

# A Comparative Study of Greek and Bulgarian Older Adults' Perceptions of Their Own Psychological Well-Being and Distress One Year After the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Konstantina Gkatziora & Ivanka Asenova

*South – West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA  
Faculty of Philosophy*

Received: 28 May 2022 ▪ Revised: 20 June 2022 ▪ Accepted: 24 June 2022

## *Abstract*

Psychological well-being is seen as a protective factor when facing adverse life events. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most dangerous challenges that has put humanity to the test. In this context, present study aimed to investigate in a comparative plan the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the Greek and Bulgarian older adults' perceptions of psychological well-being and distress. A total of 180 older adults, 90 Greeks (45 men) and 90 Bulgarians (45 men), aged 60-89 years, were studied by means of the Heubeck and Neill's inventory questionnaire (Heubeck & Neill, 2000). The results revealed insignificantly higher levels of psychological well-being and distress among the Bulgarian sample in comparison to the Greek sample, with the differences between Greek and Bulgarian women regarding psychological well-being being more pronounced and statistically significant.

**Keywords:** elderly, psychological well-being and distress, COVID-19 pandemic, cross-cultural comparison.

## 1. Introduction

The world has been living in COVID-19 global pandemic for more than 2 years. Not only the fear of serious illness and death, but also the forced mass confinement at home applied by many countries around the world and the resulting social isolation and quarantine, emerge as severe stressors that may initiate distress and serious negative consequences for people's mental health.

An increasing number of studies have reported negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and social functioning (Dawel et al., 2020; Gloster et al., 2020; Mendez-Lopez et al., 2022; Tsamakidis et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Without a doubt, elderly people were affected worst by both the virus, and the lockdown measures (Van Jaarsveld, 2020). Since they are at highest risk of serious illness, complications, and death, it is quite reasonable to expect that they would experience greater negative outcomes related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lebrasseur et al., 2021).

- Greek senior adults aged 60-89 years showed a tendency of lower levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being in comparison to Bulgarian senior adults. This tendency was more pronounced in Greek older women.
- Differences in policies of the Greek and Bulgarian states in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic may have differentiated effects on the levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being of their elderly population.
- Negative changes in the Greek and Bulgarian senior adults' perceptions of psychological distress and psychological well-being, related to the COVID-19 pandemic, may be determined by different factors.

For example, investigating life satisfaction and depressive symptoms as one of the main indicators of well-being, Wettstein, Nowossadeck and Vogel (2022) found that after the first 3-4 months following the onset of the pandemic, the German population showed the same level of life satisfaction as before the pandemic, but higher frequency of depressive symptoms, especially in older participants.

In a review of original studies published till October, 2020 on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on elderly people (aged 60 years and older, excluding COVID-19 survivors), Lebrasseur et al. (2021) summarized their findings indicating higher frequency of psychological symptoms, exacerbation of ageism, and physical deterioration among elderly, reduced quality of life and increased depression due to limited social life, as well as sleep disturbances and reduced physical activity.

In a cross-cultural study on health behaviors and wellbeing during COVID-19 involving 8 countries, Ruiz et al. (2021) found that compared to other age groups, the group of the oldest participants (over 43 years of age) reported least personal and emotional problems.

Mendez-Lopez et al. (2022) examined associations between changes in mental health in populations aged over 50 years from 26 European countries (including Greece), and stringency of their states' policy for social protection from the pandemic. The results showed that 28.1% of the total sample reported deteriorating mental health since the beginning of the pandemic, ranging from 16.1% in Slovakia to 54.8% in Portugal, as for the Greek population the percentage was 32.5%. The researchers reported the following risk factors with greatest effect sizes on deteriorated mental health: poor and fair self-rated health before the pandemic, foregone healthcare during the pandemic, being female, having tested positive for COVID-19, and job loss. An interesting finding was that being of age 80 years and older versus 50-64 years old had a protective effect.

