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## Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, and Happiness Among Filipino College Students

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to investigate the relationship between dimensions of meaning in life and factors of happiness or subjective well-being (SWB) among Filipino college students. Using a cross-sectional research design (Johnson, 1991), 147 college students (56 female, 91 male) participated in the study. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), Positive-Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) were administered to the participants in order to gather the data needed in the study. Results indicated that all correlation coefficients among the variables is positive except for presence of meaning and negative affect ( $r=-0.14$ ). The highest correlation coefficient is observed in the presence of meaning and SWB ( $r=0.40$ ) and presence of meaning and positive affect ( $r=0.36$ ). Over all, research findings showed that presence of meaning and search for meaning in life are both significantly related to SWB. Implications to the counseling and education profession have been forwarded by this study.

**Key Words:** college students; presence of meaning; search for meaning; subjective well-being

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology, a new research field has emerged in the past few decades that focus on positive human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihayi, 2000). Well-being was regarded as a scientific topic (Frey & Stutzer, 2002) despite the fact that happiness is considered the ultimate goal for many people. The subjective well-being (SWB) literature has progressed rapidly since its emergence in the field. Psychologists and other social scientists have taken huge steps, as shown in recent studies, in their understanding of the factors influencing peoples' SWB (Hoorn & Castriota, 2007). It is notable in the literature of SWB that studies are consistent in their findings across

samples of individuals reporting on SWB as it is influenced by other factors or variables such as meaning in life (Zika, 1992). Moreover, meaning in life is an important part of happiness and SWB (Morgan & Fastides, 2009).

#### 1.1 *Meaning in Life*

The predictor variable of this study that is meaning in life can be defined as the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment (Reker, 2000). Frankl (1963) postulated that every person has a "will to meaning," an inborn drive to ascribe meaning to his or her life. In this study, meaning in life has two dimensions: 1) Presence of meaning



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June 20 to 22, 2017

that refers to how a person feels on how full of meaning his or her life is; and 2) Search for meaning that shows how a person is engaged and motivated, in the effort to find meaning or deepen an understanding of meaning in life.

Meaning in life is assumed to be beneficial to youth development especially during the college years of an individual which happens mostly during the adolescence stage. Across the life span, adolescence is marked as the starting point of and arguably the most salient period in this meaning-making journey due to the enhanced abstract thinking ability and the preoccupation with self-definition (Erikson, 1968; Fry, 1998; Harter, 2012). Adolescence is a period of identity formation and self-development (Erikson, 1968; Harter, 2012).

The key developmental task for adolescents revolves around answering questions as who they are, what they believe in, and how they wish to live (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Fry, 1998; Shek, 2012). The answers to these questions often involve the exploration of meaning in life. Theoretically, when young people are engaging in various sources of meaning that provide them with cognitive frameworks with which to set their life goals and plans, they will tend to perceive their lives as fulfilling these sources and experience this fulfillment as a feeling of contentment (Damon et al., 2003; Fry, 1998). As a result, their self-concept, life commitment, and life satisfaction will be enhanced (Brassai et al., 2011; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Failure to discover meaning in life may result in an "existential vacuum," a state of emptiness and purposelessness. The findings of accumulated research have demonstrated the importance of the pursuit of meaning in life for human functioning such as having a sense of directedness and well-being such as achieving authentic happiness (Debats, 1999; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Schnell, 2009; Shek, 2012; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008).

## 1.2 Subjective Well-Being

The criterion variable which is subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as both cognitive and affective evaluations of a person's life (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). In this study, happiness is operationally defined as SWB, wherein SWB is the scientific term for happiness. The cognitive element of subjective well-being (SWB) refers to one's life satisfaction in global terms e.g. in life domains of

work, and relationships. Consistent with Diener and colleagues (1984, 1999) the cognitive component of SWB is an overall evaluation of a person's life. On the other hand, one's emotions, moods and feelings comprise the affective element (McGillivray & Clarke, 2006).

