Relationship of Purpose in Life and Autonomy on Depression in College Students

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Bio:

Sarah Anderson graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Rehabilitation Studies with a minor in Psychology. Sarah grew up in Fort Worth with her parents and three siblings, and her family relocated to Argyle prior to her junior year in high school. Sarah joined Sigma Phi Lambda during her sophomore year and served as the chapter's secretary. She has logged more than 400 hours of community service through a variety of organizations and also found time to hold a part-time job. She had an internship with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Dallas and completed a thesis on the relationship of autonomy to depression. Sarah accomplished all of this and completed her degree requirements in just three years. She plans on working in her field for one year after graduation, and then begin law school. She plans to specialize malpractice and health care law.
Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to explore the relationship between purpose of life, autonomy, and depression among college students. It was hypothesized that purpose of life and autonomy scores would predict depression scores. A convenience sample of 46 undergraduate students enrolled in online courses participated in the study. The majority of participants were female (87.2%) between the ages of 18 to 25 years of age (70.2%). Course instructors provided students with a link to an anonymous, online survey developed by the investigator. The survey consisted of demographic items (e.g., gender, age); two subscales from the Scales of Psychological Well-being (Ryff, 1989), the Autonomy scale and Purpose of Life scale; and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). Purpose of Life and Autonomy scores did not predict Depression scores, thus the hypothesis was not statistically supported. Autonomy and Purpose of Life, however, were found to have a positive correlation with each other ($r = .49, p < .01$). Although the hypothesis was not supported, it is possible that the size of the study’s sample may have been too small to detect the true relationship among these constructs.
Introduction

Suicide among college students continues to be a cause of concern for college mental health care professionals, university and college administrators, and the college community. Taub & Thompson (2013) found suicide to be the second-leading cause of death among college students. Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins (2001) reported that 53% of their college student sample stated that they experienced depression since beginning college, with 9% reporting they had considered committing suicide since beginning college. The relationship between suicide ideation and depression has been well documented in the literature.

College has always been a time for students to find out who they are and what they want in life; however, this may cause a great deal of stress for a student. College students are placed in new and unfamiliar social situations while furthering their education and knowledge. As a result, students strive to build relationships with other students and teachers while they are also trying to manage course loads, achieve the highest grades, excel in extra curricular activities, participate in multiple organizations, and attempt to enjoy “college life.” These aspects of college are constantly in the consciousness of students and can lead students to believe that they need to be “perfect” in every aspect of college. Students who have a high need for achieving perfection, and those who experience hopelessness, have been found to be at a high risk for suicide ideation (Dean, Range, & Goggin, 1996). The stress of being a college student can lead to “feelings of failure, guilt, indecisiveness, procrastination, shame, and low self-esteem” (Dean, Range, & Goggin, 1996; p. 181). This has significant implications for students as they strive to develop a level of autonomy in the college environment.

Autonomy is defined as the “ability to govern oneself, make decisions and choose one’s own pathways, and think for oneself” (O’Donnell, Chang, & Miller, 2013; p. 229). This is
exactly what college-aged students are aiming to accomplish. College is all about finding what you want to be in life and what skills you possess. O’Donnell and colleagues found that an individual’s sense of autonomy was related to reduced depressive indications, amplified participation with school and academics, improved job contentment, and greater individual well-being (p. 229). However, their research was very careful to include that “a high sense of autonomy does not necessarily lead to happiness if one also has had a negative explanatory style for the events in one’s life” (p. 232).

Robak & Griffin (2000) found a relationship between one’s purpose in life and depression among college students who had experienced the death of a loved one, with depression being associated with having a lower purpose in life. Conversely, individuals with a greater purpose in life were found to be happier. Mei-Chuan, Lightsey, Pietruszka, Uruk, & Wells (2007) reported that higher levels of purpose in life had an inverse relationship with suicidal behavior and thoughts as well as with depression. Mei-Chuan and colleagues suggested that these results underscore the importance of augmenting reasons for living and purpose in life among suicidal or potentially suicidal persons.

Among college students, depression, a precursor to suicide, has been found inversely related to a variety of factors, such as one’s sense of autonomy and purpose in life. Previous studies, however, have only studied the relationships of these factors with depression. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to determine if levels of autonomy and purpose in life can predict depression among college students. It is hypothesized that students who have both a high level of autonomy and purpose in life will have lower depressive symptomology.
Methods

Procedure

Students of a southwestern, urban university enrolled in online courses offered by an undergraduate rehabilitation program comprised our convenience sample of study participants. Participation involved completing an anonymous, online survey that had been made available for a period of two weeks. The selection criteria were: (a) the individual must be an enrolled student, and (b) be at least 18 years of age.

