



Short Communication

The pros and cons of having a meaningful life



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Meaning
College students
Relationships
Positive affect
Fear of failure

ABSTRACT

Although meaning in life is often perceived as an important aspect of psychological well-being, Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013) suggest that finding meaning in one's life includes not only positive affect but also anxiety. The purpose of these studies was to investigate if college students who attached meaning to their educations and interpersonal relationships also experienced negative affect and anxiety about these experiences. In Study 1 we hypothesized that the more meaningful students found attending college the more positive and negative affect they would experience. In Study 2 we extended the hypothesis to interpersonal meaning through examination of friendships and romantic and family relationships. Across both studies, educational and interpersonal meaning was associated with general positive affect and fear of failure. These findings suggest that meaning in life may be associated with not only happiness, but also stress because of the worry over losing the meaningful experience.

1. Introduction

Researchers who study well-being differentiate between two aspects: hedonic well-being, associated primarily with positive affect; and eudaimonic well-being, defined variously as personal growth, flourishing, or meaning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). Meaning in life, in particular, has been identified as an important aspect of psychological health, with Steger, Shin, Shim, and Fitch-Martin (2013) calling it a “flagship indicator” of well-being that incorporates both happiness and eudaimonic well-being. Other researchers have found that a sense of meaning or purpose in life is related to greater psychological well-being (Ryff; Seligman, 2011) and lower overall stress (Park & Baumeister, 2017).

Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013) also contend that happiness and meaning are closely related. They proposed, however, that under certain circumstances one's happiness and sense of a meaningful life would diverge. In an effort to differentiate the happy life from the meaningful life, Baumeister et al. correlated participants' reported happiness and meaningfulness with a variety of external measures, focusing on those which were uniquely associated with either happiness or meaningfulness. Although meaningfulness and happiness were positively correlated with one another, each showed unique patterns of correlations with the external measures. Baumeister et al. concluded that happiness is present-oriented and involves satisfying basic wants and needs. In contrast, meaning is related to expressing the self and involves helping others. Baumeister et al. suggest that happiness involves “taking” and meaning involves “giving.” They argue that

stress and anxiety are unavoidable concomitants of meaningfulness, because experiences of self-expression and helpfulness can also lead to worry. Although guiding theory in this area has long implied that meaningfulness may involve stress and anxiety (e.g., Frankl, 1959), Baumeister et al. provided the first empirical support of these relationships.

The specific aspect of one's life that people regard as most meaningful to them probably changes across the lifespan. Past studies indicate that the educational experience is an important source of meaning among young adults. Henderson-King and Mitchell (2011), for example, identified ten meanings that college students ascribed to their educations, and found that students who were searching for meaning in life endorsed the majority of these meanings. Similarly, Lambert et al. (2013) found a positive association between a sense of interpersonal belonging and meaning in life, while Lambert et al. (2010) found that family relationships in particular were a source of meaning in young adults. Because educational experiences and interpersonal relationships are important sources of meaningfulness among young adults, we focused our examination of meaningfulness in these areas.

The purpose of the current research was to expand on the work of Baumeister et al. (2013) and investigate whether a meaningful life involves negative affect. In two studies, we predicted that individual differences in reported meaningfulness of life would be related to both positive affect and anxiety. We focused our examination on life experiences that previous research had shown to be particularly meaningful to college students: higher education (Study 1) and social relationships (Study 2).

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2. Study 1: meaningfulness of educational experiences

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

College students (182 women, 74 men) from a public university in the United States participated in an online survey. The study was one of many available to students as part of a research experience course requirement; course instructors were not aware of which research experiences students completed. Participants' average age was 19.9 ($SD = 1.7$) years. In terms of race/ethnicity, participants most commonly identified as White (63%), African American (29%), and Hispanic/Latino (9%). All participants accessed the study by linking from a university webpage to SurveyMonkey. After reading an informed consent statement, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information and to complete six measures of primary interest.

2.1.2. Measures

Participants reported their basic demographic information and then completed measures of meaning, positive and negative affect, stress, fear of failure, and motivation. All responses were on a 7-point point scale.

2.1.2.1. Meaningfulness. Meaningfulness of attending college was measured by adapting the Multidimensional Existential Meaning scale (George & Park, 2016). This 15-item scale combines three factors related to meaning in life: purpose, comprehension, and mattering. They were adapted to focus on earning a college degree (e.g., “earning a degree means that my life makes sense,” $\alpha = 0.96$).

