

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SOCIAL TENSION AS A MACRO INDICATOR OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The aim: This article aims to determine the prospects of studying social tension as a macro indicator of the psychological well-being of society.

Materials and methods: A total of 1,200 respondents were included in face-to-face interviews: 548 men and 652 women. The sample represents Ukraine's adult population at or above the age of 18. We used a 16-item questionnaire developed based on a theoretical model of necessary and sufficient indicators of social tension.

Results: This comprehensive study indicates that over the past 15 years, the national elections constituted the most significant factor in reducing social tensions in Ukraine, and the most potent stressor was the global financial crisis of 2008. Contrary to expectations, the COVID-19 pandemic has not provoked the rising social tension; rather, there has been a noticeable decrease. Based on empirical research data, the prospects of scaling the psychological well-being model of an individual to a broader social context are analyzed. In particular, the study of social tension makes it possible to identify and interpret the psychological effects associated with the projection of outwardly displaced individual reactions to complex social situations.

Conclusions: We explain how the social tension model can be applied as a macro indicator of psychological well-being at the level of a society. The prospects of creating more valid and reliable indicators of psychological well-being for any given socio-cultural, socio-economic, political context are also identified.

KEY WORDS: social tension, psychological well-being, social situation, monitoring, Ukraine

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INTRODUCTION

It is now common to understand psychological well-being (PW) as a combination of affective and activity markers of a person psychological state: a steady predominance of positive feelings (joy, pleasure, happiness) in the emotional palette of the individual and the ability to carry out productive, effective, and purposeful activities in one's private and social life [1-4]. Nowadays, the theories and models of PW consider PW to be an environmentally or situationally conditioned state of personality. Nevertheless, most of them develop a narrow, purely subjectivist view of PW in isolation from broader social contexts. Therefore, it is quite promising to view PW as a characteristic of a "subject-environment" interaction, not of a single subject, and to identify the associations between PW and social, economic, and political phenomena more accurately. In our opinion, one of the indicators of PW at the societal level may be the extent of social tension, which is due to the psychological effects of social situations.

Social tension (ST) is now studied by sociologists, economists, psychologists, and interdisciplinary research teams [5-9]. Because of a specific methodological diversity due to the interdisciplinary nature of the issue, it is necessary to define what we mean by ST. In particular, we separate social tension from such notions as social well-being, social discontent, and protest moods [9]. Although

all these phenomena are individual or group reactions to certain socio-economic or political circumstances, the nature of these reactions is fundamentally different. For instance, social ill-being manifests in reducing the extent of group tension and vitality necessary to overcome unfavorable situations; in contrast, social discontent mobilizes resources of individual or collective resistance, as do protest moods. Social tension arises from people's dissatisfaction with living conditions that hinder the satisfaction of their needs, the achievement of goals, or the fulfilment of expectations, or contradict the notion of a just social order [8]. Thus, the state of ST is a sum of frustrative states determined by the broader social context experienced by members of a community or society.

THE AIM

This article aims to determine the prospects of studying social tension as a macro indicator of the psychological well-being of members of society based on empirical research conducted in Ukraine.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We interviewed 1,200 respondents, including 548 men and 652 women, from 5 to 20 June 2021, in all regions of Ukraine

except the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol, and some districts of Donetsk and regions of Luhansk not under the control of Ukrainian authorities. The sample represents the adult population of Ukraine aged 18 and older. The sample error is 3.2%. We used a 16-item questionnaire developed based on a theoretical model of necessary and sufficient indicators of social tension [8]. More specifically, respondents had to answer the following questions:

