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STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIONS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ADAPTABILITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE

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Psychosocial adaptability constitutes a core dimension of individual equilibrium and optimal functioning in society, reflecting a person's capacity to adjust attitudes, values, behaviours, and emotional responses to the demands of the social environment. It involves a continuous process of interaction and transformation through which individuals develop an adaptive potential that facilitates social integration and active participation in community life. In contemporary accounts, quality of life (QoL) is conceptualised as the individual's subjective appraisal of their position in life within the cultural, social, and value-laden context in which they live. It encompasses interdependent domains – physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being – that together define overall satisfaction and personal fulfilment. The relationship between psychosocial adaptability and QoL is intrinsic: higher levels of adaptation support emotional stability, self-regulation, and a sense of existential coherence. The present study examines students' representations of these constructs, highlighting the internal and contextual factors implicated in the construction of sustainable well-being.

Keywords: *psychosocial adaptability; quality of life; subjective well-being; mental health and emotional health; inner balance; psychological equilibrium; social relationships; free association method; students.*

REPREZENTĂRILE STUDENȚILOR DESPRE ADAPTABILITATEA PSIHOSOCIALĂ ȘI CALITATEA VIEȚII

Adaptabilitatea psihosocială constituie o dimensiune esențială a echilibrului individual și a funcționării optime în societate, reflectând capacitatea persoanei de a-și ajusta atitudinile, valorile, comportamentele și răspunsurile emoționale în raport cu cerințele mediului social. Ea presupune un proces continuu de interacțiune și transformare, prin care individul își dezvoltă un potențial adaptativ ce facilitează integrarea socială și participarea activă la viața comunitară. În viziunea contemporană, calitatea vieții este conceptualizată drept percepția subiectivă a individului asupra propriei poziții existențiale în contextul cultural, social și valoric în care trăiește. Aceasta înglobează dimensiuni interdependente – bunăstarea fizică, psihologică, socială și spirituală – ce definesc starea globală de satisfacție și împlinire personală. Relația dintre adaptabilitatea psihosocială și calitatea vieții este una intrinsecă: un nivel ridicat de adaptare susține stabilitatea emoțională, autoreglarea și sentimentul de coerență existențială. Prezentul studiu investighează reprezentările studenților privind aceste concepte, evidențiind factorii interni și contextuali implicați în construcția unei stări de bine durabile.

Cuvinte-cheie: *adaptabilitate psihosocială, calitate a vieții, bunăstare subiectivă, sănătate mentală și emoțională, echilibru interior, relații sociale, metoda asociației libere, student.*

Introduction

Psychosocial adaptability represents a fundamental condition of individual equilibrium and efficient functioning within society. It presupposes the permanent interaction between the individual and their living environment, a process through which the person adjusts their values, behaviours, and emotions to respond adequately to social demands. Psychosocial adaptation involves value transformations and the development of adaptive potential which enables active and effective participation in social life. At the same time, quality of life is conceptualised by the World Health Organization as the individual's perception of their own position within the cultural and value context in which they live. It reflects physical, psychological, and social

well-being, life satisfaction, and a sense of personal fulfilment. The relationship between the two concepts is direct: the capacity for adaptation determines the level of satisfaction, balance, and emotional stability. The present study explores students' representations of psychosocial adaptation and quality of life, placing emphasis on the internal and social factors that contribute to the formation of a sustainable state of well-being and to the consolidation of human capital within a continuously changing societal context.

Concept and Argument

The level of psychosocial adaptability is conditioned by personal adaptive resources and by the characteristics of the environment in which the individual satisfies basic needs within a context of positive attitudes, congruent with the requirements of society. Adaptive resources constitute the totality of psychosocial and individual traits that determine the degree of personal adjustment to the specific conditions of the social environment [8]. Starting from the interpretative analysis of existing definitions regarding the given concept, O. Paladi considers that psychosocial adaptation is a process of interaction between the individual and the environment that entails: (a) changing individual value orientations in accordance with social values; (b) involving regulatory psychosocial factors in shaping an individual system of values that contributes to the development of the personality's adaptive potential; and (c) accommodating to new life conditions in line with one's value orientations so as to enable effective activity [5].

