

# PREDICTIVE ROLE OF MEANING IN LIFE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND RURAL/ URBAN DIFFERENCES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the relationship between meaning in life and mental health in a sample of 143 undergraduate students from colleges of Jammu (93 females, 65 %; 50 males, 35 %) aged 18- 29,  $M=21$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ . Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al., 2006 and short form of mental health continuum (MHC-SF) by Keyes, 2009 were used. Analysis included descriptive statistics, the scales were tested for internal consistency, and correlations were analyzed with simple linear regression. Also, *t*-test was used to determine the differences based on rural/urban background of the students. The results showed a significant relationship between meaning in life and mental health. Also differences were found in mental health between rural and urban college students. We conclude that the experience of meaning in life is important for mental health of students and socio demographics also play an imperative role.

**Key Words:** College, meaning in life, mental health, rural, undergraduates, urban

Mental health issues have become a global concern (Kim & Kim, 2017). According to world health organization (WHO), around 450 million people suffer from some form of mental health related problems (Aldiabat, Matini, & Le Navenc, 2014). In India, at least one in seven people are affected by mental illness (Reddy, Gupta & Lohiya, 2013). In recent years focus is being shifted to young generation as they are a vital resource for any country. Around 20 to 25 % of college going students across the world suffers from various mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal thoughts (Douce & Keeling, 2014; Mitchell, 2016).

College students are at a high risk of developing mental illnesses as they have to deal with stress relating to their personal and academic life. As a result of transitioning from school life to higher education, they have to face many challenges in their academics like adjusting to new environment, building healthy inter-relationships, communicating, dealing with exam pressure, managing finances, and transitioning to a more competitive lifestyle (Deb, Thomas, Bose, & Aswathi, 2019). Many are unable to adapt to such expectations and demands (Aldiabat, et al., 2014). All these conditions make them prone to develop mental health issues like depression and anxiety which can further generate feeling of hopelessness, loneliness, detachment from society, and developing suicidal thoughts (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2012).

Students at this phase also strive to find meaning in their lives, which assists them in making certain lifestyle choices and fulfilling their future aspirations (Chickering & Stamm, 2002; Steger 2012; Van der Walt, 2019). Experiencing sense of meaning in one's life is essential to understand the environment, cope with everyday hassles and function at optimum level (Baumeister, 1991; Wong, 2012). Meaning in life is associated with positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions and risk behaviours (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011), (Dezutter, et al., 2014; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). The following section presents the literature relevant to meaning in life and its relation to mental health in college students. Studies are also mentioned highlighting the role of demographics on mental health.

## Meaning in life and mental health

Meaning in life is a construct that has been discussed by theologians and philosophers since centuries; however it is new to the academic field of psychology (Schnitzer, 2011; Wolf, 2010). The most significant approach toward meaning in life was given by Victor Frankl (Auhagen, 2000). According to Frankl, having meaning in life was essential in order to achieve life goals and lead a worthwhile life (Frankl 1967, 1997; Hodges, 2014). Various scholars further attempted to measure meaning in life and operationalize the theories given by Frankl (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Maddi, 1967). In the words of Steger et al. (2009) meaning in life is "the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or over-arching aim in life" (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009, p. 43).

The conceptual framework of meaning in life consists of three main components that is cognitive, motivational and affective component. The cognitive component helps in making sense of one's life and understanding how one fits into the world and his/her significance. The motivational component helps in understanding the mission of one's life, his aspirations and goals and personal values for which he/she can dedicate his/her life to. The affective component generates the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment as a result of having life that makes sense (Reker & Wong; George & Park, 2016).

Steger and colleagues (2006) propounded that meaning in life has two dimensions that is presence of meaning and search for meaning. Presence of meaning is the comprehension of one's life and environment and perceiving it to be significant. It helps in creating a framework to view and interpret one's life events with clarity (King et al., 2006). The second dimension, search for meaning, refers to the activity and the efforts an individual puts in, to enhance his understanding of the purpose, significance and meaning of his life. It helps in alignment of behaviour in the direction of the valued goals (Dezutter, et al., 2014; Krok, 2018).

Empirical evidence in adults' population suggests relationship between experiencing meaning in life and better psychological health, positive affect (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; O'Donnell, Shim, Barenz, & Steger, 2014) life satisfaction (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and psychological adjustment (King et al. 2006; Thompson et al. 2003). In a nationwide study by Kraus (2007), on older adults ( $N = 1,093$ ), it was found that having meaning in life led to the offset of the harmful impact of traumatic life events on depressive symptoms (Kraus, 2007). Lack of meaning and purpose in life has been seen to be related with low satisfaction, mental distress, depression, anxiety and negative affect (Brassai et al., 2011; Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Henry et al., 2014; Riichiro & Masahiko, 2006; Simonsson, Nilsson, Leppert, & Diwan, 2008). Significant associations were found between meaning in life and depressive symptoms in a study done by Kleftharas and Psarra (2012) on 401 recruits of national service in Navy. Subjects with higher depression scores were found to have a lower sense of meaning in life and subjects with higher life meaning were found to have lower depressive symptomatology (Kleftharas & Psarra, 2012). Results from several other studies have demonstrated link between meaning in life and better physical health, increased longevity and reduced morbidity (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016; Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013; Haugan, 2014; O'Donnell, Shim, Barenz, & Steger, 2014; Steger et al., 2009). Hooker and colleagues (2018) proposed a model suggesting that experiencing global sense of meaning is a result of increased meaning salience, or being aware of meaning in every moment of every day, which in turn enhances self-regulatory behaviours and promotes engagement in health promoting behaviours.

