

## Back Page: Singular Sensation

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*Dominika Ochnik is head of the Department of Clinical Psychology within the Faculty of Medicine at the Academy of Silesia, in Katowice, Poland. Her research focus includes mental health among young people and has revealed surprising findings about the status of singlehood.*

### **What triggered your interest in a career in clinical psychology?**

Early in my professional life, I worked as a career adviser, personal consultant, trainer, and coach. However, in each of these roles, the issue of mental health was relevant. That prompted me to focus on clinical psychology, to launch the clinical psychology department, and to research mental health at the Academy of Silesia.



Dominika Ochnik

**What was your experience like as a student of psychology in Poland, and how has the discipline (and perceptions of it) changed there over the years?**

Looking back, I think students nowadays have far more access to international programs and other international outreach opportunities. They can efficiently study abroad, participate in exchange programs such as the Erasmus program, and contribute to the global academic environment. A great example of the kind of opportunity students now have is participation in international conferences like ICPS [APS's International Convention of Psychological Science], which I frequently recommend to students.

**One of your current lines of research is the mental health of university students during the pandemic. What surprising findings have emerged from this research?**

Our [first study with an international team](#) (researchers from Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Russia, Germany, Turkey, Israel, and Colombia) used Bayesian statistics to show mental health prevalence and predictors among 2,349 university students from nine countries. We conducted the study in the first year of the pandemic (May–June 2020). The countries were culturally diverse and covered six of eight value clusters on the Inglehart–Wetzel World Cultural Map. We learned that global measurements like the Gender Inequality Index and the country's credit risk (measured by S&P [Standard and Poor's] Global Ratings) were not risk factors for anxiety, stress, or depression among students. Furthermore, the stringency of each country's pandemic-related restrictions (as measured by the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker [OxCGRTO]) also was irrelevant to mental health indices. So, global measurements did not explain mental health differences between the countries. One reason could be that student populations are more homogenous across countries than the general population.

Our greatest concern was the prevalence of mental health issues. Among the students studied, 61.3% reported high stress, 40.3% reported depression, and 30.0% reported anxiety. We also found that gender was a credible predictor for mental health, with females being more negatively affected than males.

In our next paper (<https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm10132882>), we compared depression and anxiety and analyzed each country's risk factors. The results indicated that the highest risk for depression and anxiety was in Turkey. The lowest risk for depression was in the Czech Republic, while the lowest risk for anxiety was in Germany. We found the large effect sizes noteworthy, and it was pretty surprising that being female was a risk factor for anxiety in only three countries and for depression in five countries. That suggests that gender is not an absolute risk factor for mental health, and researchers should consider cross-national context when interpreting mental health results.

I also received a grant from the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange ([NAWA](#)) within the Urgency Grants program to verify mental health changes among nationally representative samples of young adults aged between 20 and 40 from Poland, Slovenia, Israel, and Germany. The study (<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031334>) showed that being female was a risk factor for stress but not anxiety or depression. However, being a student was a significant risk factor for depression and suicidal ideation regardless of gender.

Overall, the research revealed that the student population is highly vulnerable to mental health deterioration, particularly depression and suicidal ideation.

This prompts questions about mental health prevention programs at universities across different countries. We need to include prevention programs in the regular study program to help students become more resilient. Many universities provided educational materials on mental health and access to a psychologist during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is not enough. We have to consider and discuss globally how we can create a psychologically safe academic environment for students.

**What challenges did you face conducting research during the pandemic? Were there any helpful strategies that you've since normalized into your practice?**

I was pleasantly surprised by the great sense of community during the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic environment. Deep awareness of the need for relevant research responding to the global problem of mental health deterioration was an additional facilitator for cross-cultural collaboration. I continue to pursue this interdisciplinary and international teamwork now.

[\*See all Back Page profiles\*](#)

**Singlehood is another focus of your research. What led you to zero in on exploring the well-being and mental health of single people across cultures?**

I dedicated my PhD thesis to this topic, which was considered unimportant at that time in Poland

(<https://sbc.org.pl/publication/246942>). I received a doctoral degree with honors. The results quite unexpectedly showed that among never-married, childless single people over 30 in Poland, women were more satisfied with singlehood than men. Those results were also valid for German singles (<http://dx.doi.org/10.2174/1874350102013010017>). My next published work will be a chapter on satisfaction with singlehood in a forthcoming book, *Singular Selves: An Introduction to Single Studies*, edited by Ketaki Chowkhani and Craig Wynne (Routledge).

However, knowing that many cultures have a social marriage norm that can affect the well-being and mental health of single people, I was interested in international comparisons. I was more than happy to chair the symposium “Well-Being and Mental Health of Single Individuals across Countries” at [ICPS 2023 in Brussels](#). It turned out that there were significant differences among the experiences of singles depending on their country during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results also showed that singles (particularly women) adapted better to the improved pandemic situation despite lower mental health indices.

### **What other areas of research do you hope to pursue, and why?**

I am highly interested in interdisciplinary research in a cross-national context. My next endeavor is to conduct research on mental health and urbanization. I am already collaborating with experts in architecture, urban planning, and management from the Academy of Silesia to identify risk factors related to associations between urbanization and mental health. We are focusing on our region now, but the next step will be conducting this research in a global context. I invite researchers in the United States to contact me ([dominika.ochnik@wst.pl](mailto:dominika.ochnik@wst.pl)) if you are interested in participating in this research.

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