We consider that, from the perspective of contemporary societal approaches, the quality of life of the personality is directly related to psychosocial adaptability. In fact, reference is also made to word associations presented by Colby in relation to the concept of quality of life, which is described as adaptive potential [apud 7]. In this context, when analysing the strategic direction of valuing human and social capital, researchers emphasise the rapid social changes of recent years which have had an impact on quality of life and psychosocial safety, as well as on aspects related to individuals' social integration.

It is well known that the World Health Organization describes quality of life as the individual's perception of their position within the cultural and value context in which they live, relative to their personal objectives, expectations, and standards [apud 2; 9].

By quality of life is understood physical, psychological, and social well-being, as well as individuals' ability to fulfil their ordinary daily tasks. According to the conceptions of Revicki and Kaplan, quality of life reflects preferences for certain health states that allow for improvements in morbidity and mortality. Emotional or psychological well-being as an indicator of quality of life can be illustrated through happiness, self-satisfaction, a sense of personal identity, avoidance of excessive stress, self-esteem, richness of spiritual life, and a sense of safety. Increasingly, specialists are interested in studying the psychological aspects of emotional well-being or the state of happiness. Beyond material prosperity, the perception of one's own quality of life results from a "filtering" of lived experiences through cognitive schemes or value judgements referring to what constitutes life satisfaction and happiness [apud 7].

Several dimensions of quality of life have been identified by R.L. Schalock, as follows:

1. Emotional or psychological well-being, illustrated by indicators such as: happiness, self-satisfaction, a sense of personal identity, avoidance of excessive stress, self-esteem, richness of spiritual life, a sense of safety.

2. Interpersonal relationships, illustrated by indicators such as enjoyment of intimacy, affection, friendship, social contacts, and social support (dimensions of social support).

3. Material well-being, illustrated by indicators such as ownership, job security, adequate income, proper nutrition, employment, possession of goods (movable and immovable), housing, and social status.

4. Personal achievement, referring to professional competence, career promotion, engaging intellectual activities, strong professional skills, professional fulfilment, and levels of education appropriate to one's profession.

5. Physical well-being, reflected in health, physical mobility, adequate nutrition, leisure availability, provision of quality medical care, health insurance, interesting leisure activities (hobbies and their fulfilment), and optimal physical fitness or conditioning, concretised in the four "S's": Strength – physical power, Stamina – vigour or endurance, Suppleness – physical flexibility, and Skills – dexterity or physical ability.

6. Independence, meaning autonomy in life, the ability to make personal choices and decisions, personal self-control, the presence of clearly defined values and goals, and self-direction in life.

7. Social integration, referring to the presence of social status and role, acceptance within various social groups, accessibility of social support, a stimulating work climate, participation in community activities, involvement in non-governmental organisations, and belonging to a spiritual or religious community.

8. The assurance of fundamental human rights, such as the right to vote, the right to property, to privacy, access to education and culture, and the right to a fair and prompt trial [apud 1].

The World Health Organization, in its quality-of-life assessment questionnaire, highlights six domains: (1) physical health, (2) psychological health, (3) degree of independence, (4) social relationships, (5) living environment, and (6) spiritual quality of life [apud 2]. Research conducted by E. Zaharia and I. Mărgineanu emphasises that the psychological dimension of quality of life constitutes an essential link of the construct [4].

The analysis of specialised literature offers the opportunity to examine the dimensions of quality of life defined by several authors [apud 6], as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of quality of life defined by various authors

Felce (1996)	Cummins (1997)	Hagerty (2001)
Physical well-being	Health	Health
Material well-being	Material well-being	Material well-being
Social well-being	Community well-being	Belonging to the community
Productive well-being	Work and productive activities	Work and productive activities
Emotional well-being	Emotional well-being	Emotional well-being
Civil well-being	Social and family connections	Relations with friends and family
-	Safety	Personal safety

The comparative analysis highlights a conceptual convergence among the authors presented, who define quality of life through similar dimensions: health, material well-being, social well-being, and emotional well-being. Differences appear in the emphasis placed on community participation (Hagerty) and safety (Cummins, Hagerty), indicating an evolution towards a more integrative and contextual approach to human well-being.