Upon receiving approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB), instructors of online courses offered in the program were sent an email requesting their assistance in making the anonymous, online survey available to their students. Instructors were asked to post an announcement to their Blackboard courses with information about the survey, a request for students to participate, and the link to the survey. The survey was developed using Qualtrics, an online survey software program. Consent was obtained by the participant selecting the option “yes” to the first item of the survey, which stated, “Yes, I agree to participate in this study.” Upon providing consent, the participant was able to proceed to the remaining survey items. No incentive was offered for completing the survey. As no identifying information from participants was collected, the confidentiality of participants was protected. Further, the IRB waived the requirement of a signed consent because it would have compromised the identity of participants.

Participants

Study participants were undergraduate students enrolled in online rehabilitation studies courses and who were at least 18 years of age. A minimum sample of 40 participants was necessary for the study, based on a significance level of .05, a power level of .80, and a medium
effect size (Green, 1991; as cited in Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). A total of 46 students consented to participate in the study and completed the survey.

**Instruments**

**Demographic characteristics.** Participants completed a survey that included items regarding demographic characteristics, specifically gender, age, marital status, if he or she were employed, and college student status.

**Psychometric scales.** The research questionnaire contained 40 items from the following instruments:

The subscale *Autonomy*, from the *Scales of Psychological Well-Being* (Ryff, 1989), was used as a measure of autonomy. The instrument consists of 14 items that are scored using a six-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The range of scores possible is 14 to 84, with higher scores indicating perceptions of having more autonomy. Individuals with high scores are described as being self-determining and independent, able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways, regulate behavior from within, and evaluate self by personal standards. Individuals with low scores are described as being concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others, reliant on judgments of others to make important decisions, and conforming to social pressures to think and act in certain ways. The Autonomy subscale has been reported to have good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and validity (Ryff, 1989).

The subscale *Purpose in Life*, from the *Scales of Psychological Well-Being* instrument (Ryff, 1989), was used as a measure of purpose in life. The subscale consists of 14 items that are scored using a six-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The range of scores possible is 14 to 84, with higher scores indicating having a stronger sense of purpose in
life. Individuals with high scores are described as having goals in life and a sense of
directedness, feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, holding beliefs that give life
purpose, and having aims and objectives for living. Individuals with low scores are described as
lacking a sense of meaning in life, having few goals or aims and lacking a sense of direction,
unable to see purpose of past life, and having no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning. The
subscale has been reported to have good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and validity
(Ryff, 1989).

The Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) was
used as a measure of depressive symptomatology. The instrument consists of 21 items assessing
an individual’s level of current symptoms of depression using a four-point Likert-type scale (0 =
“I do not feel sad”, 3 = “I am so sad or unhappy that I can’t stand it). Higher scores indicate a
clinical level of depressive symptoms. The BDI has been reported to have good reliability and
validity (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988).

Statistical Analyses

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Windows (SPSS 20.0), data was
analyzed with descriptive statistics, correlations, and multiple regression to test the research
hypothesis. A preliminary analysis confirmed that the scores of our dataset of 46 cases were
normally distributed and thus met the assumption for a multivariate analysis.

The dependent variable was Depression scores as measured by the Beck Depression
Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). Purpose of Life scores, measured
by the Purpose of Life scale (Ryff, 1989), and Autonomy scores, measured by the Autonomy
scale (Ryff, 1989), were the independent variables. The independent variables were entered
together as one block in the multiple regression analysis.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive data of participants. Participants were predominantly female (87.2%) and single (78.7%), and most worked part-time (59.6%). Thirty-eight percent were between the ages of 18 to 20 years of age, and 34.0% between the ages of 21 to 25 years of age. In terms of college classification, 36.2% were seniors and 34% were juniors.

Multivariate Statistics

Table 2 contains the correlation matrix for the dependent and independent variables. A significant positive correlation was found between Purpose in Life and Autonomy ($r = .49, p < .01$).

