

## Empirical Article

## Exploring fear of happiness among university students: The role of perfectionism, academic burnout, loneliness, and hopelessness

BIANKA DOBOS,<sup>1</sup>  DAVID MELLOR<sup>2</sup> and BETTINA F. PIKO<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup>Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary<sup>2</sup>School of Psychology, Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia<sup>3</sup>Department of Behavioural Sciences, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

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Due to its impact on mental health and well-being, fear of happiness is beginning to receive more attention in research. This study, conducted in Hungary, explored the relationship between fear of happiness, perfectionism, loneliness, hopelessness, and academic burnout. Participants aged between 18 and 35 years ( $N = 1,148$ ,  $M = 22$  years,  $SD = 4.5$ ) completed an online questionnaire that included self-report measures of these constructs. In the present study, males showed higher levels of fear of happiness and perfectionism than did females. Analyses also revealed that both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, academic burnout, loneliness, and hopelessness were positively related to fear of happiness. In multiple regression analysis, gender had a positive and age had a negative role in the levels of fear of happiness. Maladaptive perfectionism, academic burnout, loneliness, and hopelessness were positive predictors, while adaptive perfectionism almost reached statistical significance. These findings highlight the predictive role of previously unexplored variables in fear of happiness.

**Key words:** Fear of happiness, perfectionism, academic burnout, loneliness, hopelessness.

Bianka Dobos, Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, 6722 Szeged, Petőfi S. sgt. 32-34, Szeged, Hungary. Tel/Fax: 36 62 420-034. E-mail: [dobos.bianka@gmail.com](mailto:dobos.bianka@gmail.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Emotional well-being has an impact on many areas of life. For example, happy people not only have better physical and mental health but also report higher wages and productivity at work (Walsh, Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2018). Since happiness is a substantial indicator of subjective well-being, and one of the most relevant aspirations in Western culture, a growing number of studies have aimed to identify how we can be more happy in everyday life despite any difficulties (de Camargos, Paiva, de Almeida & Paiva, 2019). While the pursuit of happiness has become a social norm, a growing number of people tend to report being unhappy in modern society (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022). Paradoxically, the pursuit of happiness may sometimes lead people to be less happy when they are close to achieving it (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson & Savino, 2011). Therefore, besides examining resources of happiness, there is a need to search for factors which may undermine its achievement. Consequently, a recent focus of happiness research has been placed on fear of happiness.

Fear of happiness manifests in a belief that joy, contentment, and happiness may have negative consequences (Joshano, 2013). The construct of the fear of happiness can be understood on the basis of reward devaluation theory (RDT; Winer & Salem, 2016). RDT was originally described among individuals diagnosed with depression; however, cultural, social, and other processes may also contribute to avoidance of prospective rewards (Joshano, 2014). Contrary to the Western attitudes toward happiness, certain cultures (e.g., East Asia) tend to hold aversive views about happiness, e.g., that the pursuit of extreme happiness may lead to unhappiness or an unfavorable change of personality (e.g., becoming egoistic). This assumption stems from

traditional cultural beliefs and draws our attention to the fragility of happiness (Joshano *et al.*, 2015). From an evolutionary point of view, negative emotions have different useful functions, e.g., to prevent losses or stimulate survival in life-threatening situations (Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009). However, studies have revealed that fear of happiness as an unrecognized emotion may unconsciously contribute to failure in the pursuit of happiness, increased levels of negative affect (Jordan, Collins, Dunaway, Kilgore & Winer, 2021) and other mental health problems (Blasco-Belled, Rogoza, Alsinet & Torrelles-Nadal, 2021; Şar, Türk & Öztürk, 2019), and decreased levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem (Joshano, 2013; Yildirim, 2019). In contrast to negative emotions, positive emotions help individuals to experience close relationships, build personal resources (Barreiro & Treglown, 2020), and maintain health and well-being. However, as noted by Gilbert *et al.* (2012), positive emotions, for instance, joy, interest, or contentment, can be perceived as unpleasant or frightening, particularly in clinical populations. Such experience can occur for several reasons: Positive affect is blocked as a result of its association with adverse outcomes (Gilbert, 2010); positive early life attachment figures are lacking or absent; and consequently, interpreting and exploring different moods, emotions, or emotional states is difficult (Peng *et al.*, 2020). All these studies examining the ability to express and experience positive emotions support the notion that fears of positive feelings show a consistent positive relationship with psychopathology. Moreover, fear of happiness is a predictor of the onset of depression-related symptoms in healthy individuals (De Vuyst *et al.*, 2023).