2.1.2.2. Positive and negative affect. Participants' affective experience of college was measured by modifying the 16 items of the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Diener et al., 2009) to apply to attending college (e.g., “college makes me feel positive at times;” “college makes me feel sad at times”). Positive ($\alpha = 0.92$) and negative ($\alpha = 0.92$) affect subscale scores were calculated.

2.1.2.3. Stress. Participants reported the extent to which college made them stressed, worried, anxious, depressed, upset, and was hard on their nerves ($\alpha = 0.90$). These items were generated by the researchers and intended to be face-valid measures of stress and anxiety.

2.1.2.4. Fear of failure. Participants reported the extent to which “the thought of failing out of college” worried, stressed, depressed, upset, made them nervous, and made them anxious ($\alpha = 0.98$). These items were also generated by the researchers.

2.1.2.5. Test anxiety. Participants responded to ten items that comprise Sarason's (1978) Test Anxiety Scale. The original response scale was modified (from true-false) to the same 7-point scale that was used for the other measures ($\alpha = 0.89$).

2.1.2.6. Motivation. The amotivation subscale of the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992) was used to measure lack of motivation to excel in college. College students vary in their motivation, which could affect both the meaning they attach to their education and the amount of stress it engenders. Previous research suggests that motivation is correlated with the meaning found in attending college (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). The American College Health Association (2015) found that stress and anxiety were the two most commonly reported factors affecting students' academic performance. Amotivation, which represented a straightforward measure of lack of motivation (e.g., “I don't know why I am in college;” $\alpha = 0.95$), was included as a possible covariate in order to control for individual differences in students' motivation toward college.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations (Study 1).

| Variable | Mean | Standard deviation |
|--------------------|------|--------------------|
| 1. Meaning | 4.78 | 1.43 |
| 2. Positive affect | 5.66 | 1.03 |
| 3. Negative affect | 5.29 | 1.32 |
| 4. Stress | 5.87 | 1.23 |
| 5. Fear of failure | 5.41 | 1.86 |
| 6. Test anxiety | 4.43 | 1.38 |
| 7. Amotivation | 1.92 | 1.50 |

Table 2
Correlations between meaningfulness of college and measures of affect, stress, and anxiety (Study 1).

| Variable | Correlation with meaning | Correlation controlling for amotivation |
|-----------------|--------------------------|---|
| Positive affect | 0.29*** | 0.27*** |
| Negative affect | −0.01 | 0.04 |
| Stress | −0.01 | 0.01 |
| Fear of failure | 0.12 ⁺ | 0.14 ⁺ |
| Test anxiety | 0.03 | 0.12 ⁺ |
| Amotivation | −0.27*** | − |

⁺ $p < 0.10$.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

2.2. Results and discussion

Means and standard deviations for the variables of interest are reported in Table 1. To test the hypothesis that meaningfulness involves affect, stress, and anxiety, the educational meaningfulness scale was correlated with stress, fear of failure, test anxiety, affect, and amotivation. As can be seen in Table 2, meaning was positively correlated with positive affect ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), and marginally correlated with fear of failure ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.06$).

As expected, meaning was also related to amotivation ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$). To control for individual differences in motivation toward college, partial correlations that controlled for amotivation scores were also calculated. After accounting for motivation toward college, meaning remained correlated with positive affect ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) but also showed significant correlations with fear of failure ($r = 0.14$, $p = 0.02$) and test anxiety ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.047$).

In summary, the prediction that meaningfulness would be related to both positive affect and anxiety was supported. Controlling for motivation, meaningfulness of college predicted both positive affect and worry about not doing well. Meaning was not, however, related to general negative affect or stress; instead, these relationships were limited to indicators of performance fear. This pattern of findings is consistent with the position of Baumeister et al. (2013), who state that meaning involves a long-term time perspective and the worry that is often prompted by that time perspective.

3. Study 2: meaningfulness of interpersonal relationships

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

An independent sample of college students (77 women, 50 men) from the same institution as Study 1 participated in a separate online survey. Participants most commonly identified as White (58%), African American (29%), and Hispanic/Latino (14%). As in Study 1, participants received credit toward a course research experience requirement and accessed the study through SurveyMonkey. They were asked to provide demographic information and then completed a series of measures that tapped three specific types of interpersonal relationships.

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