

Does Meaning in Life Predict Psychological Well-Being? An Analysis Using the Spanish Versions of the Purpose-In-Life Test and the Ryff's Scales

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being in a sample of 180 Spanish undergraduates (138 women, 76.7%; 42 men, 23.3%) aged 18-55, $M = 22.91$, $SD = 6.71$. Spanish versions of Crumbaugh and Maholic's Purpose-In-Life Test and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales were used. Analysis included descriptive statistics, the scales were tested for internal consistency, and correlations were analysed with simple linear regression. The results showed a significant relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being dimensions, in terms of covariance and prediction, especially with global Psychological Well-Being, Self-Acceptation, Environmental Mastery, and Positive Relations. We conclude that the experience of meaning in life is important for psychological well-being.

Keywords: meaning in life, purpose in life, psychological well-being, logotherapy

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Introduction

Two perspectives on personal well-being are distinguished in Psychology: the hedonic perspective and the eudaimonic perspective (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). The hedonic one argues that pleasure is the greatest goodness, which brings the greatest happiness to the individual and is currently associated to the 'subjective well-being': absence of negative emotions, experience of positive emotions, and life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005). The eudaimonic perspective argues that happiness is composed of self-determination, achievement of goals, meaning in life, actualization of personal strengths, and self-realization; this concept is associated to 'psychological well-being': it would include personal growth and actualization of capabilities as positive evidence of psychological functioning (Keyes, 2006; Ring, Höfer, McGee, Hickey, & O'Boyle, 2007; Ryan & Huta, 2009).

Carol Ryff (1989a) conceived psychological well-being from eudaimonic keys, such as personal development and commitment to existential challenges of life, and built the *Psychological Well-Being Scales* (PWBS; Ryff, 1989a), which include six dimensions: Self-Acceptation (positive valuation of oneself and of one's past life), Positive Relations (quality interpersonal relationships), Autonomy (sense of self-determination), Environmental Mastery (ability to effectively manage the own life and the world around), Personal Growth (sense of development as a

person), and Purpose in Life (belief that one's life is useful and has a sense) (Christopher, 1999; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989a, 1989b; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996, 2008).

Moreover, 'meaning of life' construct was understood by Frankl (2004), founder of logotherapy, in terms of perception and experience of freedom and self-determination, responsibility and positive vision of one's life and the future, purpose and fulfillment of existential goals, integrating acceptance of adversity, life satisfaction, and self-fulfillment. When this sense of meaning is not reached, a negative cognitive-motivational state is originated, as well as hopelessness, perception of lack of control over one's life, and absence of vital goals. On the contrary, people with experience of meaning have a strong sense of autonomy, self-determination and purpose in life, and are involved in the realization of clear and definite personal vital goals.

Ryff and Keyes (1995) obtained, by means of a sample of 1108 adults, positive relationships between several variables associated with meaning in life and different indicators of psychological well-being, as well as negative correlations between these indicators and psychological discomfort. Zika and Chamberlain (1992) obtained, using a sample of 194 young women, similar results. Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2010), having a sample of 1,807 adolescents of Hong Kong and using structural equation models, found that meaning in life and optimism were significantly associated with life satisfaction. Kleftras and Psarra (2012), who had 401 new recruits for the Greek navy, found that meaning in life, assessed using *Purpose-In-Life Test* (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969), was negatively associated with depression but positively associated with some measures of general health. Other works run in the same direction: (1) negative relationship between meaning in life and psychological disorders, (2) positive relationship between meaning in life and mental health and psychological well-being (e.g., Psarra & Kleftras, 2008, 2013; Rathi & Rastogi, 2007; Reker, 1994; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Shek, 1992; Steger, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998).

Although the meaning in life is a personal experience, there are involved social issues. For example, the collectivist cultural values (characteristic of Oriental societies) versus individualists (more characteristic of Western societies), as show several studies over decades (e.g., Baessler, Oerter, Benavente, & Molina, 2003; Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2012; Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2007, 2008; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). As it is known, the individualism/collectivism cultural dynamism is the single most fruitful in the cross-cultural psychology (Heine, 2008, 2010; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Schwartz, 2006a, 2006b). However, as Steger and Samman (2012) noted, the research on meaning in life has focused on a small number of countries, has used a limited range of international samples (e.g., Gorlova, Romanyuk, Vanbrabant, & van de Schoot, 2012), and cross-national differences have not been systematically investigated (e.g., Oishi & Diener, 2014).

The main objective of this work was to check if meaning in life, using a Spanish brief version of the PIL (García-Alandete, Rosa, & Sellés, 2013), predicts psychological well-being, which is assessed using Ryff scales. We hypothesized significant positive effects in relation to all well-being measures in Ryff scales, especially to global psychological well-being (GPWB) and Purpose in Life.

Method

Participants

180 students participated in a teachers training college in Valencia (Spain), 138 women (76.7%) and 42 men (23.3%), aged between 18 and 55, $M = 22.91$, $SD = 6.71$, recruited through incidental sampling. Students participated voluntarily to the request of the author of this work.

