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Hope, Purpose in Life, and Mental Health in College Students

Bagher Ghobary, Masoud Lavasani and Habibollah Rahimi
Hope, Purpose in Life, and Mental Health in College Students

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship among hope, purpose in life, gender, place of residence, and mental health in college students. To fulfill the stated goal, 299 female and 264 male students were drawn by means of stratified random sampling. Then hope scale, purpose in life (PIL), and Symptom Check List 90-Revised (SCL 90-R) were administered on them. To analyze the data correlation coefficient, regression analysis, and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were used. Results indicated that “purpose in life” and the place of residence predicted mental health in college students. In addition, further analysis revealed that college students residing in dormitory showed more symptoms than students who lived with their own parents. Findings indicated the importance of meaning in life and its implication for health indicators. Moreover, paying closer attention is required by the university officials to improve and enhance the situation in dormitories and make necessary adjustments to fit psychological and social needs of the students residing in dorms.

Keywords: Purpose in Life, Hope, Mental Health, Psychological Symptoms

Introduction

MENTAL HEALTH OF individuals is associated with various factors including hope (Snyder, 2005; Mascaro & Posen, 2005; Hagen et al., 2005). Hopeful individuals are less anxious; they show less depressive symptoms; their adjustment is higher; their academic achievement is higher (Cousins, 1989; Hagen et al., 2005; Gottschalk, 1985; Udelman & Udelma, 1991).

Psychiatrist Joel Dimsdale (cited in Locke et al., 1986) at Massachusetts General Hospital interviewed survivors of the Nazi death camps, regarding the factors that gave them the strength to survive despite all physical and psychological hardships existed in the camps. Dimsdale wanted to know what kept them going and alive. After studying the interviews, Dimsdale sorted out several coping strategies that played important roles in their survival namely focusing on a few good experiences one had, trying to master the environment through asserting one’s individuality by observing Jewish holidays, having the primal will to live, possessing a group affiliation, surrendering to God, and accepting what happens. However, out of the answers he obtained and all the survivors’ stories he heard, one attitude was echoed in the testimonies of each survivor. The human quality that kept these individuals alive, he says was “blind naked hope”.

Gottschalk (cited in Lock et al., 1986) used an interview technique to analyze the impact of hope in survival rates of cancer patients. He used his interview technique with twenty seven cancer patients receiving radiotherapy at Cincinnati General Hospital and found that those who had higher levels of “hope” scored also higher in the survival rate.

Hope is also correlated highly with existential meaning in college students (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Frankl (1992) believed that strong correlation exists between psychological well-being, immune function, existential meaning, and hope in individuals. Those who lose their hope and sense of meaning quickly succumb to the surrounding on slough of deprivation, infection, and disease. In the same vein, Antonovsky (1987) proposed that sense of coherence (viewing the events comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful) has important consequences for physical health and mental well being.

In addition, finding meaning in life helps in maintaining a mental and physical health (Frankl, 1959, 1979, 1997). Yalom (1980) reported that around 12-22 percent of individuals who were referred to psychiatric hospitals have lost meaning in their own life. Researchers also reported more psychological symptoms and less life satisfactions in individuals who have lost meaning in life (e.g., Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995; Addis et al., 1995).

Frankl (1969) believed that search for meaning was a basic need of human beings, a prerequisite for mental and physical health. Margalit and Cassel-Seidenman (1987) found that perceiving the life events meaningful is the best predictor of life satis-
faction. In the same vein, Petrie and Azariah (1990) found that having a meaningful life is related to feeling less pain intensity in patients. In another study, Petrie and Brook (1992) concluded that meaningfulness of life predicted suicide ideation for 150 hospitalized para-suicides on admission. In a correlational analysis, Petrie and Brook (1992) also found that having a meaning in life was related to depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. Researchers reported a higher correlation between psychological well being, mental health, hopefulness, and purpose in life (Recker et al., 1981; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Zika & Chamberlin, 1992; Sheck, 1992; Magaletta & Oliver, 1999; Molasso, 2006). However, most researchers have studied the relation between existential meaning, hopefulness, and mental health in western cultures. In Iran, with a different psycho-social background, relationship among existential meaning, hopefulness, and mental health has not been investigated in college students. There is an increasing concern about college students’ mental health and drug use in Iran (Kafi et al., 1994; Ghanizadeh, 2005; Ahmadi & Javadpour, 2001). Considering my own clinical experiences in counseling students from different social backgrounds I hypothesized that lack of existential meaning and losing hope can contribute to these ongoing mental problems among college students. Therefore, I planned to test this hypothesis with a vigorous research design.

**Aims of the Study**

Investigators were interested in exploring the relationship between hopefulness, purpose in life, and mental health in college students. In addition, investigators wanted to examine predictors of mental health status in college students.

