

MEANING IN LIFE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL – BEING: IS A SATISFYING LIFE MEANINGFUL?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to determine the relationship of meaning in life and subjective well-being among Filipino college students in both private and public institutions. It was hypothesized in this study that meaning in life and life satisfaction has a positive relationship. Three measures, namely, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) were administered to 969 college students in different schools in the Philippines. This study employed a descriptive-predictive design to measure the degree of correlation between variables. The Pearson Correlation was used to assess the relationship of meaning in life and subjective well-being. Results of the study show that meaning in life and subjective well-being has a positive relationship. A better understanding of the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being has implications relative to developing and/or achieving a greater sense of happiness and satisfaction in living. This could be developed by tapping emotional resources to diminish negative affective conditions and optimizing meaningful life situations.

Keywords: Meaning in life, subjective well-being, positive affect and negative affect

INTRODUCTION:

“Know Thyself.”

---Socrates

College students face a barrage of challenges in their daily life. Aside from doing their homeworks, projects and extra-curricular activities, they also have responsibilities at home as a son or daughter, brother or sister and as a friend. Thus, it is vital to understand the importance of their life purpose and their well-being. Most studies on subjective well-being are conducted among college students (see Emmons & Diener, 1986; Steger & Kashan, 2007 cited in Galang, Magno, Paterno and Roldan, 2011) sample because of age-related changes and high activation of emotions as individuals develop. The researchers found the need to expand the present reviews by having a Filipino perspective on the meaning in life and subjective well-being of college students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well being among Filipino college students both from private and public institutions in the National Capital Region. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule were administered to 969 students in different schools in the Philippines.

Emmons and Diener (1986) worked on the assumption that the successful pursuit of meaning in life plays an important role in the development of individuals' psychological well-being. That is why there is an increasing attention to subjective well-being (Inglehart, 1993).

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING:

Subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as ‘a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002, p. 63). Robbins & Kliever (2000) refers to subjective well-being to the self-evaluation of life satisfaction. In line with this, life satisfaction refers to the satisfaction experienced by an individual in his or her life as a whole; it is the cognitive element referred to what one thinks about his or her life satisfaction in global terms (life as a whole) and in domain terms (in specific areas of life such as work, relationships, etc.) On the otherhand, subjective happiness is inherently defined from the perspective of a person (Emmons & Diener, 1986; Omodei & Wearing, 1990; Palys & Little, 1983; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988). The affective element refers to emotions, moods and feelings. Subjective well-being can be expressed in simple terms like saying oftently, “I feel good” and “I feel happy” (Schwartz & Strack, 1999). A person who has a high level of satisfaction with their life, and who experiences a greater positive affect and little or less negative affect, would be deemed to have a high level of SWB [or in simpler terms, be very happy].

Research points out that there are individual differences in how meaning in life is to one’s sense of well-being. The determinants of well-being and life satisfaction are highly individualized or personalized. It is to each his own, depending on their value orientations (Oishi, Graessman, 1998; Emmons, 1991). For hedonistic people, they evaluate their daily well-being based heavily on hedonic markers of well being such as avoiding pain and seeking pleasure (Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2001) and the experience of excitement (Oishi, Schimmack, & Colcombe, 2003). On the otherhand, this differs from the ‘eudiamonic’ perspective which, as Waterman (1993) stated, is where one lives in accordance with one’s ‘true self’. This perspective places emphasis on meaning in life and self-realization, and the extent to which a person fully integrates this into his or her life. In connection with this, it is pertinent to note that Frankl (1963) and Maddi (1970) discussed individual differences in the degree to which people search for meaning in life.

When SWB is being measured, what is being measured is how people think and feel about their lives. Lucas et al. (1996) pointed out that Subjective Well Being has three (3) components: life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect and that these three should be studied separately. This means that the presence of positive affect does not mean the absence of negative affect and vice versa. In the present study, subjective well-being will be measured using a questionnaire such as the 5 item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin (1985) and Pavot & Diener (1993). Affectivity will be measured by the PANAS [Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule by Watson, Clark & Tellegan (1988).