In this regard, the following section will address students' representations concerning the concepts presented-namely, *psychosocial adaptability and quality of life.*

Methodology

Within the framework of the present study, the **free association method** (free evocation) was employed. According to this method, participants were asked to write down five words or expressions that they spontaneously associated with the induced term *"psychosocial adaptability"*, and subsequently, with the term *"quality of life."* The advantage of this technique lies in its non-directive nature, allowing the collection of authentic associations with minimal researcher influence.

To obtain a value indicating the importance of each evoked term within the associative chain, the participants were instructed to write the words in a hierarchical order, similar to a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 – where 1 indicated the most important and closely related word, and 5 represented the least important and most distant word.

The research sample consisted of 256 participants, undergraduate (Cycle I) and master's (Cycle II) students from Romania. These participants represented various age categories.

Results Obtained and Discussion

The analytical approach undertaken involves representing the content of the concepts—*psychosocial*

adaptation and quality of life—as they are specific to the entire group that participated in this research. It is important to note that the process entailed an inductive thematic analysis of the free-association responses, focusing on identifying recurring ideas, concepts, and meanings. The raw responses initially collected were systematically extracted to facilitate this analysis. The following section presents several emerging themes and their detailed description.

Central associations for „psychosocial adaptability"

Flexibility and adjustment. The central concept refers to the capacity to change and to adjust effectively to diverse circumstances. Definitions provided by participants include "the capacity to be flexible and open," "the ability to adapt to the external environment," and "the capacity to adjust to various situations in life, contexts, or friendships." Other responses mention "the ability of an individual to adjust effectively to environmental changes" and "flexibility in relation to sociocultural stimuli and factors." While many definitions underline reactive adjustment to change ("to adapt to changes"), others imply a more proactive attitude, such as "to be open" or "to adjust oneself dynamically," suggesting an active engagement with the environment rather than passive compliance. This distinction between reactive adaptation and proactive engagement is a key nuance in understanding adaptive capacity.

Resilience and stress management. A significant component is the individual's capacity to face challenges, maintain emotional balance, and recover after adversity. Respondents mentioned "knowing how to control one's emotions in critical situations, without losing composure," and "the capacity to face the joys and sorrows of life." Other definitions include "the ability of a person to adjust and cope with change and challenges" and "the ability to cope with and adapt to new environments and situations, as well as to respond to stress." Furthermore, participants emphasised "the capacity to manage efficiently the changes, challenges, and uncertainties of life while maintaining emotional and cognitive balance." The focus on "controlling emotions," "not losing one's composure," and "managing stress" indicates internal control and self-regulation as critical aspects of psychosocial adaptability. This suggests that individuals perceive adaptation not merely as an external behavioural change, but as an internal psychological process involving the management of emotional and cognitive responses to demanding environments.

Social integration and communication. The ability to interact effectively within social groups and to adapt to social norms is frequently mentioned. Definitions include "the capacity to integrate socially," "how easily you adapt in the social environment," and "the process by which individuals regulate their behaviour, thoughts, and emotions in order to integrate into different social environments." Participants also referred to "the way we relate to those around us on conversational and behavioural levels" and "the ability to communicate and interact assertively within society." Definitions such as "to modify your behaviour so as to be in accordance with social rules, at a given moment, without trampling on your own values" indicate a sophisticated understanding of social adaptation. This is not blind conformity, but a dynamic interaction in which the individual adjusts while striving to maintain personal integrity, suggesting a reciprocal influence between the individual and their social environment.

Emotional intelligence and empathy. Several responses implicitly or explicitly link adaptability to the understanding and management of emotions—both one's own and others'. Participants referred to "emotional intelligence and maturity," "flexibility, appropriate emotional regulation, cognitive and affective empathy," and "a high level of emotional intelligence." The emphasis on emotional intelligence and empathy suggests that effective psychosocial adaptation relies heavily on social-cognitive abilities — the capacity to interpret social cues, to understand others' emotions, and to regulate one's own emotional responses in social contexts. This positions emotional intelligence as a key underlying mechanism of successful adaptation.

