The present study aims to explore the impact of meaning in life on psychological well-being and stress among university students. Viktor Frankl’s paradigm provided the theoretical foundation for this study. A sample of 560 university students was recruited from Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan. Data was collected using the Existence Scale (Längle, Orgler, & Kundli, 2003), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Parkinson, 2006), and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Results of linear regression analysis revealed a high perception of meaning in life will lead to high psychological well-being and low stress among university students. In this research sample, t-test showed no statistically significant differences between men and women with respect to the meaning in life variable.

KEY WORDS: existential, meaning, psychological, stress, well-being

IMPACT OF MEANING IN LIFE ON STRESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Meaning in life refers to the idea that individuals are strongly motivated to find meaning in their lives, that is, to be able to understand the nature of their personal existence, and feel it is significant and purposeful (Ratni & Rastogi 2007). Psychological well-being is defined by Parkinson (2006) as positive mental health with two aspects: hedonic (subjective experience of happiness and life satisfaction) and eudaimonic (psychological functioning, good relationships with others, and self-realization). Stress is defined by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) as a condition of being overburdened, tense, unable to relax, touchy, easily upset, irritable, easily startled, nervous, jumpy, fidgety, and intolerant of interruption or delay (Ghadirian 1983).

The philosophy of meaning in life is based on the assumption that life has unconditional meaning which cannot vanish under any circumstance (Steiger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz 2008) although the experiential validation of this thesis is still open. Moreover, meaning is important not only for survival but also for health and well-being. In fact, meaning in life plays a major role in maintaining positive mental health (Wong, & Fry 2009). Existential theory asserts that people are motivated by more than just basic drives and defense mechanisms as asserted by Freud. Moreover, “will to meaning” is a fundamental and universal human drive. According to Frankl, people who do not realize the will to meaning may experience an existential vacuum. Warning signs of such a vacuum include a sense of purposelessness, feelings of world-weariness, lack of interest, and indifference. Frankl’s theory postulates that prolonged experience of meaninglessness can lead to a noogenic neurosis, a condition typified by boredom and apathy. Frankl states that life gives the person an assignment and one has to learn what that assignment is in order to achieve this goal of life.

Certain stressors can create barriers and may ultimately affect one’s sense of well-being (Fabry 1988). Researchers have also discovered a strong positive relationship between psychological well-being and having meaning in life. Ratni and Rastogi (2007) examined meaning in life and psychological well-being in pre-adolescence, adolescence, and adults. It was concluded that meaning in life was highly correlated with psychological well-being. This study has provided an insight for the meaning in life and psychological well-being of students of early and late adolescence period. If a person perceives his or her life to be meaningful then he or she will feel more psychologically well off than those who do not perceive their life to be meaningful. De Klerk, Boshoff and Van Wyk (2004) also found a positive relationship between the variables of meaning in life and positive health.

According to Antonovsky (1987), sense of coherence is a significant factor in determining an individual’s position on the health ease-disease continuum. The sense of coherence consists of three intertwined factors (comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) that are influenced by life experiences. Research data has shown that each of these components has different well-being and health related correlates and that the meaningfulness component plays a big role. Without meaningfulness, the impact of both com-
However, the results of an Austrian sample of adults revealed no gender bias for the Existence Scale (Länge, Orgler & Kundi 2003). A study by Pirtle and Plata (2008) also found no significant gender differences in the Purpose of Life test (PIL).

Keeping in view the significance of constructs, the goal of the present research is to explore gender differences and the relationship of meaning in life with stress and psychological well-being in young adults. The following hypotheses were tested in the study:

1. Perception of meaning in life will negatively predict stress among Pakistani students.
2. Perception of meaning in life will positively predict psychological well-being among university students.
3. Male students will be higher on meaning in life, compared to female students.