While there is a growing interest in consequences of fear of happiness, less is known about factors leading to fear of

happiness. In a Turkish study, childhood psychological trauma and dissociation were found as contributors to fear of happiness, and females also tend to report higher levels (Şar, Türk & Öztürk, 2019). Apart from this study, however, there is a lack of research about predictors that might lead to fear of happiness, particularly in Hungary, where both happiness and fear of happiness are rarely studied. Therefore, in this study we focus on psychological factors that may contribute to the development of this state, that is, where fear of happiness is applied as a dependent variable. Specifically, we investigated several potential predictors of fear of happiness that have previously been found to be related to negative emotions (Lin & Huang, 2012; Moate, Gnilka, West & Bruns, 2016) and that we anticipated to be predictors of fear of happiness in a sample of university students. These were perfectionism, academic burnout, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Above all, we expected perfectionism to be a key contributor to fear of happiness. It is a multidimensional personality disposition defined as an aspiration for flawlessness, immense expectations, and a tendency toward intense self-criticism (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). Maladaptive forms of perfectionism reflect negative dispositions, such as personal concerns over mistakes in one's performance, and concerns about other people's evaluation or criticism. These expressions of perfectionism have been associated with more frequent negative affect. In contrast, adaptive components of perfectionism are associated with striving for higher achievement (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia & Neubauer, 1993, p. 125; Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava & DeCourville, 2006). Adaptive perfectionism has been found to be related to more frequent positive emotions and better physical and mental health (Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava & DeCourville, 2006).

The relationships between perfectionism and positive and negative affect have been assessed in several studies. For instance, Stornelli, Flett, and Hewitt (2009) investigated affect, perfectionism, and academic achievement in school-aged children. They found that happiness and perfectionism were unrelated in the whole sample, but in gifted students, self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism were associated with lower levels of happiness. Moreover, perfectionism was significantly correlated with measures of fear and sadness. In a subsequent study, university students with higher emotional intelligence and personal standards were happier, while perfectionism stemming from evaluative concerns was a significant negative predictor of happiness (Abdollahi, Hosseinian, Panahipour, Najafi & Soheili, 2018). However, Basheer, Ninitha, and Betty (2020) did not find a connection between subjective happiness and perfectionism among young dancers.

Outside of high standards, perfectionistic individuals also appear to have high levels of emotional involvement. Some studies have found a connection between perfectionism and fear of failure (Pervichko, Babaev, Podstreshnaya & Zinchenko, 2020). Experiencing rumination and catastrophizing in a stressful situation is frequent as well (Reinhardt, Tóth & Kenneth, 2019). Engagement in maladaptive cognitive processes, such as rumination (Reinhardt, Tóth & Kenneth, 2019), could increase the risk of negative mood. Happiness may be unattainable due to stress (Schiffirrin & Nelson, 2008) and high expectations. On the other hand, expressing positive emotions can threaten the adaptive perfectionist individual's need for personal control (Flett, Hewitt,

Blankstein & Mosher, 1995). Although emotions are frequently studied within the literature related to perfectionism, we know little about its connection with fear of happiness. Positive emotions can play a major role in maintaining physical and mental health (Alexander *et al.*, 2021); hence the research on contributors to restraining from positive emotions may be of high relevance for understanding mental health problems. Finally, only one study has investigated aversion to happiness and perfectionism, and the findings showed a positive correlation (Joshnloo, 2022). However, this study measured perfectionism by using only one item from the Revised Almost Perfect Scale (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi & Ashby, 2001) and failed to include other dimensions. Thus, it is unclear what unique relationship fear of happiness shows with adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism. Furthermore, results were obtained with the Aversion To Happiness scale (Joshnloo, 2013), where the underlying theme is that positive emotions will eventually lead to a negative outcome (e.g., "Having lots of joy and fun causes bad things to happen"). In contrast, the Fear of Happiness Scale (FHS; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012) explores general fears and anxiety about positive feelings (e.g., "I feel I don't deserve to be happy"). In the present research, we aimed to further examine the positive relationship between fear of happiness and perfectionism with Gilbert's Fear of Happiness Scale and expand our findings by examining the relationship between fear of happiness and two dimensions of perfectionism.