MEANING IN LIFE:

Morgan and Fastides (2009) pointed out that meaning in life is an important part of happiness and subjective well-being. According to Martin Seligman (1988), high depression rate can be attributed to a loss of meaning. Seligman believes that to find meaning requires that one must be attached to something larger than

just oneself. Martin Seligman defines the meaningful life as “using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are.” Perhaps in line with this theory is the finding that religiously active people in surveys worldwide, report higher levels of happiness (Inglehart, 1990) and that those who have deep religious faith are much less likely to get depressed (Friedrich, Cohen, & Witurner, 1988). In connection with this, in his 2008 book, “Gross National Happiness,” Dr. Brooks argues that what’s crucial to well-being is not how cheerful you feel, not how much money you make, but rather the meaning you find in life and your sense of “earned success” — the belief that you have created value in your life or others’ lives (Tierney, 2011). “People find meaning in providing unconditional love for children,” writes Dr. Brooks. “Paradoxically, your happiness is raised by the very fact that you are willing to have your happiness lowered through years of dirty diapers, tantrums and backtalk. Willingness to accept unhappiness from children is a source of happiness” (Tierney, 2011). In this case, Seligman (cited in Tierney, 2011) says that parents are wisely looking for more than happy feelings. “ We want meaning in life. We want relationships.” What is important to understand is that meaning in life is thought as a variable that provides the conditions from which happiness arises (Lent, 2004) and may contribute to the foundation of overall happiness which in turn is subjective well-being.

It has been suggested that meaning consistently predicts psychological well-being among college students in the United States based on the research of Zika and Chamberlain (1992 cited in Galang, Magno, Paterno and Roldan, 2011) and has a positive relationship with satisfaction in life (Samman, 2007 cited in Galang, Magno, Paterno and Roldan, 2011). In the study of Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2008) an Asian perspective on the meaning in life and subjective well-being was studied among adolescents in HongKong. Results of the study revealed meaning in life was positively associated with life satisfaction – a component/part of subjective well-being.

In the present study, meaning in life will be measured using Steger’s Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) which includes two (2) components: presence of meaning which refers to how a person feels on how full of meaning his or her life is and search from meaning which shows how a person is engaged and motivated, in the effort to find meaning or deepen an understanding of meaning in life.

THE PRESENT STUDY:

The present study focuses on the relationship of meaning in life and subjective well-being. Debats, Vanderlube & Wazeman (1993) pointed out that having more meaning in life has been positively related to work-enjoyment, life satisfaction, and happiness. It is hypothesized in the present study that there is a positive or direct relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being.

Most studies on subjective well-being are conducted among college students (see Emmons & Diener; Steger & Kashdan, 2007 cited in Galang, Magno, Paterno and Roldan, 2011) because of age-related changes and high activation of emotions as individuals develop. There is a need to study the relationship of meaning in life and subjective well-being among college students who are both enrolled in private and public institutions in the Philippine setting or context.

METHOD:

RESEARCH DESIGN:

In the present study, descriptive-predictive research design was utilized. Meaning in Life served as the predictor variable for subjective well-being. Predictive designs are a form of correlational research that utilize calculated information between variables to forecast outcomes (Sheperis, Young & Daniels, 2010).

PARTICIPANTS:

The total sample size was 969. The participants of the study were college students both from private and public institutions in the National Capital Region (NCR). The ages of the students range from 15 -21 years old and above. The participants were composed of 469 males and 500 females.

Selecting the participants was accomplished through non-probability sampling, specifically the purposive sampling design.

INSTRUMENTS:

There were three (3) instruments that were utilized to gather the data needed for this study. The Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) were used to measure subjective well-being. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was used to measure life satisfaction with two subscales: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning.

SATISFACTION WITH LIFE SCALE (SWLS):

The internal consistency of the SWLS was reported to be .87 and the test-retest correlation is .82 (Diener, 1984). The SWLS was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin (1985) and was used as one of the instruments to measure subjective well-being. This does not assess satisfaction with specific life domains (e.g., Health and Finances), but it allows respondents to integrate and weigh these domains in whatever way. The following is the range of scores on the SWLS: 30-35 very high score/highly satisfied; 25-29 high score; 20-24 average score; 10-14 dissatisfied; 5-9 extremely dissatisfied.