**METHOD**

**Sample**

The sample for this study was selected from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. The sample consisted of 560 students. It was drawn using a stratified random sampling technique. Sample characteristics were as follows. The age range was from 19 to 38 years, \( M = 22.81, SD = 2.71 \). Education levels ranged from master’s students to the doctoral students. M.Sc. students represented 75.2% of the sample, M.Phil students were 18.7%, and PhD students were 6.1%. The gender split was 42% male \( (n = 233) \) and 58% female \( (n = 327) \).

**Instruments**

The four instruments (Demographic Information sheet, Existence Scale, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale & Stress Scale) were presented in the form of a booklet. The demographic information sheet was prepared in order to gather data on education and gender.

**The Existence Scale**

The 46 item Existence Scale is based on Frankl’s theory of meaning in life using four basic dimensions of existence: Self-distance (SD), Self-transcendence (ST), Freedom (F) and Responsibility (R). To obtain the strength of agreement with the item statement, a six point Liker-type scale was used. The score on each item ranges from 1 to 6. Items 2, 15, 21, 26, and 36 are reversed scored. The maximum score that can be obtained by adding up the item values is 276. The total score is an index of the magnitude of the perception of meaning in one’s life. For the present study, the Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient (\( \alpha \)), as a measure of the internal consistency, for the full scale and its subscales namely, Self-distance, Self transcendence, Freedom and Responsibility were .87, .62, .71, .60, and .68 respectively. For the estimate of reliability the Existence Scale’s sub-scale total score was corre-
lated with the total score of the Existence scale (full), showing a significant positive relationship ranging from .54 to .86. The internal consistency and construct validity measure for the ES scale and subscales were similar to past findings (Längle, Orgler & Kundi 2003).

**Stress Scale**

The fourteen item Stress Scale includes items that measure symptoms of stress such as tension, irritability, and a tendency to overreact to stressful events. Subjects were asked to use a four point severity/frequency scale to rate the extent to which they have experienced each state over the past week. The score on each item ranges from 0 to 3. The maximum score that can be obtained by adding up the item values is 42. The total score is an index of the magnitude of one’s perception of stress. Scores above the mean show a high perception of stress, whereas a score below the mean represents a low perception of stress. For the present study, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient (α), computed for the 14 items Stress Scale (full), is .82. For the estimate of construct validity, the Existence Scale’s sub-scale total score was correlated with total score of the Stress Scale (full), showing a significant negative relationship ranging from -.36 to -.39. The internal consistency and construct validity measure for the Stress Scale was similar to past findings (Imam 2006).

**Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale**

The fourteen item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale measures one’s positive mental health. Positive mental health is one of the best indicators of psychological well-being (Parkinson 2006). Items on the scale have five response categories and respondents are instructed to answer keeping the previous two weeks in mind. For each item, the score ranges from 1-5. The maximum score that can be obtained by adding up the item values is 70. The total score is an index of the magnitude of one’s positive mental functioning. A score that is above the mean indicates high positive psychological functioning whereas a score below the mean represents a low degree of positive psychological functioning. For the present study, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient (α) computed for the 14 items “Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale” (full) is .81. For the estimate of construct validity, the Existence Scale’s sub-scale total score was correlated with total score of Existence Scale and Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (full), showing a significant positive relationship ranging from .28 to .46. The internal consistency and construct validity measure for the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) was similar to past findings (Parkinson 2006).

**Procedure**

After completing the selection procedure of the sample, subjects were approached either individually or in groups in their classes. Initially, a brief interview was conducted to determine fit for the research selection criteria. Participants were told that within the booklet they had to complete there were three paper based inventories along with a biographical inventory designed for the purpose of the research. The respondents were encouraged to mark the very first answer to the question that came to their mind. Respondents were also asked to answer in light of their own personal views, as was deemed important for the present research objectives. After the collection of the data, for the purpose of analysis, the raw scores of all the inventories were loaded onto a spreadsheet for statistical analysis and interpretation. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences 13 (SPSS) was used for this purpose. The raw score data which was fed into the computer was later “recoded (into same variable)” in SPSS, in order to transform the raw scores into scale scores for the purpose of statistical analysis.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the mean Existence Scale score, the mean Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale score and the mean Stress Scale score.