Burnout is another risk factor of students' mental health problems in higher education environments (Madigan & Curran, 2021). Early identification of the burnout syndrome is therefore a key to the protection of the health of students (Długosz & Liszka, 2021; Williams, Tricomi, Gupta & Janise, 2014). In a representative sample of undergraduate students, Salmela-Aro and Read (2017) found that 7% were burned out. Symptoms were associated with the experience of high expectations and insufficient social support. Similarly, in high school students, a positive association was found between high expectations and the development of burnout symptoms, exacerbated by lower levels of self-efficacy (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2013). Loneliness and maladaptive perfectionism can also lead to a more intense experience of stress and learning burnout (Lin & Huang, 2012; Moate, Gnilka, West & Bruns, 2016). However, the relationship between burnout and adaptive perfectionism is more complex and not unequivocal (Chang, Seong & Lee, 2020; Garratt-Reed, Howell, Hayes & Boyes, 2018; Zhang, Gan & Cham, 2007). In a sample of medical students, burnout was negatively correlated with psychological well-being and resilience (Yu & Chae, 2020). Research has shown that there is a close connection between academic burnout and emotion suppression (Seibert, Bauer, May & Fincha, 2017). In this sense, underlying maladaptive emotion regulation processes would explain why burnout may lead to fear of happiness. Although a number of studies confirm that burnout is negatively related to happiness (Demerouti, Veldhuis, Coombes & Hunter, 2018), the investigation of burnout and fear of happiness is yet to be explored.

Besides the individual-level factors, social connections can also influence the experience of happiness. Being lonely has been found to be negatively associated with subjective happiness and social connectedness (Satici, Uysal & Deniz, 2016). Loneliness can be positive as long as it is voluntary and increases

productivity; however, it is negative if prolonged in time and hinders the progress of students (Kalubi *et al.*, 2020). Lonely individuals are likely to have negative beliefs about themselves and others, so they may exhibit characteristics such as hopelessness (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006) with a lack of control over events (Özdemir, Kuzucu & Ak, 2014). It has been reported that students who are more vulnerable to anxiety, depression symptoms, and perfectionism have higher levels of loneliness (Arslan, Hamarta, Üre & Özyeşil, 2010; Chang, Sanna, Chang & Bodem, 2008; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017; Richardson, Elliott & Roberts, 2017). A study involving university students from 25 countries indicated that 10.6% reported mostly feeling lonely, with no overall gender differences (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017), and other cross-national studies suggest that hopelessness increased between 1978 and 2010 (Oykecin, Sahin & Aldemir, 2017). Finally, hopelessness can possibly hinder the experience of positive emotions and therefore explain why individuals would develop fear of happiness. Additionally, Satici and Uysal (2016) demonstrated that hopelessness acted as a mediator between psychological vulnerability and subjective happiness of students.

### The current study

While, due to its negative impact on mental health and well-being, fear of happiness is receiving more attention in research, fewer studies have investigated background variables leading to the development of fear of happiness. Therefore, our main purpose in this study was to extend our knowledge of fear of happiness and to identify the potential roles of previously unexplored variables in its genesis. The objectives of this study were as follows: (1) to detect gender differences in fear of happiness and other variables; and (2) to test in multiple regression models how dimensions of perfectionism, loneliness, hopelessness, and academic burnout (as independent variables) might contribute to the fear of happiness (as the dependent variable) controlling for sociodemographics (age and gender).

## METHOD

### Procedure and participants

The study was conducted in Szeged, Hungary. It received approval from the University of Szeged Ethics Committee (Ref. No. 6/2017). Data were obtained in February through March 2020 via an online survey that included the self-report measures described below. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and terms of anonymity and confidentiality before completing the 15–20 min online survey. Links to the survey were posted on student Facebook sites. The whole population included 1,183 students aged between 18 and 54 years ( $M = 22$  years,  $SD = 4.5$ ). The sample size was then reduced to narrow the age-group, and responses from 1,148 university students across Hungary aged between 18 and 35 years were analyzed (970 female;  $M = 22$  years,  $SD = 4.5$ ).

