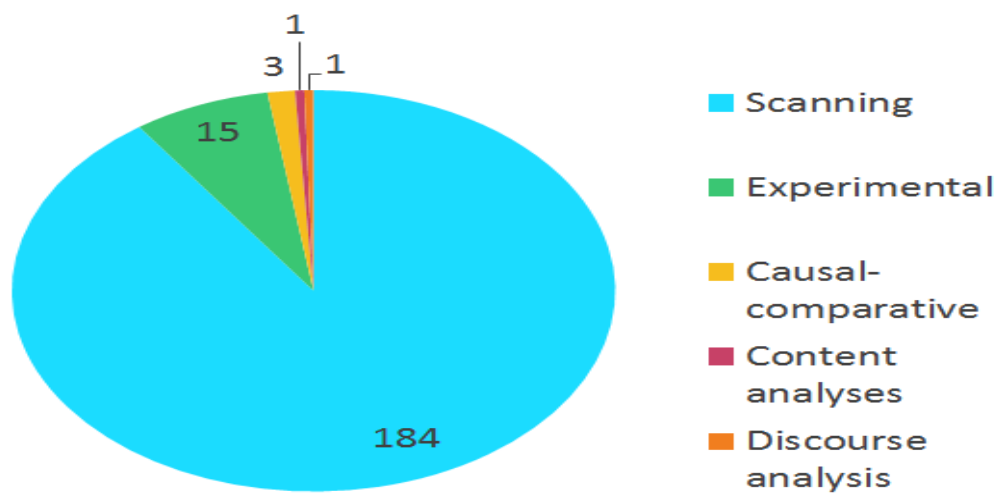


Figure 4. Research models

Upon examining Figure 4, it is observed that 90.2% of the studies were designed with the screening model ($f = 184$), 7.4% used the experimental model ($f = 15$), 1.5% used the causal-comparative model ($f = 3$), 0.5% used the discourse analysis model ($f = 1$), and 0.5% used the content analysis model ($f = 1$).

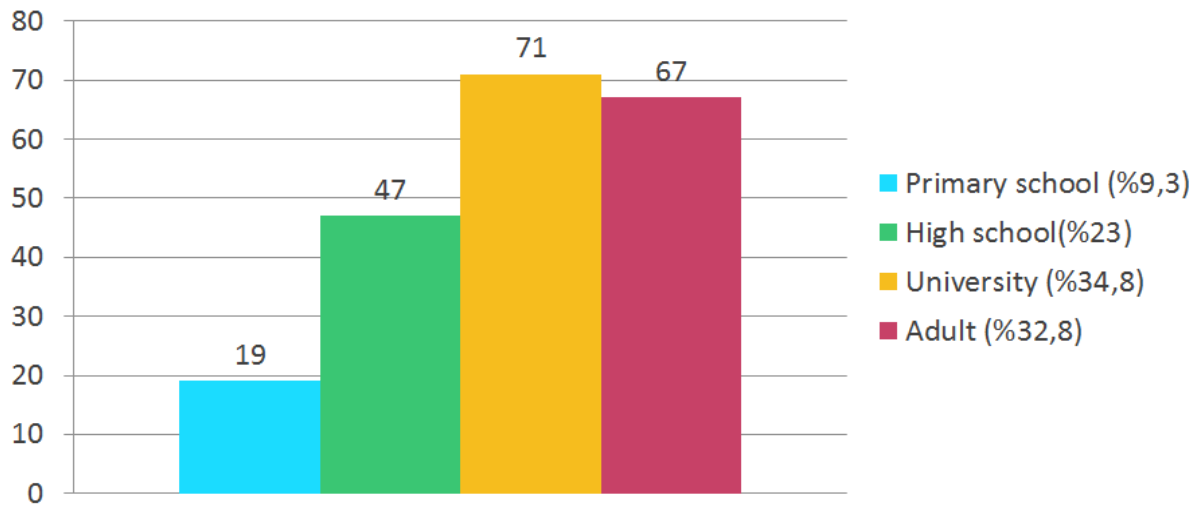


Figure 5. Sample groups

Figure 5 shows the studies in the context of the sample recruited. Among all studies, 34.8% were conducted with a university ($f = 71$) sample, 32.8% with an adult ($f = 67$) sample, 23% with a high school ($f = 47$) sample, and 9.3% with a primary education ($f = 19$) sample.