Multiple regression analysis

No relationship was found between Depression and Purpose in Life, or Depression and Autonomy, therefore Purpose in Life and Autonomy did not predict Depression, $F(2, 36) = 1.645, p > .05$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to predict depression symptomology among college students based on levels of autonomy and purpose in life. Although a positive relationship was found between autonomy and purpose in life values, no relationship was found between autonomy and depression, or purpose in life and depression. Since no relationship was found between the predictor variables (Autonomy, Purpose of Life) and the criterion variable (Depression), a multivariate analysis would be unwarranted. Unfortunately, the hypothesis of this study was not supported by the data.
Literature suggests that there is indeed a relationship between depression and autonomy, and depression and purpose of life, although these relationships were not found in our sample of college students. Depression and suicidal ideation among college students is a significant concern among mental health practitioners and finding those factors that may influence depression by diminishing its occurrence should lead to increasingly effective interventions for this particular population. Given that increased levels of autonomy and purpose in life have been found inversely related to depression in previous studies, and that autonomy and purpose in life was found positively related in the present study, it seems important that there be further exploration of the relationship of these factors to depression.

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. First, this study was cross-sectional and correlational in design, and thus, no causal association between variables can be determined. Most importantly, the sample size may have been too small and homogenous for the relationship to be found. This was a convenience sample of students in one undergraduate program who were taking online classes, which may mean the sample was not truly representative of a diverse college student population.

Furthermore, there was no follow up with participants to discuss their responses or previous events that may have had an impact on their responses. For example, O’Donnell, Chang, & Miller (2013) concluded that having a higher sense of autonomy does not necessarily mean the participants are happy or do not experience depressive symptoms. Autonomy has to be considered within the context of other events that have happened in a person’s life. Therefore, not all low scores on an autonomy scale would mean the respondent is unhappy. This would add to the complexity of clearly identifying a relationship between autonomy and depression.
College is a time for students to find their purpose in life. Our convenience sample was composed exclusively of students in the rehabilitation studies program and did not include students from different majors or undecided students. When a student has not declared a major, he or she could experience additional stress. However, these students were not included in our study. Having such a homogenous sample may have added to the inability of determining the predictive ability of autonomy and purpose of life on depressive symptomology.

College campuses need to increase awareness of student mental health issues. Suicide and depression is too common an occurrence on campuses. Students should have access to multiple resources and counselors to help them identify and reduce stressors that may lead to depression or thoughts of suicide. Suicide should not be the second leading cause of death among college students (Taub & Thompson, 2013). Despite the hypothesis of this study not being statistically supported, colleges and researchers should consider that a relationship may exist based on the findings of previous studies and consider addressing these factors in any interventions designed to treat depression among college students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this thesis was to determine if levels of autonomy and purpose in life could predict depressive symptomology. Although the hypothesis was not supported by the data, it is recommended that further research be conducted with a larger, more diverse sample. This study should also include multiple universities. It may be important to provide college students with an incentive to participate in a study such as this (e.g. giving extra credit points). Researchers should also explore how autonomy and purpose in life affect depression so that effective interventions involving these factors can be developed to minimize the occurrences of depression and suicide among college-aged students.
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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 46)

| Characteristics | n   | %    |
|-----------------|-----|------|
| Gender          |     |      |
| Male            | 5   | 10.87|
| Female          | 41  | 89.13|
| Age             |     |      |
| 18 – 20         | 18  | 39.13|
| 21 – 25         | 16  | 34.78|
| 26 – 30         | 1   | 2.18 |
| 31 – 35         | 3   | 6.52 |
| 36 – 40         | 2   | 4.35 |
| 41 +            | 6   | 13.04|
| Marital Status  |     |      |
| Single          | 37  | 80.43|
| Married         | 8   | 17.39|
| Divorced        | 1   | 2.18 |
| Employment      |     |      |
| Part-time       | 28  | 60.87|
| Full-time       | 6   | 13.04|
| Unemployed      | 12  | 26.09|
| College Status  |     |      |
| Freshman        | 3   | 6.52 |
| Sophmore        | 10  | 21.74|
| Junior          | 16  | 34.78|
| Senior          | 17  | 36.96|
**Table 2. Correlation Matrix**

| Measure | 1   | 2          | 3   |
|---------|-----|------------|-----|
| 1. PIL  | 1.00| .494**     | -.120|
| 2. AUT  | .494**| 1.00     | .185|
| 3. DEP  | -.120| .185     | 1.00|

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).** PIL = Purpose in Life; AUT = Autonomy, DEP = Depression