### Measures

**Fear of happiness.** Fear of happiness was measured with the Fear of Happiness Scale (FHS; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Hungarian version by Szabó-Bartha, Takács & Takács, 2019). This is a nine-item scale designed to assess people's general fears of positive emotions. Items include statements such as "I am frightened to let myself become too happy." Responses were recorded

on a five-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *extremely like me*) and summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicative of more avoidance of positive feelings. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

**Academic burnout.** Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS; Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002; Hungarian version by Hazag, Major & Ádám, 2010). This 15-item inventory was developed to measure the students' levels of three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion (e.g., "I feel emotionally drained by my studies"), cynicism (e.g., "I doubt the significance of my studies"), and academic efficacy (e.g., "During class I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done"). In the original form, all efficacy items are reverse coded; however, Bresó, Salanova, and Schaufeli (2007, pp. 463–464) concluded that reversing the scores for efficacy is problematic. Thus, for this study, only (unreversed) positively worded items of the third dimension (efficacy) were used. The respondent rates the frequency of each item during the previous 3 months on a seven-point Likert-type scale (0 = *never* to 6 = *every day*). Cronbach's alpha value of reliability for the whole scale was 0.71, whereas the coefficients for the subscales were 0.84 (EX), 0.88 (CY), and 0.82 (EF).

**Perfectionism.** A brief version (Burgess, Frost & DiBartolo, 2016) of the original 35-item Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (F-MPS; Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990; Hungarian version by Dobos, Piko & Kenny, 2018) was used as a self-report measure of two main dimensions of perfectionism: perfectionistic concerns (maladaptive perfectionism: e.g., "If I do not do well all the time, people will not respect me") and perfectionistic strivings (adaptive perfectionism: e.g., "I expect higher performance in my daily tasks than most people"). There are four items for each subscale. The eight-item short version does not include items from the Organization, Parental Expectations, and Parental Criticism subscales from the original scale. Responses for each subscale were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and scores generated by summing the responses. A total perfectionism scale was obtained by adding the subscale scores. The brief version demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas for the total perfectionism scale and the maladaptive and adaptive dimensions were 0.81, 0.79, and 0.85, respectively).

**Loneliness.** A short form (ULS-6; Neto, 2014) of the original 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980; Hungarian version by Csóka, Szabó, Sáfrány, Rochlitz & Bódizs, 2007) was used to assess subjective feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction (e.g., "I feel isolated from others"). Participants were asked to rate each of six items on a four-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*). Item 2 is reversed before summing the responses. Higher scores are indicative of higher levels of loneliness. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure in the current study was 0.71.

**Hopelessness.** A three-item version of the original 20-item Hopelessness Scale (BHS; Beck, Weissman, Lester & Trexler, 1974; Hungarian version by Perczel Forintos, Sallai & Rózsa, 2001) was used to assess the affective (e.g., "My future seems dark to me"), cognitive (e.g., "Things just won't work out the way I want them to"), and motivational (e.g., "There's no use in really trying to get something I want because I probably won't get it") elements of hopelessness. Respondents rated each item using a true-false format referring to the previous week, where each "True" response is given one point. According to our results, the three-item BHS showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics including values for minimum, maximum, mean scores, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Male participants showed greater scores for perfectionism total

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for fear of happiness, perfectionism, burnout, loneliness, and hopelessness ( $n = 1,148$ )