In order to expand our knowledge of how the COVID-19 crisis affects elderly people cross-culturally, we planned this study with the main assumption that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of elderly people may vary across countries, mainly due to the differences in their states' policy related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparing samples from the Greek and Bulgarian older populations we suggested that differences in the stringency of lockdown measures in these countries may moderate the negative impact of the pandemic on their perceptions of psychological well-being and psychological distress.

## 2. Method

A total of 180 senior adults, 90 Greeks (45 men) and 90 Bulgarians (45 men), aged 60-89 years, participated voluntarily in the study. All participants lived independently, i.e., they were not institutionalized. They were studied by means of the Mental Health Inventory of Heubeck and

Neill (Heubeck & Neill, 2000) which consists of two scales: psychological distress and psychological well-being.

Data were collected between June and September, 2021. During this period the state of emergency was lifted in both countries. The participants were recruited through the help of social institutions in the two countries (mainly through the churches). The questionnaire was given individually to each participant with a request to complete it immediately.

### 3. Results

Independent-Samples T Tests was applied in order to compare the differences between the mean scores of studied personality variables: psychological distress and psychological well-being.

An overview of the results from the assessment on psychological distress scale and psychological well-being scale is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Psychological distress and psychological well-being scores (M; SD) of the Greek and Bulgarian groups

	N	Psychological distress		Psychological well-being	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Greek group	90	30.20	7.97	31.48	6.81
Bulgarian group	90	32.15	6.84	33.12	6.00
<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> ) Hedges' <i>g</i>		$t_{/178}/=-1,765$ ( $p=.079$ ) Hedges' $g=.231$		$t_{/178}/=-1,707$ ( $p=.090$ ) Hedges' $g=.203$	

As shown, the Greek and Bulgarian groups differed in the mean scores (Mean, SD) of the two scales: psychological distress ( $t_{/178}/=-1,765$ ,  $p=.079$ ; Hedges'  $g=0.231$ ) and psychological well-being ( $t_{/178}/=-1,707$ ,  $p=.090$ ; Hedges'  $g=.203$ ). The between-group differences did not reach statistical significance. The Bulgarian group scored higher on both scales, suggesting slightly higher levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being among the Bulgarian senior adults in comparison to Greek senior adults.

With the aim to investigate the effects of gender and its interaction with culture on the mean scale scores, univariate ANOVA was applied. Mean psychological distress scores and mean psychological well-being scores were entered separately as a dependent variable, with culture and gender as the fixed factors.

Table 2. Mean scale scores (M; SD) on the Heubeck & Neill's Mental Health Inventory of the culture-gender subgroups (Descriptives)

	N	Psychological distress scale		Psychological well-being scale	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Greek male subgroup	45	30.35	7.71	32.73	5.87
Greek female subgroup	45	30.04	8.31	30.24	7.49
Bulgarian male subgroup	45	31.46	7.05	33.31	6.01
Bulgarian female subgroup	45	32.84	6.63	32.93	6.05
<i>F</i> ; Sig.		$F_{/3, 176}/=.230$ ; sig=.632		$F_{/3, 176}/=2.262$ ; sig=.134	

Tests of between-subjects effects revealed slight and insignificant main effect for gender on the mean scores of both studied variables: psychological distress ( $F_{/3, 176}/=.230$ ; sig=.632) and psychological well-being ( $F_{/3, 176}/=2.262$ ; sig=.134).

The effects of interaction between culture and gender on psychological distress ( $F_{/3, 176}/=.577$ ; sig=.449) and psychological well-being ( $F_{/3, 176}/=1.227$ ; sig=.270) were also statistically

insignificant. Nevertheless, it is impressive that the Greek elderly women demonstrated the lowest levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being, and the Bulgarian elderly women – the highest level of psychological distress, in comparison to all culture-gender subgroups.

#### 4. Conclusions

The current cross-cultural study aimed to compare the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and policies for social protection adopted at state-level on Greek and Bulgarian senior adults' psychological well-being and psychological distress, one year after the beginning of the pandemic.

The obtained results revealed statistically insignificant differences between the Bulgarian and Greek samples regarding the group-level psychological distress and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, a tendency of lower levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being among the Greek sample, especially among Greek older women, in comparison to the Bulgarian sample, were found.