**Method**

**Participants**

Population in the current study was consisted of undergraduate college students studying in Tehran, Iran in academic year of 2006-2007. Stratified sampling procedure was used to draw the sample from various colleges of the University of Tehran. Six hundred male and female students (3% of the population) were drawn from five major homogenous strata of the University of Tehran. However, 37 questionnaires were incomplete, and researcher did not include them in the final analysis. Therefore, final analysis was accomplished with 563 completed questionnaires. Students’ median age was about 22. Half of them were living in Tehran and rest from other cities residing in dormitories during their studies. Most of these students (93%) were unmarried. In terms of gender identification half of them were males and half females.

**Instruments**

These instruments were used in the current study:

1. **Individual Differences Measure of Hope** (Snyder et al., 1991). This measure is consisted of an agency component (goal directed determination) and a pathway component (means of obtaining the goal). It is consisted of 12 Likert type items (responses change from completely correct to completely incorrect). For completely incorrect responses number 1 and for completely correct options number 8 is assigned. Four items measure agency component (items, 2, 9, 10, & 12); another four items measure pathway component (items 1, 4, 6, & 8), and the remaining four items measure additional component. Studies indicated an acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Factor analysis demonstrated the agency and pathways components of the hope scale. Convergent and discriminant validity of this scale are documented along with evidence suggesting that hope scale scores augmented the prediction of goal-related activities and coping strategies beyond other self-report measures. In the current study internal consistency of the agency component that was calculated by the Cronbach alpha was 0.82, and the pathway component was about 0.79, alpha coefficient for the whole measure was about 0.88.

2. **Symptom Check List 90 Revised (SCL-90R)** (Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973). This is a measure of psychological distress appropriate for adult population. It consists of 90 items in total with 83 items representing nine subscales: Somatization (SOM), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Interpersonal Sensitivity (IS), depression, (DEP), anxiety (ANX), hostility (HOS), phobic anxiety (PHOB), paranoid ideation (PAR), and psychoticism (PSY). In addition to these nine symptoms, the SCL-90R also contains seven items which relate to appetite and sleep disturbances and is also categorized under “additional items”. It utilizes three global distress indices: Global Severity Index (GSI), Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI), and Positive Symptom Total (PST) (Derogatis, 1992). The author suggests that the GSI is the best indicator of the current degrees of distress when one simple summary score is needed. This symptom check list is a 5-point likert type scale ranging from “not at all distressing” (0) to “extremely distressing” (4). Internal consistency of the scale calculated by Cronbach alpha...
was about 0.74. Internal consistencies of the subscale varied from 0.74 to 0.88. The highest internal consistency was for ‘somatization’ and lowest was for ‘hostility’ subscale.

3. **Purpose in Life Test** (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). The most widely used instrument for measuring the degree to which an individual possesses an existential meaning is the purpose in life test (PIL). The PIL is a 20-item, 7 point likert type scale that assess the degree to which an individual experiences a sense of meaning or purpose in life. Higher scores on the PIL are taken to indicate the presence of meaning in individual’s life. Split-half reliability of the test with Spearman-Brown correction was 0.92 (Recker, 1977). Test-retest correlations have been 0.68 (12 weeks; Recker, 1977), 0.79 (6 weeks; Recker & Cousins, 1979), and 0.83 (7 weeks; Meier & Edwards, 1974). Discriminant validity of PIL has been supported. For example, it distinguishes between psychological patients and non patients (Crumbaugh, 1968, Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), and inmates and non-inmates (Recker, 1977).

**Procedures**

Prior to distribution of questionnaires to students, clarity of instructions in completing the instruments and outcome measures were checked. In addition, respondents were ensured of the anonymity of their responses and encouraged to answer all questions with honesty and according to what they felt about each question. Investigators administered instruments after making sure that all instruction and procedures were clear to the students. After distribution, if students had questions regarding completion of the questionnaires their questions were answered and ambiguities were cleared.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to describe correlation coefficients among variables of the study. Incomplete data were excluded from the final analysis. To test hypothesis about the relations among meaningfulness of life, hopefulness, and mental health, correlation coefficients were used and significance of correlation coefficients was tested with an appropriate statistic. Stepwise regression analysis was utilized to determine whether the predictors (purpose in life and hope) can enter the regression equation of college student’s mental health.

**Results**

Table 1 shows correlation coefficients among ‘purpose in life’, ‘hopefulness’, and ‘mental health’. As it was hypothesized, Global Severity Index (GSI) which is the best indicator of the current degrees of distress in college students has a significant high correlation with hopefulness, and purpose in life in college students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Hope</th>
<th>Purpose in Life</th>
<th>Symptom Check List (SCL 90-R)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.679**</td>
<td>-0.358**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>0.679**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.496**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom Check List (SCL 90-R)</td>
<td>-0.358**</td>
<td>-0.496**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 356  ** = P < 0.01

Since hopefulness and purpose in life have a negative significant correlation with psychological distress, we can conclude that they have a positive correlation with mental health indicators.