In order to determine the impact of the meaning in life variable (as measured by the Existence Scale) on stress (as measured by the Stress Scale) and positive psychological well-being (as measured by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale) as hypothesized, linear regression analysis was carried out.

Results in table 2 and 3 revealed that perception of me-
meaning in life was a highly significant predictor of the relationship among the variables, accounting for 17% of the variance in positive psychological well-being and 19% of the variance in stress.

Scatter plot reveals a positive relationship among the two variables (i.e., as one variable increases the other variable increases).

A scatter plot reveals a negative relationship among the two variables (i.e., as one variable increases the other variable decreases).

For determining any significant differences in the manifestation of meaning in life between males and females, as hypothesized, the following research findings were reported via the t-test results. Males and females displayed similar levels of perception of meaning in life, with no significant gender differences being found.

**DISCUSSION**

The present research aimed at examining the impact of meaning in life on one’s perceived stress and psychological well-being. The study also explored gender differences in perceived meaning in life.

The findings of the present study may be concluded as: meaning in life is a highly significant predictor of the levels of stress and psychological wellbeing; accounting for 17% of the variance in positive psychological well-being and 19% of the variance in stress. It is also found that meaning in life is the same for both genders in this study, concluding that meaning in life is a universal phenomenon independent of gender. Moreover, the results of this study supported the stated hypothesis that the perception of meaning in life will negatively predict stress and positively predict psychological well-being among university students. Existential meaning is related to particular variables of psychological health because the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) is at least as much a measure of psychological health as it is a measure of existential meaning (according to Mascaro & Rosen 2006). The Stress Scale is based on the tripartite model of anxiety, depression, and stress. It states that stress is a significant factor of the two psychopathological states of anxiety and depression (Imam 2006). Mascaro and Rosen (2006) concluded that perceived meaning in life acts as a defense against the effects of stress on well-being. There exists a strong positive relationship between meaning in life and well-being (Ratni & Rastogi 2007). In research by Scannell, Allen and Burton (2002), perceived meaning in life is regarded as a correlate of well-being. This study highlighted the significance of the construct of meaning in life in one’s well-being.

The implications and applications of the meaningfulness construct to the health care field is via the biopsychosocial model. This model is assessing the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of human life.

Though we hypothesized that male students will depict higher levels of meaning in life (literature shows inconsistent findings across cultures), our findings did not support the stated prediction. It indicated that personal-existential ability, as assessed by the Existential Scale, has no gender-preferences in this sample. This result is in line with the results of a study using a sample of Austrian adults which also revealed no gender preferences in the Existence Scale.
(Längle, Orgler & Kundi 2003). A study by Pirtle and Plata (2008) also found no significant gender differences on the Purpose in Life test.

The present study suggests some speculative and practical implications for researchers, professionals, and educators. Agreeing upon the sensitivity, importance, and assessment in broad settings (in clinical and counseling settings in particular), psychometrically sound measures of the meaning construct such as the Existence Scale can make major contributions towards supportive and remedial services in the field of applied psychology within Asian culture. This study highlighted the significance of the construct of meaning in life in particular. If professional psychologists and psychotherapists have the diagnostic ability to recognize the contribution of existential factors to the etiology of the client’s suffering, s/he can begin to service clients as an authentic existential psychotherapist. Health teams should work not only to recover objective health status but also to recuperate the meaning status of the client after identifying it as an underlying etiology. Preventive interventions can be setup at home, in schools, or in places of work. Such mediation could focus on changing behaviors relevant to the construction of a healthy or strong meaningfulness stance towards life. Further educating the public and providing choice in the environment may help to foster a strong meaningfulness during the stressful transitions of age periods workplace, life matters.

References


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