This finding is in line with our preliminary assumption that the differences in the policies of the Greek and Bulgarian states in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic may have differentiated the effects on the levels of psychological distress and psychological well-being of their elderly population.

A possible explanation for the lower level of psychological well-being among the Greek elderly sample may be the higher stringency and duration of lockdown measures in Greece than in Bulgaria.

As for the higher level of psychological distress among the Bulgarian elderly sample in comparison to the Greek elderly sample, we assume that it has been induced by the fear of Bulgarians of the high excess morbidity and mortality in Bulgaria, chaos in health care and inadequate treatment of those who are seriously ill, in the autumn and winter of 2020-2021. "In November (2020), Bulgaria registered a record number of people infected with the coronavirus, and in one seven-day period the country ranked first in the world in terms of mortality per 1 million of the population" (Karasimeonov, 2020: 2).

Taken together, the findings of the present study support the suggestion that the negative changes in the Greek and Bulgarian senior adults' perceptions of psychological distress and psychological well-being related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the two components of the general well-being – psychological distress and psychological well-being, may be determined by different factors.

A limitation of the study is the relatively small size of the studied samples. Another limitation is the failure to take into account factors, which were reported as contributing to the deteriorated mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as poor and fair self-rated health before the pandemic, foregone healthcare during the pandemic, having tested positive for COVID-19 (Mendez-Lopez et al., 2022).

#### Acknowledgements

The authors thank the participants for their generous dedication of time and willingness to participate in the study.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

## References

- Dawel, D., Shou, Y., Smithson, M. et al. (2020). The effect of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing in a representative sample of Australian adults. *Front. Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.579985>
- Gloster, A. T., Lamnisos, D., Lubenko, J. et al. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health: An international study. *PLoS One*, 15(12), e0244809.
- Heubeck, B., & Neill, J. T. (2000). Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability of the Mental Health Inventory for Australian adolescents. *Psychological Reports*, 87, 431-440.
- Karasimeonov, G. (2020). Democracy and human rights. *Polit-Barometer*, Year 20 Issue 9, November 2020, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. [https://bulgaria.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/publications/Barometer\\_Year20\\_Issue9\\_November\\_ENG.pdf](https://bulgaria.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/publications/Barometer_Year20_Issue9_November_ENG.pdf).
- Lebrasseur, A., Fortin-Bédard, N., Lettre, J. et. al. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults: Rapid review. *JMIR Aging*, 4(2), e26474). <https://doi.org/10.2196/26474>
- Mendez-Lopez, A., Stuckler, D., McKee, M., Semenza, J. C., & Lazarus, J. V. (2022). The mental health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic in older adults and the role of physical distancing interventions and social protection measures in 26 European countries. *SSM - Population Health*, 17, 101017.
- Ruiz, M. C., Devonport, T. J., Chen-Wilson, Ch.-H. (J.) et. al. (2021). A cross-cultural exploratory study of health behaviors and wellbeing during COVID-19. *Front. Psychol.* <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.608216>
- Tsamakis, K., Triantafyllis, A. S., Tsiptios, D. et al. (2020). COVID-19 related stress exacerbates common physical and mental pathologies and affects treatment (Review). *Exp Ther Med.*, 20(1), 159-162. <https://doi.org/10.3892/etm.2020.8671>
- Van Jaarsveld, G. M. (2020). The effects of COVID-19 among the elderly population: A case for closing the digital divide. *Front. Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.577427>
- Wang, C., Pan, R., Wan, X., Tan, Y., Xu, L., Ho, C. S. et al. (2020). Immediate psychological responses and associated factors during the initial stage of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic among the general population in China. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 17, 17-29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051729>
- Wettstein, M., Nowossadeck, S., & Vogel, C. (2022). Well-being trajectories of middle-aged and older adults and the corona pandemic: No “COVID-19 effect” on life satisfaction, but increase in depressive symptoms. *Psychology and Aging*, 37(2), 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000664>

