

IMPACT OF MEANING IN LIFE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING AND STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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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, & Kundi, 2003), Warwick-Edinburg Mental Well-Being Scale (Parkinson, 2006), and Stress Scale (Levibond & Levibond, 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

DIE AUSWIRKUNG VON SINN IM LEBEN AUF DAS PSYCHISCHE WOHLBEFINDEN UND STRESS UNTER UNIVERSITÄTSSTUDENTEN

Die vorliegende Studie zielt darauf ab, die Auswirkung von Sinn im Leben auf das psychische Wohlbefinden und Stress unter Universitätsstudenten zu untersuchen. Viktor Frankls Paradigma liefert die theoretische Grundlage für die Studie. Eine Stichprobe von 560 Studenten der Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad in Pakistan ließ sich zur Teilnahme motivieren. Die Daten wurden mithilfe der Existenz-Skala (Längle, Orgler, & Kundi 2003), dem Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Parkinson 2006) und der Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond 1995) ermittelt. Resultate der linearen Regressionsanalyse ergaben eine hohe Wahrnehmung von Sinn im Leben als förderlich für hochgradiges psychisches Wohlbefinden und niedrigem Stress unter Universitätsstudenten. In dieser Stichprobenauswahl ergab der t-Test keine statistisch signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen Männern und Frauen im Bezug auf die Variable Sinn im Leben.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: Sinn, existentiell, psychologisch, Stress, Wohlbefinden

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 over-aroused, tense, unable to relax, touchy, easily upset, irritable, easily startled, nervy, 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 (Steger, 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 noögenic 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-

prehensibility and manageability are likely to be temporary. High meaningfulness motivates the individuals to make sense of their environment and manage their coping resources. Specifically, some studies have also found that people who have a sense of life-purpose also report higher levels of well-being and do not tend to struggle with issues like depression (Mascaro & Rosen 2006) and stressors (Antonovsky 1987).

One of the key qualities of meaning in life has been theorized to be its capability to act as buffer against stress, such that in highly stressful circumstances, a meaningful approach gives a person resiliency against the development of negative psychological effects. Specifically, some studies have found that people who have a sense of life purpose also report higher levels of well-being, and do not tend to struggle with issues like stress, anxiety, and depression (Mascaro & Rosen 2006; Shek 2003).

The construct of meaning in life is of maximum value in determining how people may become motivated to accomplish their goals at school, university, work and in day to day life experiences. Frankl (1976) stated that the quest of meaning in life has an overwhelming urgency particularly for young people, due to the many decisions and life stressors with which they are constantly faced (as cited in Shek, 2003). University life is considered to be full of struggle and motivated toward achievement of life goals. Proceeding toward meaning in life may be one of these goals.

In the view of Fitzgerald (2005), the search for meaning in life is a necessary component of normal adult development. Young adults are always engaged in the process of goal setting. These goals include: getting an education, finding job stability, and self-actualization. Reconciling personal goals with available opportunities in education and employment emerges as critical to the construction of a sense of coherence (Devadason, 2007).

In a recent study, university students were found exhibiting moderate to high levels of stress (Shah, Hasan, Malik, & Sreeramareddy 2010). This is especially salient for young people, as more and more adolescents and young adults are experiencing life as hopeless and meaningless (Santrock 2003). It is worth mentioning that one of meaning's key qualities has been theorized to be its capability to act as a buffer against stress, such that in high stress circumstances, a meaningful approach gives a person resiliency against the development of negative psychological effects. Mascaro and Rosen (2006), on a sample of 143 college undergraduates, tested the hypothesis that a sense of existential meaning buffers against the effect of stress on depression and hope. Results suggest that meaning (having a sense of coherence) is related positively to hope and negatively to depression, within a nonclinical college-age population. For this purpose, young adults were regarded as the unit of analysis in this study.

Gender related differences on psychological well-being supports the notion that males tend to score higher on psychological well-being indicators in comparison to females. In a study by Carmel and Bernstein (2003), it was found that women scored lower than men on psychological indicators of well-being (as cited in Carmel & Nigavekar 2007). However, the results of an Austrian sample of adults revealed

no gender bias for the Existence Scale (Längle, 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 Likert-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 (α), 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 (Länge, 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

Scale	M	SD
Existence Scale	166.11	27.02
<i>Subscales of Existence scale</i>		
Freedom (F)	39.02	7.40
Responsibility (R)	45.08	9.29
Self-Distance (SD)	26.01	6.24
Self-Transcendence (ST)	55.97	9.29
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale	48.03	8.64
Stress Scale	19.60	7.30

Tab. 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Existence Scale, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale and Stress Scale (N = 560)

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-

Variables	B	SE β	B	t.
Existence Scale	.14	.013	.42	10.89***
$R^2 = .18$, Adjusted $R^2 = .17$, *** $p < .001$				
Note. Please read b as Unstandardized Coefficients; SE as Standard Error; and β as Standardized Coefficients				

Tab. 2: Linear Regression analysis using Existence Scale as predictor variable for Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale (N = 560)

Variables	B	SE β	B	t.
Existence Scale	-.12	.01	.42	11.37***
R ² = .43, Adjusted R ² = .19, *** p < .001				
Note. Please read B as Unstandardized Coefficients; SE as Standard Error; and β as Standardized Coefficients				

Tab. 3: Linear Regression analysis using the Existence Scale as a predictor variable for the Stress Scale (N = 560)

aning 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

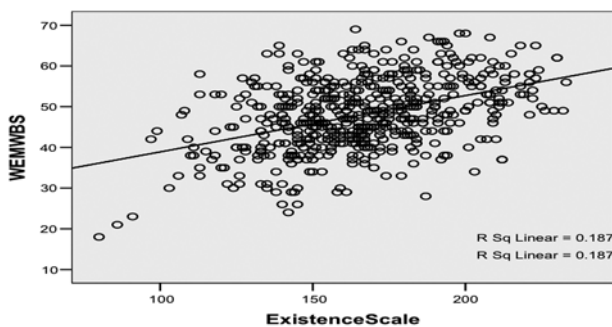


Figure 1: Linear Regression Analysis using the Existence Scale as a predictor variable for the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale; R squared linear data (N = 560)

Note: Vertical axis: variable Y-- Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale – Horizontal axis: variable X-- Existence Scale

two variables (i.e., as one variable increases the other variable increases).

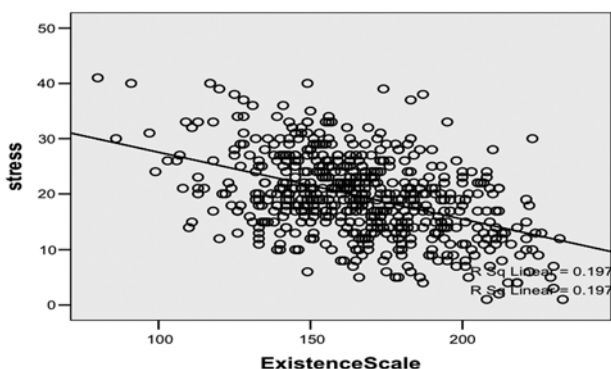


Figure 2: Linear Regression Analysis using the Existence Scale as a predictor variable for the Stress Scale; R squared linear data (N = 560)

Note: Vertical axis: variable Y--Stress Scale – Horizontal axis: variable X-- Existence Scale

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

Gender	n	M	SD	t
Male	233	166.48	26.21	
				0.28
Female	327	165.83	27.61	
df = 558. p = n.s. *p < .05				

Tab. 4: Means, Standard Deviations and t-values on Existence Scale with regard to Gender (N = 560)

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.

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