1. Please assess the socio-economic and political situation for the area(s) where you, your relatives, and your friends live. (Answer options: completely ok, ok, wrong, completely wrong, difficult to answer.)
2. Do you think that the past socio-economic and political situation in which your life took place was better than now? (Answer options: unequivocally yes, rather yes, difficult to answer, rather no, unequivocally no.)
3. Do you agree that the future socio-economic and political situation in which your life takes place will change for the better? (Answer options: unequivocally yes, rather yes, difficult to answer, rather no, unequivocally no.)
4. Do you agree with the following statements? (Answer options: unequivocally yes, rather yes, difficult to answer, rather no, unequivocally no.)
 - The level of my well-being depends primarily on me, not on the socio-economic and political situation in the country.
 - Other people and external circumstances have affected (and still affect) my life more than myself.
 - Nobody has the power to control his destiny.
 - My life has depended (and still depends) more on myself than on other people and circumstances.
 - Everyone is the creator of his destiny.
1. Are you satisfied with your ability to influence on the socio-economic and political situation in which your life takes place? (Answer options: completely satisfied, rather satisfied, difficult to answer, rather dissatisfied, not at all satisfied.)
2. In your opinion, do the listed persons, public authorities, and other organizations have a significant impact (positive or negative) on this situation? Directors of enterprises (institutions, organizations), local authorities, the Verkhovna Rada, the Cabinet of Ministers, the President of Ukraine, law enforcement organizations, the Russian Federation Government, the US and EU governments, oligarchs, political and economic clans? (Answer options: unequivocally yes, rather yes, it is difficult to say, rather no, unequivocally no.)
3. Are you satisfied with the results of this influence? (Answer options: unequivocally yes, rather yes, difficult to answer, rather no, unequivocally no.)

The answers to the questions were coded on a five-point scale from -2 to 2. The formula to calculate the integrated indicator of social tension (N) is

$$N = O + \frac{O1 + O2}{2} + iV + jW.$$

where O = general assessment of the current state of the situation; $O1$ = retrospective assessment of the past state of

the situation; $O2$ = forecast assessment of the future state of the situation; V = satisfaction with the ones ability to influence the situation; W = satisfaction with the results of external influence on the situation; i = level of subjective control (internality) of the subject of evaluation; j = attributed to specific social forces the degree of external influence on the situation.

We compared the results of the 2021 survey with data obtained in 2007-2018 using identical instruments. All respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

For data processing, we used MakeformWin and OCA for Windows. The analysis of the obtained data was carried out based on descriptive statistics by constructing crosstabs.

RESULTS

The study indicates that the reduction of social tensions in Ukraine in 2021 is primarily due to a more positive assessment of the current socio-economic and political situation. While in 2018 only a quarter of respondents (26.7%) considered it to be mostly normal, and more than half (53.7%) considered it wrong or very bad, now almost a third of respondents are inclined toward positive assessments and less than half (48.8%) gave negative assessments. Contrary to expectations, the COVID-19 pandemic has not caused a rise in social tension; there is a noticeable decrease. In general, 41.8% now are satisfied with their lives, 36% are dissatisfied (in 2018 – 37.6% and 40.9%, respectively).

The level of nostalgia for the “beautiful past” has slightly decreased. The recent survey shows that 62.7% of respondents thought that the situation was better before (66.7% in 2018). Ukrainians began to see the future in a slightly more optimistic way. In 2018, only 23.9% of respondents expected better changes in the future, and 43.5% did not expect anything good; there are 26.5% optimists and 38.8% pessimists among Ukrainians in 2021.

Significant changes have taken place in citizens’ perceptions of the extent to which they can influence the course of their lives in assigned socio-economic and political conditions. About half (46.8%) of respondents now agree that their level of well-being depends primarily on themselves. One-third of respondents (33.9%) do not agree with this. In 2018, this statement divided respondents almost in half: 41.3% and 38.5%, respectively. Only 15.4% of respondents in 2021 are satisfied with their ability to influence the socio-economic and political situation in the country (13.9% in 2018). However, the number of dissatisfied Ukrainians has decreased more markedly: from 61, 4% in 2018 to 55.9% in 2021.