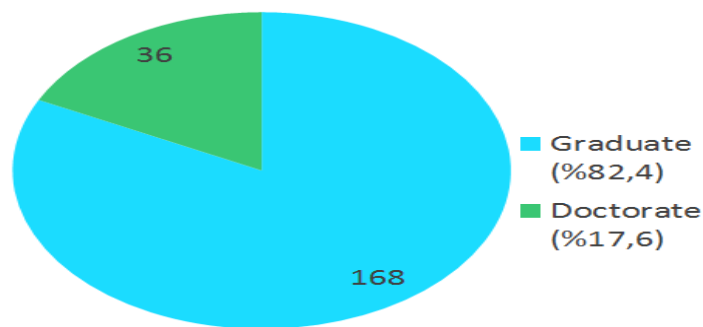


Figure 6. Research levels

In terms of the level of postgraduate studies on positive psychology, it was found that 82.4% of the studies were postgraduate theses ($f = 168$) and 17.6% were doctoral theses ($f = 36$).

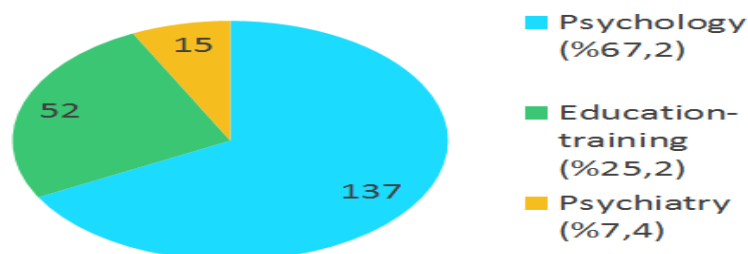


Figure 7. Research field

Figure 7 shows that 137 (67.2%) of the studies were in the field of psychology, while 52 (25.5%) were in education, and 15 (7.4%) were conducted in the field of psychiatry.

Discussion

In this study, a content analysis of postgraduate theses in Turkey in the field of positive psychology was performed. It was found that studies conducted in positive psychology have increased in recent years. Studies were mostly conducted in the field of psychology, on life satisfaction, based on the quantitative method and the screening model, with university students. These findings are consistent with the results of Kardaş and Yalçın (2016), who found that the majority of the studies on well-being were conducted between 2010 and 2015, that most studies were conducted on high school and university students, and that experimental studies and model test studies were fewer in number as compared to screening studies.

According to the results of the study, studies conducted in the field of positive psychology have shown a rapid increase in the last 5 years. This finding is supported by the international literature. There are more than 140,000 studies on subjective well-being on Google Scholar, and as of 2015, subjective well-being was mentioned in more than 14,000 publications (Diener et al., 2016). The fewest number of studies were conducted on the concept of happiness, and most were conducted on life satisfaction. The concepts of subjective well-being and life satisfaction seem to be preferred over the concept of happiness. In Turkey, happiness is studied more in fields such as literature, theology, and philosophy.

It was also observed that the quantitative method and screening model are used most often. Findings support the results obtained in previous educational studies (Göktaş et al., 2012; Bıkmaz et al., 2013; Selçuk et al., 2014). The use of more quantitative methods in studies is thought to be due to the fact that this method provides a quick, easy, and more convenient access to samples, as well as easier and faster data collection and interpretation (Selçuk et al., 2014). Upon examining by sample groups, it was observed that most studies were conducted with university students and the fewest number of studies were conducted with primary school students. This finding supports previous findings (Göktaş et al., 2012; Saban, 2009; Selçuk et al., 2014; Yalçın, Yavuz, and Dibek, 2016). International studies have also indicated that there are a limited number of studies on children's well-being and happiness (see Bender, 1997; Konu, Lintonen & Autio, 2002; Mahon & Yarcheski, 2002). Studies are likely conducted on university students most frequently because it is easy to access and gain permission to study this population as compared to primary school students, as well as increased participation because researchers know students. Further, students are aware of their problems, leading to effective data collection (Yalçın, Yavuz & Dibek, 2016).

Conclusion and Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the theses examined were limited to the concepts of happiness, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and emotion. Concepts such as wellness, hope, gratitude, conscious awareness, and so forth, all of which are included under positive psychology, were not examined individually. Further, the study only assessed thesis studies performed in Turkey between 2005 and 2015. Articles written in journals were not included in the study. There are also studies conducted on happiness in

various fields such as theology, literature, sociology, philosophy, economics, and business, and these were not included.

Despite these limitations, some recommendations for future studies can be made considering the results obtained. First, studies are mostly conducted based on the quantitative method and screening model. In future studies, studies using both quantitative and qualitative methods should be conducted. Furthermore, there were few experimental studies conducted. Therefore, in future studies, effectiveness can be tested by preparing psycho-educational programs to increase well-being. More comprehensive content and meta-analysis studies on happiness can be conducted. Second, only theses conducted in Turkey were examined. Articles published in different journals can be analyzed moving forward. Finally, there were few studies conducted on children. Studies can be conducted to determine the factors that affect children's happiness. In conclusion, it is thought that the findings will contribute to researchers who want to work in the field of positive psychology in Turkey.

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