Instruments

Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS; Ryff, 1989a, 1989b) — The Spanish adaptation of Díaz et al. (2006) was used. It is a 29-item Likert-type scale (1 = Completely disagree, 6 = Completely agree), which measures psychological well-being through scales of Self-Acceptance (SA), Positive Relationships (PR), Autonomy (AU), Environmental Mastery (EM), Personal Growth (PG), and Purpose in Life (PL).

Purpose In Life Test–10 Items (PIL-10; García-Alandete et al., 2013) — This scale is a Spanish adaptation of the part A of the PIL (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969), comprised of 10 of the items that are answered in a Likert scale (from 1 to 7, with a specific anchor for each item), which assesses vital satisfaction and meaning in life, and goals and vital purposes. The total score ranges between 10 and 70. Confirmatory factor analysis has shown that PIL-10 easily fits (García-Alandete et al., 2013; Rosa, García-Alandete, Sellés, Bernabé, & Soucase, 2012).

Procedure and Analysis

Participants fulfilled anonymously, in an average time of 30 minutes, a protocol that included socio-demographic variables, PIL-10, EPWBS, and other scales not included in this study. The fulfilment was in the classrooms in which ordinary the participants developed their academic activity, under the supervision of the author. Any doubts arising in this regard were previously cleared up, and anonymity and confidentiality of data were guaranteed.

Programme 15.0 SPSS[®] for Windows was used for descriptive statistics, consistency of the scales (Cronbach's alpha), and simple linear regression between PWBS (global and dimensions), as criteria, and PIL-10, as predicting.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of PIL-10 and of PWBS. The internal consistency of the PWBS reached values between acceptable (EM and PG) and high (GPWB), and the PIL-10 result was high (Gronlund, 1985; Nunnally, 1978). It means that the scales offer a reliable measure, in terms of homogeneity among items that compose them.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of PIL-10 and PWBS

(Sub-)Scale	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
PIL-10	27	70	57.58	7.55	.85
GPWB	94	180	141.07	18.19	.90
SA	7	24	18.65	3.58	.80
PR	11	30	24.43	4.56	.76
AU	6	36	26.37	5.22	.74
EM	29	54	43.291	5.88	.64
PG	11	24	20.37	2.98	.69
PL	12	30	23.75	3.92	.78

Correlations between meaning in life and psychological well-being were significant, $p < .01$: GPWB, $r(180) = .75$; SA, $r(180) = .65$; EM, $r(180) = .64$; PL, $r(180) = .66$; PR, $r(180) = .51$; AU, $r(180) = .42$; PG, $r(180) = .48$. Both variables have an important covariance relationship, so when one of both increase or decrease, the other also.

Simple linear regression showed that meaning in life was a positive predictor of psychological well-being, explaining significantly, $p < .01$, (1) more than 50% of the variance of GPWB, $R^2 = .56$, $F(1, 178) = 224.54$, (2) more than 40% of the variance of PL, $R^2 = .44$, $F(1, 178) = 140.06$, of SA, $R^2 = .43$, $F(1, 178) = 132.368$, and of EM, $R^2 = .41$, $F(1, 178) = 125.12$, (3) more than 20% of the variance of PR, $R^2 = .26$, $F(1, 178) = 60.96$, and of PG, $R^2 = .23$, $F(1, 178) = 54.20$, and (4) slightly less than 20% of the variance of AU, $R^2 = .18$, $F(1, 178) = 37.71$.

The non-standard β coefficient, which indicates the change between corresponding measures of psychological well-being by change in meaning of life unit, was also significant, $p < .01$, in all cases: GPWB, $\beta = 1.80$, $t(180) = 14.99$; EM, $\beta = .50$, $t(180) = 11.19$; PL, $\beta = .35$, $t(180) = 11.84$; SA, $\beta = .31$, $t(180) = 11.51$; PR, $\beta = .31$, $t(180) = 7.81$; AU, $\beta = .29$, $t(180) = 6.14$; PG, $\beta = .19$, $t(180) = 7.36$. The psychological well-being, both global and its different dimensions, increases significantly as it increases the meaning in life.