The social tensions dynamics in Ukraine over the last 15 years (Fig. 1) show that national elections usually lead to a significant reduction in social tensions, as they increase optimistic expectations about the future. One of the most potent stressors for the Ukrainian society was the global financial crisis of 2008, which impacted the level of social tension until 2011. The peak level of social tension recorded in 2017 may result from a specific cumulative effect. During

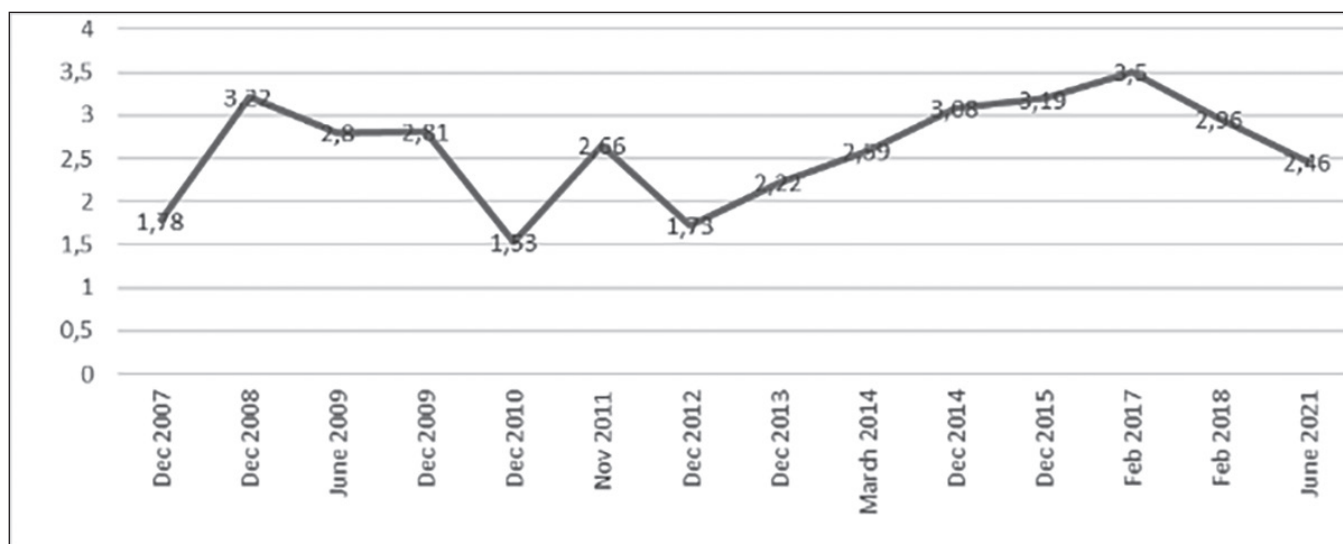


Fig. 1. The social tension dynamic in Ukraine (2007-2021)