In addition, an analysis was conducted on the lists of "five similar words" related to psychosocial adaptability. These lists reinforced the central themes of flexibility and resilience. Thus, several dominant keywords emerged: "flexibility" was the most frequent term, followed by "resilience," "integration," "communication," "empathy," and "adjustment." These words highlight the essential capacities required for effective psychosocial adaptation. Moreover, additional facets were outlined through terms such as "tolerance," "openness," "self-control," and "stress management," further elaborating the multidimensional

nature of this concept. The high frequency of “flexibility,” alongside “tolerance” and “openness,” indicates that psychosocial adaptability refers not only to behavioural adjustment but also to cognitive flexibility—the willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives and to tolerate ambiguity or differences. This reflects a form of mental agility that underpins effective adaptation. The frequencies were calculated by aggregating mentions from both open-ended definitions and the lists of five similar words, with normalisation to include wording variations. Overall, the results obtained highlight that flexibility and resilience are perceived as the most important attributes of psychosocial adaptability, followed by the capacity for social integration and effective communication.

Following the same method — the free association technique — associative terms were also obtained for the inductive word *“quality of life.”* The following section presents the emerging themes and their detailed description.

Central associations for “quality of life.”

Holistic well-being. This association represents the most prevalent theme, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions. Students consistently associated quality of life with a comprehensive sense of being well and healthy in all these areas. Key concepts included “general well-being,” “physical and mental health,” “state of well-being,” and “bio-psycho-social balance.” Respondents defined quality of life as “the level each person experiences in relation to health and well-being” or “well-being in psychological, emotional, and social aspects.” Moreover, it was frequently mentioned as “physical and psychological well-being” and “bio-psycho-social balance;” “a complex concept reflecting general well-being, including both objective factors — health, income, education, safety — and subjective factors — satisfaction, balance between work and leisure This aligns with existing definitions. The constant emphasis on “well-being” and “health” across multiple dimensions suggests that students perceive quality of life not as the absence of illness, but as a proactive and holistic state. This perspective indicates a sophisticated understanding, extending beyond mere survival. Through repeated mention of “physical and psychological health” and “general well-being,” students signalled that health is not merely a component but a fundamental condition for quality of life. The inclusion of “mental” and “emotional” health alongside “physical” health demonstrates awareness of their interconnection, surpassing a purely biomedical model of health. This implies that initiatives aimed at improving students’ quality of life must address mental and emotional well-being as critically as physical health.

Inner peace and balance. This theme reflects a deep-seated desire for calm, harmony, and balance within oneself and across life domains. It highlights the subjective and internal dimension of quality of life. Key concepts included “peace,” “harmony,” “balance,” “inner calm,” “serenity,” and “being in accord with oneself.” Examples from responses include expressions such as “peace, well-being, harmony,” “inner peace and relationships with loved ones,” and “based on peace and spiritual fulfilment.” Some respondents mentioned “inner peace, material stability, healthy relationships,” and “balance in life.” Others emphasised the need “to live in emotional balance, to be authentic, to have deep connections, freedom, evolution, and a positive impact on those around me,” as well as “balance between body, soul, and mind, authentic moments and happiness, deep connections, and states in accordance with values.”

The recurring emphasis on “peace” and “balance” suggests that students perceive quality of life as a dynamic state of internal regulation and harmony, particularly important in the often-stressful academic environment. It is not a static condition but an active pursuit of stability amidst challenges. Students face significant transitions, academic pressures, and social demands. The frequent references to “peace” and “balance” reveal awareness of the inherent stressors in their lives. This is not merely a passive desire but an active coping mechanism or a desired outcome of successfully navigating these challenges. Hence, quality of life is perceived as the ability to maintain inner calm and to balance external demands — a higher-order psychological need.