In addition to the correlation coefficient, researchers examined the predicting power of purpose in life, and hopefulness in determining mental health of college students. The regression analysis in table 2 examines whether mental health of college students can be predicted by degrees of hopefulness and purposefulness in life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>Adjusted R2</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.511</td>
<td>0.262</td>
<td>0.256</td>
<td>48.43</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.288</td>
<td>55.98</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>0.302</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>58.12</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stepwise regression analysis demonstrated that in the third step by entering purpose in life, hopefulness, gender and place of residence in the regression model, almost 30% of the variance of college students' sources of distress can be explained. Since psychological distress is the opposite of mental health, mental health of students can be negatively explained and predicted by previously mentioned factors. Table (3) shows regression coefficient ($\beta$) for each predictor.

### Table 3: Coefficients of Predictors in Determining College Students’ Psychological Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>$\beta$ (beta)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.497</td>
<td>-10.1</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td>0.003**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** $P<.01$

Table (3) shows that place of residence, and having a purposeful life are important predictors in determining students’ mental health. In terms of place of residence as indicated in table (3), students who were living in dormitories were exhibiting more psychological symptoms in compare with students who were living with their parents and relatives. Moreover, students who had more purposeful lives were less prone to show psychological symptoms. Therefore, the degree of their mental health was higher.

### Discussion

The results of the current study demonstrated that hopefulness and purposefulness in life are highly correlated with each other ($r = 0.68$). This finding is consistent with reports of other researchers regarding correlation between these variables (e.g., Feldman & Snyder, 2005). In addition, hopefulness, and purposefulness in life showed a negative significant correlation with psychological symptoms of college students. This finding is also consistent with the previous researchers’ emphasis on the importance of purposefulness in life, and hopefulness on determining mental health in individuals (e.g., Yalom, 1980; Debats et al, 1995; Addis et al, 1995; Frankl, 1952, 1979, 1997; Feldman & Snyder, 2005). Furthermore, purposeful life as an important predictor of the mental health of college students was entered in the regression model. Its high $\beta$ (Beta) shows the importance of this variable in determining psychological symptoms (and mental health) in college students. This data is also consistent with other researchers’ reports on the impact of having meaning on reduction of psychological symptoms, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Yalom, 1980; Debats et al, 1995; Addis et al, 1995; Eldman & Snyder, 2005).

In the current study place of residence was an important determinant of college students’ mental health. Students who were living in the dormitory had more distress as indicated by GSI score than other students who were living with their parents and relatives. Since these students are coming from other provinces and cities, they need to adjust themselves to demands of living in big populated industrial cities. In addition, these students may feel less connected with their own parents, and relatives that can cause distress for them. Some investigators have reported more distress and psychological symptoms in dormitory students (e.g. Kafi et al, 1994). However, more in depth research is needed to explore the reason for differences in mental health of students in terms of their place of residence.

### Implication and Application of the Study

Implications of the current finding can support the theoretical framework established by Frankl (1963), and extended by other humanist psychologists. When people lose the meaning of life they become at risk for having psychological problems including depression, anxiety, and addiction. Also finding meaning grows out of the healthy personality. In other words, purposeful life is part of a healthy personality. That is to state that healthy developed individuals search for meaning and in case of frustration in finding meanings they fall in despair and become disappointed. These individuals are also hopeful in finding meaning and sense that brings them a coherent world view of ontological meaning of life. Current study also has indications for application and practices in psychotherapy and counseling. Counselors can provide a healing environment by helping their clients to find meaning in their lives. People need to make a sense of the events in their environments in order to thrive and actualize.

The intrinsic meaning of event in human life first stated in religious texts. Kuran (tr. Yousufl Ali, 1934) stated “It is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. God knows, but you don’t know (2, 216). However, this religious concept which has evolutionary value and causes individuals’ adaptab-
ility during their encounter with hardships in life is considered as a psychological construct after elaborated writings of Frankl (1963, 1969) and his colleagues. Its adaptive and survival values for people is in the process of exploration. This research is also one small step compatible with other findings that support significance of meaning and hope in individuals’ mental health. Further exploration and investigation is suggested in determining any relationship between finding a meaning in life and personality traits. It is also necessary to investigate the relation between religious affiliation and cultural background in finding meaning in life.

References


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Dr. Bagher Gobbari Bonab is an associate professor at University of Tehran, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Special Education Department. He holds a Ph.D. in Special Education, Mental Retardation from University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. His MA is in SPED, Early Childhood from George Washington University, Washington DC, USA. He also completed a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri Institute of Mental Health to develop Mental Retardation-Expert (MR-E) which is a soft-ware to help clinicians diagnose and treat aberrant behaviors in individuals with mental retardation. He currently teaches, advises graduate and undergraduate students and takes research projects in the field of special education. He also teaches at different universities in Iran. His research interests include intervention strategies to enhance social and academic skills of developmentally disabled and culturally disadvantaged population. He also does research in spirituality, moral development, and human virtues as well as their impact on quality of life in individuals with disabilities and their families. He has authored four books and over 50 articles.

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