The affective component of subjective well-being (SWB) is the experience of having relatively frequent positive emotions and relatively infrequent negative emotions (Diener 1984; Diener et al., 1999). Since subjective well-being can be simply defined as the current evaluation of an individual's happiness, often expressed in affective terms, it becomes at least in part, a proxy for global affective evaluation (Schwartz & Strack, 1999).

In Lyubomirsky (2011) theory explains that as an individual experiences more positive emotions after a positive life change, the more likely one's well-being boost will last. Moreover, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) contend that positive emotion is an important component of happiness or SWB. According to the authors, individuals who report more frequent positive emotions experience higher SWB. Thus, positive emotions play an important role in positive activities. In turn, the ability of positive activities to increase and sustain positive emotions is also an important factor in determining and sustaining later well-being (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Two studies (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2010; Della Porta & Lyubomirsky, 2011) found support that positive activities promote well-being with positive emotions as a mechanism in this relation. In the PANAS-X (Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale), the positive affect include active, alert, attentive, determined, enthusiastic, excited, inspired, interested, proud, and strong, in the general dimension scales. In the basic positive emotion scale, the following are included: joviality, self-assurance, and attentiveness. The general dimension scales include the following negative affect in PANAS-X: afraid, scared, nervous, jittery, irritable, hostile, guilty, ashamed, upset, and distressed, whereas the basic negative emotion scale include: fear, hostility, guilt, and sadness.

A person having a high level of satisfaction with life and experiencing a greater positive affect or less negative affect can be described in simpler terms as being very happy, satisfied and fulfilled in life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985); in other words, one has a high level of SWB. That is to say, a happy person is one who has frequent



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De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
June 20 to 22, 2017

positive emotions, infrequent negative emotions, and high satisfaction with life. In the hedonic perspective, the concept of SWB defines well-being or happiness as being fundamentally maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain (Waterman, 1993).

### 1.3 *Meaning in Life and SWB*

Based on the literature, the concept of meaning in life is positively associated with many concepts examined within positive psychology (Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Steger, 2005; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). In a study investigating the relationship between meaning in life and life satisfaction which represents the cognitive side of subjective well-being, it was found that there is a positive relationship between meaning in life and life satisfaction (Bonebright, Clay & Ankenmann, 2000). Another study of meaning in life similarly indicates a positive relationship between happiness represented by subjective well-being and meaning in life (Debats, Lubbe & Vezeman, 1993).

It has been suggested that meaning in life consistently predicts psychological well-being among college students in the United States based on the research of Zika and Chamberlain (1992) and has a positive relationship with satisfaction in life (Samman, 2007). Moreover, in a study done by Reker, Peacock, and Wong (1987), results showed that among the personality dispositions examined, meaning in life was the most consistent predictor of well-being. Subjects with strong meaning in life reported high positive well-being while those with weak meaning in life reported increased negative well-being.

An Asian perspective on the meaning in life and subjective well-being was studied by Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2008) among adolescents in Hongkong. Results of the study revealed meaning in life was positively associated with life satisfaction (a component of SWB). Such findings showed significance effects of meaning in life to multidimensional satisfaction. Chinese adolescents' pursuit of meaningful academic goals brought about satisfaction with school life (Wong & Fry, 1998) which in turn affects subjective well-being.

### 1.4 *The Present Study*

Although there were existing foreign studies on meaning in life and SWB, there have been no studies conducted in the local context

which also focuses on college students as subjects of the study. The aim of the present study is to investigate the association between meaning in life and SWB among Filipino college students. The following hypotheses were determined for the aim of the study:

H1: Presence of meaning in life is not significantly related to the SWB of college students.

H2: Search for meaning in life is not significantly related to the SWB of college students.