Personal fulfilment and satisfaction. This theme refers to the feeling of achieving one’s personal goals, fulfilling aspirations, feeling content with one’s life, and experiencing joy and happiness. It highlights the subjective and aspirational aspects of quality of life. Key concepts include “contentment,” “satisfaction,” “fulfilment,” “happiness,” “joy,” and “personal and professional achievement.”Among the definitions offered were: “joy and balance in everything I do,” “the extent to which I manage to accomplish my goals

and desires," and "contentment with one's own life, professional and personal fulfilment." Participants also mentioned "the ability to do what makes you happy" and "the degree of satisfaction that a person experiences in their life." One revealing response was "a feeling of fulfilment, satisfaction from a job well done, absence of worries," alongside "fulfilment in all areas of life." The strong connection between quality of life and personal fulfilment suggests that students define well-being not merely through what they possess, but through what they accomplish and become. This highlights a growth-oriented mindset, where continuous development and achievement contribute significantly to perceived quality of life. For students, life is often future-oriented — focused on academic goals, professional aspirations, and personal development. The emphasis on "fulfilment" and "satisfaction" derived from goal attainment reflects this developmental stage. It implies that quality of life is seen as a journey of self-actualization, in which progress and accomplishment directly enhance well-being, rather than representing a static condition.

Meaningful relationships and social connection. The importance of strong, supportive relationships with family and friends, as well as a sense of belonging to a community, emerged as central. Love and unconditional support were frequently mentioned. Key concepts included "family," "unconditional love," "fulfilling relationships," "loved ones," "deep connections," and "authentic social relationships." In the same context, responses included expressions such as: "represented by family, unconditional love, health, success, peace, well-being," "having loved ones by your side," and "peace of soul and relationships with loved ones." It was also emphasised that quality of life is "determined by the relationships we maintain with loved ones, the level of professional fulfilment we achieve, and our relationship with the community." Other respondents noted "health, harmonious family relationships, social status, financial comfort, professional activity carried out with pleasure," "fulfilling relationships with others and with oneself," and "time spent with family, my own and my family's health, friendship." The consistent prioritisation of relationships underscores the social embeddedness of individual well-being. For students, quality of life is not perceived as a solitary pursuit but is deeply interconnected with the quality of their interpersonal bonds. This denotes a strong need for belonging and social support. Human beings are social by nature, and for young adults, relationships with peers and family are formative. The data show that students view "love," "family," and "relationships" as fundamental to their quality of life. This extends beyond mere social interaction, indicating a need for deep, supportive, and harmonious connections. This observation is essential for understanding students' mental health, as social isolation can significantly diminish quality of life.

Material security and autonomy. Although less dominant than internal states, financial stability, material comfort, and freedom of choice were recognised as important factors contributing to a good life. Key concepts included "material comfort," "financial stability," "money," "satisfaction of material needs," and "freedom to choose." Responses also contained expressions such as: "to have my material needs met," "material comfort, financial stability, physical and mental health," and "health, harmonious family relationships, social status, financial comfort, professional activity carried out with pleasure."

Other references included "security, money, love, people, health" and "the level of satisfaction of an individual's needs, from basic to personal development needs, according to aspirations."

Material factors were viewed primarily as facilitators, rather than as ultimate definitions of quality of life. Students recognised that financial stability and comfort provide the foundation and freedom necessary to pursue intrinsically valuable aspects such as health, relationships, and personal fulfilment. This suggests a hierarchical understanding of needs, consistent with Maslow's framework [3]. The explicit mention of "meeting material needs" and "financial stability," alongside "health" and "relationships," indicates that, although not defining quality of life per se, these material aspects are considered necessary preconditions for achieving it. The expression "to be able to afford a good life financially, including holidays" clearly illustrates how financial security enables desired experiences, linking material well-being with leisure and personal pleasure. This reflects a practical, instrumental view of money and comfort.

The results of the research confirm the multidimensional nature of both psychosocial adaptability and quality of life, consistent with current theoretical approaches in social and health psychology.