Meaning in life and psychological well-being, both general and dimensions, are positively related. Meaning in life, even more, is an important and robust predictor of psychological well-being.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to ascertain if the meaning in life is a predictor of psychological well-being, and this was done using the hypothesis of positive and significant effects, especially in case of GPWB and PL. The results confirmed this hypothesis. Correlations indicated that meaning in life and psychological well-being are positively and significantly associated variables, $p < .01$, especially with GPWB, PL, SA, EM, and PR. The more experience of life, the greater psychological well-being. Regression analyses showed that meaning in life is an important predictor of psychological well-being, with percentages of explained variance ranging between 17.5% (AU) to 56% (GPWB). The remarkable relationship with GPWB is clearly indicative of the important role experience of meaning in life has. Experiencing that life has a meaning would imply, as values of the obtained coefficients of determination suggest, a major dose of vital purposes and goals, personal self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive interpersonal relationships, personal growth, and autonomy. The dimensions in which the size of the effect is most important refer to aspects strongly linked to human motivation for achievement of the existential meaning,

establishment of personally assumed goals, experience of control and responsibility over the own live, openness to others, and self-realization (Frankl, 2014). The relationship with PL was expected, since this dimension of psychological well-being refers to central aspects of meaning in life, as this is understood from logotherapy: the personal conviction that one's life is useful and has a meaning (Christopher, 1999; Díaz et al., 2006; Frankl, 2004; Ryff, 1989a). As already noted, PL is, together with PG (23.3% of the variance explained in our study) one of the most eudaimonic dimensions of Ryff's model.

In short, these results suggest that meaning of life seems to be a powerful predictor of personal well-being understood in an eudaimonic way (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996, 2008), and allow us to conclude that experiencing that one's life is valuable and makes sense, feeling satisfied with what has been done, and being oriented to goals and purposes is an eudaimonic source of personal well-being. Well-being is not only, or mainly, experiencing pleasure, but is rather perceiving that life is valuable, setting goals and striving to reach them. That is, well-being relates positively and significantly with the experience of gratification. Pleasures and gratifications correspond with the distinction of Seligman (2004) between «hedonistic goals» and «eudaimonic goals», respectively. That is, pleasure and gratification distinguish aspirations for a “good life” (*hedonia*) or for ‘living well’ (*eudaimonia*). Gratifications are activities in which we engage quite, to the point of losing the notion of time and space (being immersed in a “state of flow”, of mindfulness; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and they relate to the exercise of virtues and strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), focusing on psychological growth.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

Meaning in life may be a protective factor of mental health, enhancing the life satisfaction and the psychological well-being (e.g., Psarra & Kleftaras, 2013; Santos, Magramo, Oguan, Paat, & Barnachea, 2012; Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011). It is essential to include the meaning in life in the counselling process, to develop a meaning-centered counseling (e.g., Adams, 2012; Cox & Klinger, 2004, 2011; Graber, 2004; Savickas, 2003; Wong, 1998), focusing on the personal positive functioning and strengths, and integrating both the personal characteristics and circumstances and the cultural values.

A meaning-centered counselling needs to deepen the understanding of the fundamental human motivation, which is the meaning of life, and the cognitive-behavioral processes involved in meeting it. In this regard, the logotherapy is, as existentially oriented therapy (May & Yalom, 2005), an exceptionally interesting approach, that provides theoretical and practical resources (e.g., Garcini, Short, & Norwood, 2013; Wong, 1997, 2012). However, logotherapy and meaning-centered counselling are not the same:

“Meaning-centered counseling adopts the basic tenets of logotherapy and it may be considered an extension of logotherapy. There are differences in its details and emphases, however. For example, Frankl (1969/1988) defined the will to meaning as the ‘basic striving of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose’ (p. 35). From the perspective of meaning-centered counseling, the will to meaning consists of two psychological processes: the motivation to seek the core meaning of a given life situation and the motivation to seek purpose and significance for one’s life goals.

The main difference between logotherapy and meaning-centered counseling is that the former takes a philosophical and spiritual approach, whereas the latter favors a cognitive or psychological approach.” (Wong & Wong, 2006, p. 643)

From the meaning-centered counselling approach, it is important for both general and clinical population to know the role of the meaning in life on the psychological well-being (e.g., Dezutter et al., 2013). The counselor can help

the client to find his or her personal meaning in life, in order to make the sense of the events and to develop the ability to make decisions responsibly and enhance his or her functional efficiency, aimed at achieving vital goals and psychological well-being. As it is known, the logotherapy emphasizes the responsibility in the process of making vital decisions, so a meaning-centered counselling can empower the client to respond constructively and effectively to the vital demands, especially in the adverse circumstances.

Limitations

Without detracting from the above contributions, some limitations of the present study should be considered. The composition of the sample might compromise the generalisability of the results. In future studies, it would be interesting to count on more representative samples of general population, and analyze the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being, as well as the mediator role of different socio-demographic and psychosocial variables using more sophisticated statistical analysis and research designs.

Likewise, it would be interesting to consider the cultural differences in the definition of the meaning in life, in order to adjust the counselling process and to develop culturally based programs of intervention. Regarding to this, it is important to carry out cross-cultural studies. The meaning in life is strongly idiosyncratic, but it is also the product of cultural values, internalized through the process of socialization (e.g., family, school). On the other hand, meaning is also important to understand the culture (e.g., Wong & Wong, 2006).

Last, we cannot determine the casual relation between the meaning in life and the psychological well-being, because we used a cross-sectional design. It would be interesting to design longitudinal studies, in order to identify whether, and to what extent, the meaning in life causes the psychological well-being.

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Competing Interests

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