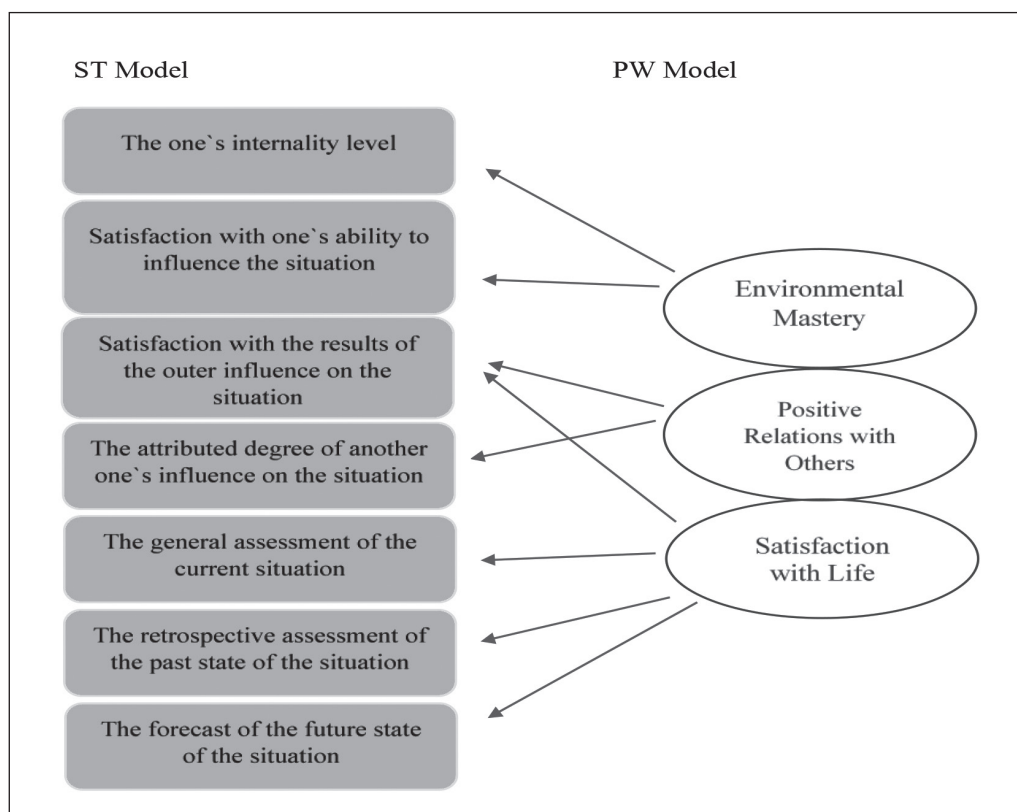


Fig. 2. Comparative analysis of PW and ST models.

the Revolution of Dignity, public inquiries and debates did not find adequate answers, particularly in ideas about the prospects of overcoming a challenging situation.

DISCUSSION

The presented model of necessary and sufficient indicators of social tension can be extended by projecting on a more comprehensive social context three-factor model of psychological well-being developed in studies of communities' psychological responses to distress [10].

A certain phenomenological similarity between the factors of both models, presented in Fig. 2, is indicated by results of studies conducted separately from each other. Presently, they can be discussed only in terms of a hypothesis. Of course, we ought to empirically test these theoretical assumptions in the future. However, even now, our results provide the directions to describe psychological well-being in the context of subject-environment interaction. Also, it helps us to demonstrate some nuances of psychological well-being as a specific socio-psychological reality when scaling its components to a broader social context.

Table I. Attitude to the actual social, economic, and political situation

	Value (%)		
	The situation is quite normal/ normal	The situation is definitely not normal/ not normal	No answer
Our family does not have enough money at all	6,5	79,0	14,5
Our family has enough money for necessities	32,8	41,4	25,9
Our family has enough money	67,1	16,5	16,5
Our family has almost enough money	81,8	15,9	2,3
The situation will surely / rather change for the better *	58,4	20,3	21,3
The situation will surely not change for the better *	14,4	74,0	11,6
I am entirely / rather satisfied with the possibilities of my influence on the situation *	72,3	16,8	10,9
Definitely / rather dissatisfied with the possibilities of their influence on the situation *	19,3	65,4	15,4
Opportunities for external influence on the situation are entirely / rather satisfied *	68,8	17,7	13,5
Opportunities for external influence on the situation are definitely / rather dissatisfied *	25,9	57,8	16,2
The level of my own well-being depends entirely on me	43,6	39,3	17,1
The level of my own well-being is definitely / rather not up to me	20,7	61,0	18,3