	Number of items	$\alpha$	$M$ (SD)	Females $M$ (SD); Males $M$ (SD)	
Fear of happiness*	9	0.88	11.9 (8.0)	11.8 (8.0) 13.2 (8.1)	<sup>a</sup> $p = 0.03$
Perfectionism*	8	0.81	21.8 (6.9)	21.7 (6.9) 22.8 (6.8)	$p = 0.04$
Maladaptive perfectionism	4	0.79	9.5 (4.0)	9.4 (4.0) 9.7 (3.9)	$p = 0.42$
Adaptive perfectionism*	4	0.85	12.4 (4.5)	12.3 (4.6) 13.1 (4.4)	$p = 0.01$
Burnout	15	0.71	48.4 (12.5)	48.5 (12.5) 47.6 (12.5)	$p = 0.34$
Exhaustion	5	0.84	14.2 (7.8)	14.4 (7.8) 13.7 (7.4)	$p = 0.28$
Cynicism*	4	0.79	9.4 (7.4)	9.2 (7.3) 10.3 (7.4)	$p = 0.04$
Efficacy**	6	0.85	24.7 (6.8)	24.9 (6.7) 23.5 (7.4)	$p = 0.00$
Loneliness	6	0.71	11.4 (3.7)	11.3 (3.7) 11.8 (3.8)	$p = 0.12$
Hopelessness	3	0.70	0.6 (0.9)	0.62 (0.94) 0.66 (1.0)	$p = 0.63$

<sup>a</sup>Two-sample  $t$  test.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

score ( $t[1146] = -2.04$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), adaptive perfectionism ( $t[1146] = -2.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), fear of happiness ( $t[1146] = -2.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and the cynicism subscale of burnout ( $t[1146] = -1.98$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Relative to males, higher levels of efficacy were reported by females ( $t[1146] = -1.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

#### Bivariate relationships between the scales

Table 2 summarizes the bivariate correlation coefficients between the constructs. Fear of happiness was positively associated with total perfectionism scores ( $r = 0.40$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), as well as maladaptive ( $r = 0.52$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and adaptive perfectionism ( $r = 0.14$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). It was also positively correlated with total burnout scores ( $r = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). However, while it was positively correlated with exhaustion ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and

Table 2. Bivariate relationships between the scales ( $n = 1,148$ )

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Age	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Fear of happiness	–0.06	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Perfectionism	0.03	0.40**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Maladaptive perfectionism	–0.07*	0.52**	0.77**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Adaptive perfectionism	0.11**	0.14**	0.83**	0.29**	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Burnout	0.07*	0.34**	0.27**	0.33**	0.12**	–	–	–	–	–
7. Exhaustion	–0.02	0.40**	0.20**	0.37**	0.01	0.81**	–	–	–	–
8. Cynicism	0.07**	0.36**	0.11**	0.26**	–0.06*	0.76**	0.65**	–	–	–
9. Efficacy	0.07**	–0.22**	0.15**	–0.09**	0.31**	0.07*	–0.35**	–0.42**	–	–
10. Loneliness	–0.04	0.37**	0.21**	0.33**	0.02	0.24**	0.35**	0.30**	–0.27**	–
11. Hopelessness	0.00	0.51**	0.24**	0.42**	–0.00	0.30**	0.37**	0.40**	–0.30**	0.34**

Note: Correlation coefficients ( $r$ ).

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

cynicism ( $r = 0.36$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), it was negatively associated with efficacy ( $r = -0.22$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Total perfectionism scores were positively correlated with loneliness scores ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), hopelessness scores ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and total burnout scores ( $r = 0.27$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The latter showed a similar positive relationship with hopelessness scores ( $r = 0.30$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), loneliness scores ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and age ( $r = 0.07$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Maladaptive perfectionism scores were positively correlated with total burnout scores ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), exhaustion scores ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and cynicism scores ( $r = 0.26$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) but negatively correlated with efficacy scores ( $r = -0.09$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). They were positively correlated with loneliness scores ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), hopelessness scores ( $r = 0.42$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and age ( $r = -0.07$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Fewer significant relationships were observed for adaptive perfectionism, which had positive associations with burnout total scores ( $r = 0.12$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), efficacy ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and age ( $r = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) but a negative association with cynicism ( $r = -0.06$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). It was not associated with exhaustion.

#### Stepwise multiple regression models

Finally, as seen in Table 3, results of six regression models were conducted to detect predictors of fear of happiness. Predictors were entered in six blocks, which we applied to determine the order of variables in the regression equation and control their roles separately. We added the sociodemographics (gender, age) in the first model, followed by the two types of perfectionism (adaptive and maladaptive) and the psychological scales (burnout, hopelessness, loneliness). Model 1 showed male gender as positive contributor to the dependent variable ( $\beta = 0.06$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), whereas age was a negative predictor ( $\beta = -0.05$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In Model 2, adaptive perfectionism was included ( $\beta = 0.15$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The addition of maladaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.52$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) in Model 3 increased the variance by 25% and substantially decreased the significance level of adaptive perfectionism. In this model, only gender remained significant ( $\beta = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The addition of burnout in Model 4 ( $\beta = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) was positively related to fear of happiness and increased the variance by 4%. A similar relationship was observed with hopelessness in Model 5 ( $\beta = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Adding loneliness ( $\beta = 0.14$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) as the last