The current study may shed light on the potential psychological mechanism in improving the well-being of college students. Moreover, by studying meaning in life among college students, we can understand how meaning in life shapes their identity formation and coping behavior, which offers valuable reference materials for developing effective prevention programs and policies that can benefit their college formation. This line of research may also be useful in optimizing the efficient delivery of psychological counseling for students who are experiencing existential crisis that includes the inner conflicts and anxieties that accompany important issues of purpose, responsibility, independence, freedom and commitment.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 *Research Design*

Based on the research classification of Johnson (1991), the present study is cross-sectional in nature. It is cross-sectional in nature because the data collected from the participants cover a brief period of time. Likewise, the data collected directly apply to the participants and comparisons are made across the variables of interest namely: meaning in life and SWB.

### 2.2 *Participants*

A total of 147 college students (56 female, 91 male) participated in the study. They were selected using nonprobability sampling specifically convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was used since this study intends to gather initial primary data regarding SWB profile of college students which will then serve as basis in the development of happiness intervention programs. For the sampling method, all college students were



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017  
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
June 20 to 22, 2017

invited to participate, however, only those who were interested and available at the time of test administration were included in the sample. The participants are first year to graduating college students from a university whose extension campus is located in Laguna.

### 2.3 Research Instrument

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire was developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler (2006). The questionnaire is Likert type with 10 items and has two subscales: Search and Presence. Presence of Meaning indicates how much respondents feel their lives have meaning, and Search for Meaning shows how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives. Steger et al. (2006) reported that internal consistency coefficients are between .83 and .85 for “search” subscale, and between .83 and .88 for “presence” subscale. The psychometric properties of the scale have been validated by Chan (2014) and Steger et al. (2006, 2008). For example, presence of meaning was found to be positively correlated with life satisfaction, positive emotions, intrinsic religiosity, and negatively associated with depression, negative emotions, and neuroticism (Steger et al., 2006). The highest (very high) score expected for search and presence is 35 and a low score will be 7 and below.

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). The Satisfaction With Life Scale is a 5-item, Likert type self-report questionnaire, developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985). Diener et al., (1985) found that internal consistency of SWLS is .87 and test-retest reliability coefficient is .82. A score of 31 to 35 would mean extremely satisfied and 5 to 9 would indicate extremely dissatisfied evaluation of one's life.

Positive-Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). Positive-Negative Affect Scale was developed by Watson, Tellegen and Clark (1988). PANAS is a Likert type questionnaire including 20 items; 10 negative and 10 positive. Gençöz (2000) reported that internal consistency is .83 for “Positive affect” subscale and .86 for “Negative affect” subscale. Scores can range from 10 – 50, with higher scores representing higher levels of positive affect and lower scores representing lower levels of negative affect.

### 2.4 Procedure

The consent of the participants was sought prior to test administration. They were told that participation in the study is voluntary, and they may choose to discontinue their participation at any time. Participants were assured that information they will provide will be handled with utmost confidentiality. Test administration was done individually and by group during the vacant class period of the participants. They were oriented that they would be asked to answer three questionnaires that would help them to get to know aspects about themselves better. On the average, test administration for the three (3) instruments was around 30 minutes. During the administration, standard procedures and test instructions were followed based on the manual of both instruments. After completing the questionnaires, they were thanked and debriefed about the study. The instruments were then scored and interpreted and subjected to data analysis in order to answer the objectives of the study.

### 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The rights of the participants were stated and enumerated in the study. It explained that their participation in the research is voluntary basis and they can withdraw at any time without any disadvantage. The results are confidential, however, in the event of presenting or publication of the said research, it was reiterated that no personally identifiable information will be shared.

### 2.6 Data Analysis

Data gathered were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 16. Descriptive statistics specifically the M and SD were used to identify the meaning in life scores and SWB scores of the participants. Pearson r was used to establish relationship among the factors of meaning in life and SWB. In computing for the SWB, this formula was considered:

$$\text{Subjective Well-being} = (\text{Satisfaction with Life} + \text{Positive Affect}) - \text{Negative Affect}$$



### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mean scores and standard deviations of research variables were calculated and findings are displayed on Table 1. Pearson r was conducted to investigate the relationships of the variables being studied (see Table 2).

Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations of the dimensions of meaning in life and subjective well-being

| Variables                    | M     | SD    |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Presence of Meaning          | 24.42 | 4.40  |
| Search for Meaning           | 23.85 | 5.28  |
| Satisfaction with life (SWL) | 23.48 | 5.30  |
| Positive Affect              | 29.10 | 9.18  |
| Negative Affect              | 25.43 | 7.21  |
| Subjective Well-Being (SWB)  | 27.15 | 13.65 |

N = 147

The mean scores for presence of meaning (M=24.42, SD=4.40) and search for meaning (M=23.85, SD=5.28) are both high. Results would indicate that the college students at this point in their life feel that their lives have meaning and that they constantly strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives. Further, these young people are engaging in various sources of meaning that provide them with cognitive frameworks with which to set their life goals and plans.

Meanwhile, SWL score got a mean of 23.48 and a SD of 5.30 which is interpreted as slightly satisfied. Respondents perceived that their life satisfaction in global terms e.g. in life domains of work, and relationships is not fully achieved and that their quest for life satisfaction is a continuous endeavor. Average mean scores were obtained for positive affect (M=29.10, SD=9.18) and negative affect and high score for subjective well-being (M=27.15, SD=13.65). In terms of the affective dimension of SWB, participants are experiencing relatively frequent positive emotions and relatively infrequent negative emotions. Overall, participants can be described as happy, satisfied, and fulfilled in life as indicated by the high score in SWB.

Table 2. Correlations of meaning in life and subjective well being

| Variables                    | Presence of Meaning | Search for Meaning |
|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Satisfaction with life (SWL) | 0.21*               | 0.23*              |
| Positive Affect              | 0.36*               | 0.30*              |
| Negative Affect              | -0.14*              | 0.08*              |
| Subjective Well-Being (SWB)  | 0.40*               | 0.25*              |

\*p<0.05

The correlation coefficients of all the variables are significant with a probability value of less than .05. The correlation results are within weak to moderate relationship. All correlation coefficients is positive except for presence of meaning and negative affect (r=-0.14). The highest correlation coefficient is observed in the presence of meaning and SWB (r=0.40) and presence of meaning and positive affect (r=0.36).

The findings showed that presence of meaning in life is significantly related to the cognitive and affective dimensions of SWB of college students. Similar results were also revealed with the relationship of search for meaning in life and the factors of SWB. Research findings indicated that presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life significantly predicts subjective well-being in a positive way. These findings show that meaning in life is an important component of subjective well-being. It is inferred that presence of meaning and search for meaning in life has an increasing effect on subjective well-being. Previous research conducted also showed the same findings similar to this study (Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Ho, Cheung & Cheung, 2008; Morgan & Fastides, 2009).

The results would imply that how a college student thinks and feels about the meaning of his or her life contributes to life satisfaction and to the frequency of experiencing positive and less frequent negative emotions. Further, the more engaged and motivated a college student is in searching for the meaning of life would mean the more satisfied he or she is in the overall evaluation of his or her life as well as frequent positive emotions, moods and feelings will be felt.



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 De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
 June 20 to 22, 2017

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to test the relationships between presence and search for meaning in life and SWB. Research findings indicated that presence of meaning and search for meaning in life are both significantly related to SWB. These findings show that meaning in life is an important component of SWB. The current study supports the same findings as cited in previous studies (Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Ho, Cheung & Cheung, 2008; Morgan & Fastides, 2009).

In this context, results of this research for Filipino college students have implications in the counseling practice. Considering the results, meaning in life can be focused on during counseling procedures and programs aiming to increase or boost happiness. Future research may examine other variables such as student life satisfaction which contribute to the meaning in life and SWB of college students. Moreover, higher education and counseling professionals could apply the study's findings to design psychoeducational programs, activities, or trainings for students in various aspects of their college life to assist them to enhance their SWB. These programs can be focused on self-understanding and growth, academic learning and professional growth, interpersonal relationship, realizing life goals and belief, and interaction with the environment.

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Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017  
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
June 20 to 22, 2017

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Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017  
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June 20 to 22, 2017

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