Table 2 presents a synthesis of the data, classifying and hierarchising the central associations and dimensions for the concepts *psychosocial adaptability* and *quality of life.*

Table 2. Central Associations Identified for “Psychosocial Adaptability” and “Quality of Life”

Central Associations – “Psychosocial Adaptability”	Central Associations – “Quality of Life”
Flexibility and Adjustment	Holistic Well-being
Resilience and Stress Management	Inner Peace and Balance
Social Integration and Communication	Personal Fulfilment and Satisfaction
Emotional Intelligence and Empathy	Meaningful Relationships and Social Connection
-	Material Security and Autonomy

The comparison between the contents of Table 1 and Table 2 reveals a complementary relationship between the dimensions of quality of life and the factors underlying psychosocial adaptability. Table 1 highlights the objective and social components of well-being (health, safety, activity, relationships), while Table 2 emphasises the subjective and dynamic aspects (resilience, inner balance, empathy). Together, these outline an integrated vision of quality of life, wherein psychosocial adaptability becomes the mechanism through which the individual maintains and optimises well-being in variable contexts.

The data obtained indicate that students perceive adaptability as a complex competence, involving not only conformity to environmental demands but also active engagement in shaping one’s own psychological balance. This perspective aligns with definitions proposed by various authors, according to whom adaptation is an interactive process between individual and environment, based on the restructuring of personal values and orientations.

Furthermore, the component of resilience and emotional control identified in participants’ responses corresponds to contemporary models of mental health, which position emotional self-regulation at the core of psychosocial well-being. Connections among empathy, social integration, and communication reflect the relational dimension of adaptation, supported by theories of social capital that emphasise the role of interpersonal support in maintaining well-being.

Perceptions of quality of life indicate a mature understanding of the balance between objective dimensions (material conditions, health, security) and subjective dimensions (satisfaction, fulfilment, inner peace). In this sense, the results converge with definitions that conceptualise quality of life as the individual’s perception of their own position relative to the cultural and value context.

The analysis suggests that students associate quality of life with self-realisation and personal development, confirming the link between adaptability and emotional self-regulation as central factors of well-being. From an applied perspective, these findings indicate the necessity of integrating educational programmes focused on developing socio-emotional competences and adaptive coping strategies. Thus, psychosocial adaptability represents not only an indicator of social integration but also a fundamental condition for building a balanced, resilient, and meaningful life among young adults.

Conclusions

The conducted analysis reveals that students’ representations of psychosocial adaptability and quality of life fit within a holistic model centred on balance, personal development, and effective interpersonal functioning. The research provides valuable qualitative insight into the way students perceive the concepts of psychosocial adaptability and quality of life, employing the free association method to capture meanings spontaneously associated with these terms. The results reflect a nuanced and complex understanding of the concepts, highlighting several essential dimensions in both social and individual contexts.

Psychosocial adaptability is primarily associated with cognitive flexibility, openness to change, and the ability to manage stress and emotions constructively. It includes dimensions such as resilience, emotional self-regulation, empathy, and social integration — core competences for maintaining optimal psychological states and for harmonious interaction with the environment.

Regarding quality of life, students define it as global well-being, integrating physical health, psychological balance, emotional stability, and authentic social relationships.The emphasis is placed on the subjective

dimension of experience — inner peace, harmony, satisfaction, and a sense of personal fulfilment. Material factors are perceived as supportive but not determining, indicating a mature perspective on the role of economic resources in achieving well-being.

The results suggest a close relationship between psychosocial adaptability and quality of life, as the capacity to adjust to social and emotional changes determines levels of satisfaction and personal balance. Good adaptation facilitates resilience, self-acceptance, and effective interaction with the environment, contributing to the development of a positive attitude and a life perceived as meaningful.

From an applied standpoint, the research underscores the importance of educational programmes focused on developing psychosocial adaptability, emotional intelligence, interpersonal competences, and self-regulatory mechanisms — particularly in university settings. Such competences promote not only academic performance but also the psychological and social well-being of young people. In a society marked by rapid change, psychosocial adaptability becomes a strategic resource for maintaining balance and sustaining a high quality of life.

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