Table 3. Stepwise multiple regression model predicting Fear of Happiness Scale (FHS) ( $n = 1,148$ )

Variables	Model 1 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 2 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 3 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 4 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 5 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 6 $\beta$ (SE)	$P$
Gender	0.06 (0.62)*	0.05 (0.61)	0.05 (0.53)*	0.06 (0.52)*	0.05 (0.50)*	0.04 (0.48)*	0.040
Age	-0.05 (0.08)*	-0.07 (0.08)*	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.06)*	0.044
Adaptive perfectionism		0.15 (0.05)***	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)#	0.055
Maladaptive perfectionism			0.52 (0.05)***	0.45 (0.05)***	0.31 (0.05)***	0.28 (0.05)***	0.000
Burnout				0.19 (0.01)***	0.13 (0.01)***	0.11 (0.01)***	0.000
Hopelessness					0.34 (0.22)***	0.31 (0.22)***	0.000
Loneliness						0.14 (0.05)***	0.000
Constant	14.06***	12.01***	2.12	-1.60	1.12	-1.35	
$R^2$	0.07***	0.03***	0.27***	0.31***	0.39***	0.41***	

Note: For the last-step regression model,  $F(7, 1,182) = 120.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .  $R^2$  = explained variance. Gender: female = 1, male = 2.  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; # $p = 0.05$ .

predictor (Model 6) was associated with an increase in the predicting value for adaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.04$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ) and age ( $\beta = -0.04$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Every variable was significant in this model. The explained variance in fear of happiness scores was 41%.

## DISCUSSION

Our study aimed to better understand the concept of fear of happiness; therefore, we detected gender differences in its levels as well as investigated the relationships between fear of happiness and perfectionism, loneliness, hopelessness, and academic burnout. The novelty of our study is to highlight new factors that can have a predictive role in fear of happiness. We paid special attention to adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism since they can play different roles in emotions, mental health, and well-being (Moate, Gnilka, West & Bruns, 2016; Reinhardt, Tóth & Kenneth, 2019). Second, in our country, there is little data on the relationship between perfectionism and burnout. Despite fear of happiness having increasing relevance in the international literature, examining fear of happiness as a dependent variable is still rare. In addition, this was the first Hungarian study that explored these interrelationships in a sample of university students.

Results showed that male students reported higher fear of happiness than female students. A previous study among Turkish university students did not find a gender difference (Şar, Türk & Öztürk, 2019); this may be a cultural issue and needs further exploration. Gender differences were also found for perfectionism total scale and adaptive perfectionism: males had significantly higher scores than females. This finding may be related to a social norm for males to be strong and show good skills to solve problems effectively. Mean scores obtained on the two perfectionism dimensions were similar to other studies (Garratt-Reed, Howell, Hayes & Boyes, 2018). On the other hand, no gender differences were found for academic burnout, hopelessness, and loneliness scores. This latter finding is in contradiction with previous studies in which males were more likely to report being lonely (e.g., Barreto *et al.*, 2021).

Although the association between fear of happiness and perfectionism was unclear, based on previous findings (Abdollahi, Hosseini, Panahipour, Najafi & Soheili, 2018), we assumed that there would be a positive relationship between these variables.

Indeed, we found a moderate but positive correlation between perfectionism and fear of happiness. This key finding suggests that perfectionists have a certain amount of fear when it comes to expressing or experiencing positive emotions. A large number of studies showed that critical and controlling parenting can lead to perfectionistic traits in adults (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). Growing up with critical parents would not only be challenging when exploring different types of activities but also make it difficult for the child to express their emotions without feeling fear or guilt about their behavior. It is possible that this childhood behavior pattern is the cause of emotional apprehension and consequent fear of happiness.