POSITIVE AFFECT AND NEGATIVE AFFECT SCHEDULE (PANAS BRIEF VERSION):

The 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) comprises two mood scales, one measuring positive affect and the other measuring negative affect. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely to indicate the extent to which the respondent has felt this way in the indicated time frame (Watson & Tellegen, 1988). The proponents of the test have used the scale to measure affect at this moment, today, the past few days, the past week, the past few weeks, the past year, and generally (on average). In the present study, the researchers used the scale to measure affect of the respondents during their college life as the time frame. Reliability and Validity reported by Watson (1988) was moderately good. For the Positive Affect Scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.86 to 0.90; for the Negative Affect Scale, 0.84 to 0.87. Over an 8-week time period, the test-retest correlations were 0.47-0.68 for the PA and 0.39-0.71 for the NA. The PANAS has strong reported validity with such measures as general distress and dysfunction, depression, and state anxiety. The use of this tool has been approved by Dr. Watson. (See Appendix for the copy of the Research Agreement).

MEANING IN LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE (MLQ):

The MLQ's internal consistency was established with *Chronbach* alpha values of .81 and .84 for MLQ-P and MLQ-S respectively, a good test-retest reliability coefficient of .70 and .73 for MLQ-P and MLQ-S was obtained respectively. The two factor structure was supported using CFA with adequate fit ($X^2=56.04$, GFI=.97, CFI=.99, RMSEA=.01). The two subscales of the measure are presence of meaning (measures how full of meaning the respondents feel about their lives) and search for meaning (measures how engaged and motivated respondents are in efforts to find meaning or deepen their understanding of meaning in their lives). The MLQ was developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) composed of 10 items rated on a seven-point scale from "Absolutely True" to "Absolutely Untrue." The use of this tool has been approved by Dr. Steger. (See Appendix for the copy of the Research Agreement).

The meaning in Life Questionnaire examines the presence of meaning the search for meaning using 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Absolutely True" to "Absolutely Untrue." The subscale of Presence of Meaning intends to capture the extent to which participants feel their lives currently have meaning whereas the subscale of Search for Meaning intends to capture the extent to which participants are motivated and engaged in finding meaning in their lives. The Presence of Meaning has been connected to positive levels of well-being, extraversion, agreeableness, and intrinsic religiosity (Steger, M.F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). The Search for Meaning has been linked to rumination, negative affect, depression, and neuroticism.

PROCEDURE:

Permission from the proponents of the instruments was sought. The researchers located participants who met the criteria set for the study and who were willing to participate. When participants who met the criteria were identified, their full consent was sought and confidentiality assurances were given. The three (3)

questionnaires (MLQ, SWLS and PANAS) were administered to different schools during one class period. Before the administration started, the participants were instructed to answer the items honestly. They were also reminded to answer all items and not to leave any item blank. After completing the questionnaires, they were thanked.

Means and standard deviations of the factors of the measures were obtained. The Pearson r was used to establish the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being.

RESULTS:

Relationship of Meaning in Life and Subjective well-being. The results showed moderate to strong correlation between variables. Results indicate that there is a predictive relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being. It shows a positive or direct relationship. A better understanding of the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being has implications relative to developing and/or achieving a greater sense of happiness and satisfaction in living.

Table 1: Correlations of Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being

	1	2	3	4	5
1.Presence of Meaning			0.88	0.85	-0.80
2.Search for Meaning			-0.60	-0.71	0.77
3.Life Satisfaction				0.87	-0.63
4.Positive Affect					
5.Negative Affect					

Overall Meaning in Life. Across participants, meaning in life was relatively high which suggests positive well being. Respondents reported feeling that their lives already have meaning, but were also open to continue in exploring their life purpose. This represents a degree of openness to new experiences in broadening ones thinking while also feeling secure in their present life purpose or meaning

Table 2: Overall Meaning in Life

Meaning in Life	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Search for Meaning	28.1775	4.6376	969
Presence of Meaning	25.9432	4.2855	969

Gender differences in meaning in life. Gender differences were found in both the presence of meaning ($t = 0.558, p < 0.01$) and the search for meaning ($t = 2.279, p < 0.05$). Females reported higher levels of search for meaning, whereas males reported higher levels of presence of meaning but lower levels of search for meaning as compared to females. This suggests that male respondents may already feel that their lives are meaningful and are more certain of what they want to do with their lives than female respondents.