* Indicators included in the estimated level of social tension

Table II. Satisfaction with one's own life

	Value (%)		
	Quite satisfied/ satisfied	Definitely not satisfied / not satisfied	No answer
Our family does not have enough money at all	12,5	66,5	21,0
Our family has enough money for necessities	48,2	26,4	25,3
Our family has enough money	75,4	10,9	14,0
Our family has almost enough money	90,9	4,5	4,5
The situation will surely / rather change for the better *	69,5	12,0	18,5
The situation will surely not change for the better *	23,2	59,7	17,1
I am entirely / rather satisfied with the possibilities of my influence on the situation *	83,8	6,1	10,1
Definitely / rather dissatisfied with the possibilities of their influence on the situation *	28,8	52,0	19,2
Opportunities for external influence on the situation are entirely / rather satisfied *	45,3	31,0	23,6
Opportunities for external influence on the situation are definitely / rather dissatisfied *	42,9	39,4	17,7
The level of my own well-being depends entirely on me	56,7	25,6	17,7
The level of my own well-being is definitely / rather not up to me	28,1	52,0	19,8

* Indicators included in the estimated level of social tension

As we can see from tables I and II, citizens' assessment of the current socio-economic and political situation is not necessarily equal to their level of satisfaction with their own lives. Essentially, the number of respondents who were satisfied with their own lives and whose income is only enough to cover basic needs is almost twice the number

of dissatisfied respondents. However, we see a different picture if we differentiate the respondents according to their assessments of their current socio-economic and political situations. Those who consider the situation in the country to be entirely acceptable or rather acceptable, among respondents who have enough money only for the

most necessary goods, total to 10% less in number than those who assess the situation negatively.

Even more noticeable is the difference in the distribution of answers to questions about satisfaction with external influences on situation outcomes. Suppose we group respondents according to the general situation in the country. In that case, it turns out that among social optimists, more than two thirds of people are generally optimistic about the results of other countries influencing the situation (authorities, representatives of outgroups), and a quarter of respondents disapprove. If we consider the level of satisfaction with one's own life, the distribution of attitudes to the possibilities of such external influences is different. Among respondents generally satisfied with their lives, the number of people satisfied with the outcomes of external influences is almost equal to the number of those who are dissatisfied with it.

The subjective control (internality) of respondents also manifests itself differently depending on whether we consider assessing the situation in the country as a whole or assessing their life circumstances in particular. Among those who consider the situation in the country to be most acceptable, the number of respondents with internality and externality is almost equal. At the same time, among those satisfied with their own lives, there are more than twice as many internally minded respondents as externally minded ones.

So, which of the criteria—assessment of the situation in the country or satisfaction with one's own life—is more relevant for measuring psychological well-being? We suppose both are quite informative, as they measure different aspects of socio-psychological reality. By inviting respondents to assess the situation in the country, researchers create some psychological space for the projection of complex, contradictory, or repressed attitudes, feelings, intentions in a more safe, abstract context. When a person needs to assess his life situation, there is not such a projective space, so certain representations of reality, which can be a source of actual psychological discomfort, are either suppressed or not clearly articulated.

The tendency to downplay the impact of a crisis on one's own life may be protective. Furthermore, in this case, providing a convenient object for citizens to express their own anxieties, stresses, frustrations, and injuries in a public way can be a source of important information about the extent of tension in a society and the level of psychological well-being of a society's individuals.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is our first attempt to use the model of necessary and sufficient indicators of social tension as a macro indicator of psychological well-being. First, further research is needed for a deeper understanding of the causes of changes in social tensions in Ukraine. These cannot be comprehensively explained in a situational or environmental approach. Second, there is a need to create more valid and reliable indicators of psychological well-being in a given socio-cultural, socio-economic, political context.

CONCLUSIONS

We can now include psychological well-being and social tension in a common phenomenological space. At different levels of the system of subject-environment interactions—personal, group, and societal—we should consider these phenomena as manifestations of joint socio-psychological reality. Applying the model of necessary and sufficient indicators of social tension as a macro indicator of psychological well-being will make it possible to provide greater responsiveness to research on psychological well-being. For example, this model can help identify some repressed or implicit attitudes, feelings, or intentions of individuals regarding their own life situation. The capacity to project the suppressed material of individual consciousness outside or attribute it to other actors—members of the in-group, out-group, community, or society—provided by the model of social tension causes greater responsiveness to psychological well-being studying at the society level.

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The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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