In addition, fear of happiness was positively correlated with burnout, hopelessness, and loneliness. We found that students who are emotionally exhausted and cynical in regard to their studies are more fearful of being happy, and on the contrary, more efficient students had significantly less fear of happiness. This finding supports the idea that fear of positive emotions can be associated with a negative emotional state. This is particularly alarming, since fear of happiness has been previously linked to depression (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012). In line with existing literature (Lin & Huang, 2012), burnout and loneliness were also positively related. This result confirms that lonely students are more likely to experience burnout. Findings also revealed a significant positive association between loneliness, hopelessness, and perfectionism. These results are consistent with those of previous studies (Arslan, Hamarta, Üre & Özyeşil, 2010; Chang, Sanna, Chang & Bodem, 2008; Özdemir, Kuzucu & Ak, 2014).

As mentioned among the study objectives, we especially focused on the two types of perfectionism. Zhang, Gan, and Cham (2007) found that maladaptive perfectionism is positively related while adaptive perfectionism is negatively related to burnout symptoms. However, other studies found a non-significant relationship between adaptive perfectionism and burnout (Chang, Seong & Lee, 2020; Garinger, Chow & Luzzeri, 2018). In our study, both dimensions of perfectionism showed a positive association with the total burnout score; however, the correlation with maladaptive perfectionism was stronger. Our finding supports previous research finding that maladaptive perfectionists experience more stress and higher levels of burnout (Moate, Gnilka, West & Bruns, 2016). We included three dimensions of burnout in the correlation analysis to further clarify these

associations. Maladaptive perfectionism was positively correlated with exhaustion and cynicism, and negatively with efficacy. This is consistent with an earlier result (Garratt-Reed, Howell, Hayes & Boyes, 2018). On the other hand, adaptive perfectionism was positively related to efficacy and negatively related to cynicism. Our findings suggest that although students with a higher level of adaptive perfectionism can also have a slightly higher risk of burnout, they are also more likely to maintain efficacy. We suggest that well-organized students with high personal standards feel more efficient and have a higher sense of competence in their studies, which helps with effective coping and achievement of personal goals. Additionally, maladaptive perfectionism was positively correlated with loneliness and hopelessness, while adaptive perfectionism did not show a similar connection. Present findings are consistent with several other studies: Maladaptive perfectionists tend to experience greater loneliness (Arslan, Hamarta, Üre & Özyeşil, 2010) and anxiety symptoms (Chang, Sanna, Chang & Bodem, 2008) than adaptive perfectionists due to negative thoughts about social interactions (Harper, Eddington & Silvia, 2020). It is important to identify early signs of hopelessness, as it can be a predictor of later suicide ideation (McClelland, Evans, Nowland, Ferguson & O'Connor, 2020).

After detecting associations between the predictor variables, the next step was to analyze their relationship with the fear of happiness. This variable was significantly associated with both types of perfectionism, although correlation was noticeably weaker in the case of the adaptive dimension. Adaptive perfectionists report lower levels of perceived stress and more positive and fewer negative emotions compared with maladaptive perfectionists (Moate, Gnilka, West & Bruns, 2016). Our results suggest not only that adaptive perfectionism is related to a higher level of positive emotions (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia & Neubauer, 1993; Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava & DeCourville, 2006) but also that a positive emotional state such as happiness can induce negative feelings. This finding is especially important because fear of happiness is a relatively stable belief (Joshanloo, 2013). These results support a previous finding that self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism may be associated with lower levels of happiness (Stornelli, Flett & Hewitt, 2009). Joshanloo (2013) demonstrated that people tend to avoid positive emotions because they may lose control over their emotions. Our result can be explained by the finding that adaptive perfectionism is associated with a higher desire for personal control (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & Mosher, 1995). On the other hand, a greater fear of rejection (Pervichko, Babaev, Podstreshnaya & Zinchenko, 2020) due to a motivation to appear perfect can explain the increased fear of happiness for maladaptive perfectionists.