Table 3: Gender Differences in meaning in life.

Meaning in Life	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Search for Meaning	Female	30.3117	4.5827	500
Presence of Meaning		24.5093	4.1359	500
Search for Meaning	Male	26.0433	4.6925	469
Presence of Meaning		27.3771	4.4351	469

Age Differences in Meaning in Life. Age differences ($F = 1.728, p < 0.05$) for the presence of meaning and ($F = 1.746, p < 0.05$) for the search for meaning suggest that students aged 15-16 have lower scores for both presence of meaning and search for meaning in life as compared to those who are older. It appears that those who are older as per their chronological age appears to be more explorative in terms of searching their meaning in life as well as feeling the presence of meaning in their lives.

Table 4: Age Differences in Meaning in Life

Meaning in Life	Age	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Presence of Meaning	15 – 16	22.9534	4.0065	317
	17 – 18	24.4497	4.3123	250
	19 – 20	27.4724	4.3245	228
	21 and above	28.8973	4.4987	174
Search for Meaning	15 – 16	25.3236	4.6887	317
	17 – 18	26.6745	4.6621	250
	19 – 20	29.5352	4.3027	228
	21 and above	30.9367	4.8969	174

Private and Public Institutions and Meaning in Life. Differences were found in both the presence of meaning ($t = 4.462, p < 0.01$) and search for meaning ($t = 0.025, p < 0.05$) between private and public institutions. It appears that students enrolled in public institutions have higher levels of presence of meaning and search for meaning as compared to the students enrolled in private institutions.

Table 5: Private and Public Institutions and Meaning in Life

Institution	Meaning in Life	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Public	Search for Meaning	29.9678	4.5452	479
	Presence of Meaning	27.5649	4.3921	
Private	Search for Meaning	26.2672	4.7300	490
	Presence of Meaning	24.3215	4.1789	

Overall Life Satisfaction. The respondents of the study showed that they had an average score of (24) for life satisfaction. Scoring in this range means that they are generally satisfied, but have some areas where they would like some improvement. Persons scoring in this range is normal and that they have their areas of their lives that need improvement. However, an individual in this range would usually like to move to higher level by some light changes.

Table 6: Overall Life Satisfaction

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Life Satisfaction	24.1204	5.2347

Gender Differences in Life Satisfaction. Gender differences between males and females were found ($t = 1.107, p < 0.05$). It appears that males have higher life satisfaction scores in the SWLS as compared as to females. This result is in harmony with literature on meaning in life stating that presence of meaning has been connected to positive level of subjective well-being since males reported higher scores in the Presence of Meaning Subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

Table 7: Gender Differences in Life Satisfaction

Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	25.3822	5.3785	469
Female	23.8586	5.0909	500

Age Differences in Life Satisfaction. Age differences were found in both freshmen (15-16 years of age) ($F = 2.908, p < 0.01$) and Fourth year graduating students (21 and above). It appears that students age 21 and above have higher life satisfaction as compared to students age 15-16. This finding again validates the literature that suggests that presence of meaning is linked to positive levels of well-being (Steger, 2006).

Table 8: Age Differences in Life Satisfaction

	Age	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Life Satisfaction	15 – 16	22.3447	5.2784	317
	17 – 18	23.3993	5.3468	250
	19 – 20	24.3478	5.2422	228
	21 and above	26.3898	5.0714	174

Private and Public Institutions and Life Satisfaction. Scores in life satisfaction differ significantly for students enrolled in private and public institutions ($t = 1.051, p < 0.05$). Results suggest that students enrolled in private institutions have higher life satisfaction as opposed to students enrolled in public institutions.