Literature suggests that meaning in life in adolescence and young adults sample has also shown to be important factor and positively related with their well being and positive attitudes (Mason, 2014; Rathi & Rastogi, 2007; Steger, 2012). A study by Krok (2018) on 384 participants belonging to age range of 16-20 years found that meaning in life had strong and positive relationship with psychological well being and subjective well being. Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2010), collected data from a sample of 1,807 adolescents of Hong Kong and found that meaning in life and optimism was significantly associated with life satisfaction. Another study by Garcia- Alandete (2015) in a sample of 180 Spanish undergraduates showed a significant relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being dimensions.

Absence or low level of meaning in life has found to be related with mental health problems and risk taking behaviours like drug use, and suicidal ideation (Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006; Tuttle, 2006). The findings of a study done by Rahiminezhad et al. (2017) on 126 students at university level revealed that life meaningfulness showed the highest negative relationship with depression and stress. In another study by Van der Walt (2019) data was obtained from 269 first year students of college and results suggested that small but significant relation existed between their meaning in life and mental health.

### **Demographics and mental health**

Research suggests that it is important to take into account the demographic variables and the socioeconomic conditions of individuals while studying their mental health (Kim & Kim, 2017). Studies have been conducted on mental health which focused on factors like age group, socio economic status, gender, residential area, and environmental factors (Dales & Cakmak, 2016; Mayberry, Horowitz, & Declercq, 2007; Zhang, Qing & Delprino, 2011) In a meta analytic review by Gruebner et al (2017), it was found that urban dwellers were more prone to anxiety, mood disorders and addictive behaviours. Study carried out on 2691 participants from north Sweden revealed that differences existed among youth belonging to rural and urban areas, where psychological distress was more prevalent in urban areas (Jonsson, Goicolea, & Sebastian, 2019). Similarly, significant differences were found in another study done on college students of china on constructs related to mental health and their rural/urban origin (Zhang et al., 2011)

The reports by National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) in India indicated that prevalence of mental disorders was 2-3 times higher in urban areas, in comparison to rural areas. Few studies done on children and adolescents of India suggests that there is an existence of rural and urban differences on mental health (Malhotra & Patra, 2014; Naik, Bhattacharjee, & Sutradhar, 2015). However, not much empirical evidence is available in this area on different populations including college students.

### Purpose of the study

Intensive literature review indicates that although there is abundant research highlighting the association between meaning in life and mental health, limited research has been carried out on Indian students of colleges. Similarly, empirical evidence supporting the role of demographic variable like rural/urban origin on mental health in college students is also scarce in India. Given this background, the need was felt to bridge the knowledge gap by carrying out a systematic study on college students' to explore the relationship between meaning in life and its association with mental health and also examining the rural/urban differences between them relating to mental health. The following hypotheses were formulated for this purpose:

### Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant difference between the rural and urban college students with respect to their mental health.
2. There will be an impact of meaning in life on mental health of college students.

### Method

#### Participants and Procedure

Data was collected in the form of a survey from the college students of Jammu region. Students participated voluntarily to become part of this research work. Consent was obtained from the participants in a written format. The aim and objectives of the research were also explained before administering the survey. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. On average, participants took 10 minutes to complete the questionnaires. Data was collected using cross-sectional design from 150 students of both private and government colleges working within the Jammu region. Convenience sampling technique was used to collect data. Out of 150, seven respondents did not completely fill the form and hence were excluded from the final data. 143 students who completed the survey, were retained and out of these, 93 (65%) were females, while 50 (35%) were males. Participants were 21 years old on average (SD= 2.68) age ranged from 18 to 29 years. 68 students (47.6%) belonged to the rural area while 75 students (52.4%) belonged to the urban area of Jammu region. 55 students belonged to the private institutions while rest of the 88 students belonged to the government institutions.

#### Measures

The measures used in this study are presented below:

**Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)** (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006): It consists of 10 items using a 7-item scale ranging from 1 (Absolutely true) to 7 (Absolutely untrue). The sub-dimensions of the scale include (1) Presence of Meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) Search for Meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives).

**Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF) Scale** (Keyes, C. L. M., 2009): This scale consists of 14 items rated upon a 6-point scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 6 (Everyday). Score ranges from 0-70. The sub-dimensions include Hedonic emotional well-being, social well-being and psychological well-being.

#### Statistical Analysis

For the present study, in order to test the relationships, t-test, correlation and regression analysis was done using SPSS 23.