In multiple regression analyses, age had a negative and male gender had a positive association with fear of happiness. We assume that with growing age, people learn to be more aware of their negative emotions (Orgeta, 2009). Furthermore, on their way to adulthood, students may have less difficulty with regulating their emotions and using more adaptive emotion regulation strategies to cope with negative beliefs about happiness compared with those of younger ages. Initially, adaptive perfectionism was a significant predictor of fear of happiness, but its predictive value decreased in the final model, while maladaptive perfectionism remained a strong predictor. Previous findings also noted that maladaptive perfectionism

is a negative predictor of happiness (Abdollahi, Hosseinian, Panahipour, Najafi & Soheili, 2018). This can have a meaning that perfectionism as a personality trait is a factor that makes an individual more vulnerable to difficulties with positive emotions.

According to Satici, Uysal, and Deniz (2016), there is a negative relationship between subjective happiness and loneliness. This is consistent with our findings: Loneliness was a positive predictor of fear of happiness. Therefore, it is of high importance to increase social support and strengthen the sense of community within institutions for those studying in higher education. Moreover, previous studies have suggested that an increasing number of students are affected by hopelessness (Oyekcin, Sahin & Aldemir, 2017; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017), which has an adverse effect on students' mental health (Richardson, Elliott & Roberts, 2017). Our results showed that hopelessness was a positive predictor of fear of happiness. Recent studies have indicated that psychological well-being and happiness were negatively related to the symptoms of burnout (Demerouti, Veldhuis, Coombes & Hunter, 2018; Yu & Chae, 2020); however, the relationship between academic burnout and fear of happiness was unexplored. We found that burnout was a weak but statistically significant predictor of fear of happiness. This finding suggests that burnout may have a negative impact on emotion regulation.

#### *Limitations, strengths, and future directions*

Limitations of the current study include the unbalanced gender distribution, with the majority of the participants being females. However, in online studies this phenomenon is very common (Sax, Gilmartin, Lee & Hagedorn, 2008). The study sample consisted of university students, and therefore our results cannot be generalized to other populations. The online survey does not support generalizability either. Future studies should examine the identified interrelationships in other samples and age-groups and be better equalized in terms of gender. Also, we used the brief version of the perfectionism scale (Burgess, Frost & DiBartolo, 2016), which is very useful and reliable as a measurement, but it does not include items from the Organization, Parental Expectations, and Parental Criticism subscales (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, cause-and-effect relationships cannot be inferred. Despite these limitations, we consider that highlighting the predictive role of maladaptive perfectionism will support a better understanding of fear of happiness among university students. The most important strength of this article is that our findings provide evidence of the role of previously unexplored psychological factors in fear of happiness. In addition, this study is among the few to investigate fear of happiness as a dependent variable. Further investigation would be useful to clarify those variables or cultural factors that could explain increasing experience of fear of happiness in the higher education environment.

#### CONCLUSION

This research added to the literature in several ways. First, since gaining happiness is a very important aspiration in Western societies, most studies are focused on exploring factors contributing to happiness, and we know less about those leading to fear of

happiness. However, pursuing happiness without identifying its obstacles can be less effective. While we know more about negative outcomes of fear of happiness, investigating predictors of fear of happiness is a unique contribution to the literature, since only a few similar studies are available on this question. Second, the present study was the first to examine how perfectionism, loneliness, hopelessness, and academic burnout are associated with fear of happiness, with special emphasis put on both maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Findings showed that feeling fear of happiness was positively associated with perfectionism, academic burnout, hopelessness, and loneliness. Students with maladaptive perfectionism reported increased levels of fear of happiness, all dimensions of burnout, hopelessness, and loneliness. Adaptive perfectionism was also linked to fear of happiness and burnout but did not show significant association with hopelessness and loneliness. These findings highlight the predictive role of previously unexplored variables in the fear of happiness. Third, this study involved a student population. Mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, or burnout are common, and we anticipated that they would be closely related to the students' concept of happiness or the fear of it. Finally, these findings have practical implications for mental health promotion among these students. They should learn to recognize the feeling of fear of happiness and its association with loneliness, hopelessness, or perfectionism. Developing active and adaptive emotion regulation may help them cope with academic and social challenges.

Overall, our findings draw attention to the need for preventive programs among university students to identify and understand fear of happiness. These programs also should be focused on (a) developing social skills to prevent loneliness; (b) strengthening academic resilience to prevent burnout and perfectionism; and (c) screening for hopelessness and other negative mood states to prevent depression.

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All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This study received ethical approval from the University of Szeged Ethics Committee (Ref. No. 6/2017).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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