Table 9: Private and Public Institutions and Life Satisfaction

School	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Public	22.6619	5.3406	479
Private	25.5789	5.1288	490

Overall Positive and Negative Affect. Results show that respondents have relatively high positive affect. This is reflective with their score for the SWLS which is 24 in the Life Satisfaction Scale while a score of 15.1300 represents lower negative affect and 36.7327 for Positive Affect. For PANAS, scores can range from 10-50 with higher scores representing higher levels of positive affect for the positive affect score and lower scores representing lower levels of negative affect for the negative affect score.

Table 10: Overall Positive and Negative Affect

PANAS	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Positive	36.7327	6.5231	969
Negative	15.1300	6.6237	969

Gender Differences and Positive and Negative Affect. Difference between positive affect ($t = 0.293, p < 0.05$) and negative affect ($t = 1.168, p < 0.05$) between male and female students were visible. Results show that females have slightly higher negative affect score compared to males. This may be attributed to their higher scores in search for meaning in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

Table 11: Gender Differences and Positive and Negative Affect

Gender	Positive	SD	Negative	SD	N
Male	38.2456	6.6234	12.4196	6.6394	469
Female	35.2198	6.4227	17.8404	6.6081	500

Age Difference and Positive and Negative Affect. Results show that students age 21 and above have higher positive affect as compared to the younger respondents ($F = 3.024, p < 0.01$) for positive affect and ($F = 2.863, p < 0.01$) lower for negative affect. This could be tied up to their scores in meaning in life and life satisfaction.

Table 12: Age Difference and Positive and Negative Affect

PANAS	Age	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
POSITIVE	15 – 16	34.5664	6.6354	317
	17 – 18	35.8767	6.7216	250
	19 – 20	37.5555	6.8442	228
	21 and above	38.9322	6.6724	174

NEGATIVE	15 – 16	18.0063	6.6221	317
	17 – 18	16.3228	6.5345	250
	19 – 20	13.9937	6.6956	228
	21 and above	12.1972	6.6094	174

Private and Public Institutions and Positive and Negative Affect. Difference in the positive affect ($t = 2.693, p < 0.05$) and negative affect ($t = 4.683, p < 0.01$) between students from private schools and public schools was observable. Students from private institutions appear to have a higher positive affect as compared to those enrolled in public institutions. Students enrolled in public institutions reported a higher score of negative affect as opposed to those enrolled in private institutions.

Table 13: Private and Public Institutions and Positive and Negative Affect

Institution	PANAS	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Public	Positive	33.7495	6.8957	479
	Negative	17.6558	7.0002	
Private	Positive	39.7159	6.6671	490
	Negative	12.6042	6.2306	

DISCUSSION:

The results of the study show significant relationships between meaning in life and subjective well-being among college students which is consistent with previous findings. The variable meaning in life provide conditions for happiness to arise (Lent, 2004). Having realized one's meaning in life had been positively related to life satisfaction and happiness as reported by among other measures of healthy psychological functioning (Debats, Vanderlube,, & Wazeman, 1993; Park & Folkman, 1997; Ryff, 1989).

College students can become engaged and motivated in their efforts to find meaning in life especially during their graduating years when they tend to be more reflective of their career pathing. Their score (above 24 for both presence of meaning and search for meaning) suggests positive well being as validated by the results of the SWLS and the PANAS. This suggests that respondents feel the presence of meaning in their lives but are still open to explore their life purpose. Given the age of the students (15 – above 21 years of age), they already see the worth of their life's meaning and as a consequence they become happy, however, results show a trend that as these students become older their presence of meaning and search for meaning tend to increase as well. The result is noteworthy since graduating students are transitioning from college life to entering the work setting, thus, this could possibly explain the reason for higher scores in the search for meaning subscale (in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire) in the age 21 and above age range.

Career counseling in schools may focus on improving the subjective well-being of college students by assisting them in exploring their life's meaning in terms of career exploration and career pathing as well. Furthermore, a better understanding of the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being has implications relative to developing and/or achieving a greater sense of happiness and satisfaction in living. College students may be taught to tap their emotional resources by diminishing negative affective conditions and optimizing meaningful life situations.

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