### Results and Interpretation

After collecting all the data, it was entered into SPSS 23 and was checked for any missing values. The descriptive analysis was checked and the reliability of the scales was also calculated. Furthermore, the normality of the data was checked and found to be sufficient.

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha and Bivariate correlations among scale scores**

| S. no | Variable        | 1 | 2     | 3      | M    | SD   | Alpha |
|-------|-----------------|---|-------|--------|------|------|-------|
| 1     | Area (1=R, 2=U) | - | -.029 | -.192* | 1.52 | .50  | -     |
| 2     | Meaning in life | - | -     | .45**  | 50.9 | 8.70 | .69   |

|   |               |   |   |   |      |      |     |
|---|---------------|---|---|---|------|------|-----|
| 3 | Mental health | - | - | - | 45.8 | 13.3 | .84 |
|---|---------------|---|---|---|------|------|-----|

Note. F = female, M = male; R= rural, U= urban.

\* correlation significant at 0.05 level.

\*\* correlation significant at 0.01 level.

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlation among the variables of the study. The Pearson correlation results( $r(143) = .45$   $p < .001$  two tailed indicated medium and highly significant relationship exists between meaning in life and mental health.

**Table 1.1. The Mean, SD, t-value, and Significance value**

| Group | Mean | Std. Deviation | t-value | Significance(p) |
|-------|------|----------------|---------|-----------------|
| Rural | 48.5 | 14.2           | 2.32    | .02             |
| Urban | 43.3 | 12.16          |         |                 |

When analyzing table 1.1, it is to be inferred that the mean score of the students belonging to rural area (48.5) is slightly higher than the students belonging to the urban area (43.3) and the t-value 2.32, is significant at 0.05. Hence, it can be said that our first hypothesis is accepted. Thus, significant differences exist between the rural and urban college students with respect to their mental health.

In order to assess the second hypothesis, the simple linear regression analysis is used, Table 1.2. shows the model summary for meaning in life total score as predictor and mental health score as outcome variable.

**Table 1.2: Model summary for overall meaning in life as a predictor variable and mental health as an outcome variable**

| S. no | Predictor       | B    | t value | F value | R square | Sig. |
|-------|-----------------|------|---------|---------|----------|------|
| 1     | Meaning in life | .700 | 1.70    | 36.713  | .207     | .000 |

➤ Predictor Variable: Meaning in life.

➤ Outcome Variable: Mental health.

Table 1.2 shows that our model  $F(1, 143) = 36.713$ ,  $p = .000$  is significant at both .01 levels of significance. Therefore, we can conclude that our regression model results in significantly better prediction of the impact of meaning in life on the mental health of college students. As per the summary table the value of R square reflects the variance, .207. This shows that 20.7 % variance in the dependent variable i.e. on mental health is because of independent variable i.e. meaning in life. Having meaning in one’s life improves and enhances the positive mental health of the college going students Thus, our second hypothesis stands accepted and we can say that meaning in life does have an impact on mental health.

**Discussion**

In our study, the results from correlation and regression analyses of meaning in life and mental health among young college going students supported the hypothesis that meaning in life impacts mental health. This shows that those students who perceive their life to be meaningful will feel more psychologically uplifted than those who do not find their life to have any meaning. Previous literature also shows studies with similar results while evaluating the relationship between meaning in life and constructs related to mental health (Garcia-Alandate, 2013; Garcini, 2013). In a study conducted by Rathi and Rastogi (2007) on 104 school students, high correlation was found between students meaning in life and psychological well being( Rathi & Rastogi, 2007)

Another important focus of this study was on investigating the differences in college students’ mental health in relation to the area they belonged to, which was categorized as rural or urban. The study showed that there was a difference between rural and urban students based on their mental health. These differences may be a result of the lifestyle of young adults residing in rural and urban areas as well as the government related health and educational schemes and policies in both the areas. Although demographic variables have been studied previously, this variable of interest needs more attention as previous literature on rural/urban comparison have showed mixed results relating to various psychological health constructs like suicide, depression and general psychological well being (Zhang et al, 2017; Jonsson et al, 2019).

**Conclusion**

The study provided an insight on the relationship between meaning in life and mental health among young adults going to colleges. The findings of the study highlight the importance of both meaning in life and

mental health of college students. A better understanding of these variables can facilitate educators and counselors to formulate policies which would further help the students to adjust in a better way to their environment. The results of this study are of relevance for educators and administrative authorities who can take measures to increase awareness on this issue and create a supportive academic environment in educational institutions. Also mental health programs can be developed for students to prevent mental illness and promote overall mental well being and productivity among them. The current study tried to expand upon the existing literature however few limitations of the study need to be addressed. Firstly, data was collected using convenience sampling and self reported questionnaires were used. Future researchers can use other rigorous assessment methodologies. Secondly, the sample was limited to only college students and hence can't be generalized to sample of other age groups. Future studies can explore relationship between these variables among other population of different age range. Lastly, as the study followed correlation design, causal relationship could not be inferred between meaning in life and mental health. For this purpose, future empirical work should employ longitudinal designs.

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