

2018

Dispositional Optimism as a Predictor of Experiencing Purpose in Life

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By

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A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of
Barry University in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Miami Shores, Florida

May 30, 2018

BARRY UNIVERSITY

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to a few of the most inspiring people in my life. To my father who taught me the importance of not just building a life, but actually living my life. Who taught me to think deeper, to be adaptable, and has always supported me in creating my own path.

To my mother who has taught me to be relentless, to persevere and to always chase my dreams. Who has shown me how to be a leader and to think for myself. To my sisters, who directly and indirectly encourage me to constantly aim to be my best self. Who not only inspire me to always chase my dreams and stay true to myself, but whom I always hope to be an inspiration for as well. And to my future husband, the one who leads by example; continually reminding me of the importance of hard work and consistency. The one who never doubts my ability to achieve all the goals and dreams I have set for myself and always keeps me grounded.

Acknowledgments

There are a number of people without whom this thesis might not have been written, and to whom I am greatly indebted.

I must first thank the handful of thesis advisors who have taken on the task of helping me at every stage of my writing. I do not imagine it's a common thing to have to change advisors four times, but each one of you has played a tremendously influential role in my development as a professional and the development of my research.

Thank you Dr. DeDonno for believing in my initial topic when so many others doubted it; and pushing me to pursue whatever sets my curiosity on fire. Thank you, Dr. Feldman for your continued support when I was less than motivated and resistant to changing my thesis topic. Thank you, Dr. Bacheller for helping me get back on track, motivated and confident in my ability to complete my research. I truly do not think I would have been able to complete this task without you to remind me of my love for this field and the reason I started it all. Lastly, thank you Dr. Wated for coming in at the end of this journey with your unwavering support and willingness to help me finally close this chapter of my life and educational career.

I must also thank Dr. Muscarella, Analia Suarez and the rest of the Clinical Psychology Department for the ways in which you all challenged and supported me throughout this journey - knowing when to push me and when to let up. You have played an enormous role in my professional and personal development; challenging my thought processes and helping me develop my path.

A loving thanks to my friend and classmate Lainie, who has played such an important role in this journey, as we mutually engaged in making sense of the various challenges we faced and in providing encouragement to each other at those times when it

seemed impossible to continue. I cannot imagine having completed this without you by my side, I am forever grateful.

I must also thank my friends Eva, Betsy and Alexis for always checking in with my progress and encouraging me to not give up; for defusing irrational thoughts, and many times believing in me more than I believed in myself. You have all played such huge roles in my life and I am incredibly appreciative of your relentless love and support in all that I do.

I would not be where I am today without all of you and am so incredibly grateful.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between dispositional optimism and purpose in life. Data was collected from 254 participants from a private university located in the southeastern region of the United States. The study collected data using the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) and Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). As hypothesized, optimism predicted purpose in life, i.e., as dispositional optimism increases, purpose in life increases as well. The findings of the present study in context with previous research may be utilized in both clinical and applied settings. By targeting and promoting the development of optimism, one may in turn be able to find purpose in life and facilitate the development of overall well-being.

The Relationship between Dispositional Optimism and Experiencing Purpose in Life

“The human experience of meaning in life is widely viewed as a cornerstone of well-being and central human motivation.” (Heintzelman & King, 2014)

This quote exemplifies the importance of the present study. If meaning or purpose in life is vital to our wellbeing, then it is necessary to understand the factors which may impact this. The objective of the present study was to determine the influence of dispositional optimism on experiencing meaning or purpose in one’s life. This paper will first discuss Logotherapy as proposed by Victor Frankl, and the meaning of one’s purpose in life. Secondly, the paper will discuss optimism’s impact on various factors in one’s life, as well as, various factors which impact optimism. This will be followed by the methods used and the results of this study. This paper will be concluded with the discussion, limitations and practical implications of this study.

Logotherapy

Developed by Frankl (1967), logotherapy is a meaning-centered approach to psychotherapy; proposing that individuals are motivated by the desire to find meaning in their lives. According to Mason and Nel (2012), “‘meaning’ implies that humans acknowledge the physical and psychological impact that life has on them but make a conscious choice to do what is right, good, ethically and called for” (p.1).

The framework of Logotherapy suggests that humans are able to conceptualize and make choices to find meaning and follow what they believe to be their purpose in life. This allows individuals to choose to sacrifice pleasure, or face suffering for what they believe to be a meaningful cause (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013). It is further believed that all obstacles and suffering in life provide an opportunity for growth, self-discovery and

development of life meaning, however meaning in various circumstances are individualized and must be discovered. Frankl proposes that meaning in suffering or through overcoming, does not occur without an individual consciously looking into themselves and detecting the meaning they may take from their experiences (Blair, 2004)

Logotherapy presents the idea that humans are made up of three dimensions: the biological dimension, the psychological dimension and the spiritual dimension (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013). The physical organism is conceptualized as the biological dimension, the basic cognitive processes including attention and memory are conceptualized as the psychological dimension, while the spiritual dimension is proposed to be the essence which differentiates humans from animals (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013; Martinez & Florez, 2015).

Frankl (1967) defines the human person as a spirit which possesses both a mind and a body. The spiritual dimension of humans is what allows them to experience feelings such as love, humor and gratitude. This is the dimension which offers the ability for individuals to reflect upon themselves and thus, behave according to their intent (Martinez & Florez, 2015). Therefore, if one is able to act according to intent, they in turn have the ability to choose their actions (Lewis, 2011). This ability to choose one's response to their circumstances is defined as the 'Freedom of Will' and is one of the three fundamental assumptions of Logotherapy. The other two fundamental assumptions of Logotherapy include 'meaning of life' and 'will to meaning' (Martinez & Florez, 2015).

The spiritual dimension of a human, is a complex, multi-level system which provides individuals the conscious ability of choice. The spiritual dimension is comprised of spiritual resources broken into two categories: self-distancing and self-transcendence

(Martinez & Florez, 2015). The self-distancing spiritual resources include self-comprehension, self-regulation and self-projection. Self-comprehension is defined as the ability to objectively observe oneself. Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and regulate emotional and cognitive processes and oppose oneself to the need of fighting against discomfort of avoiding suffering. While self-projection is that ability to perceive or imagine one differently in the future based on the choices they make now (Martinez & Florez, 2015).

The second category of spiritual resources, self-transcendence, is based on the proposition that humans have the ability to direct their effort and attention towards achieving something outside of themselves, or a goal they have for the future. This category includes differentiation, affection and commitment (Martinez & Florez, 2015). Differentiation is a human's ability to interact with the environment and other beings, while understanding that others may hold different beliefs, values and emotions than themselves. Affection in this context is defined as the ability to be motivated to act based on emotions linked to the values one possesses. While commitment, as defined by logotherapy, is a human's ability to put effort towards a cause or power greater than themselves in order to gain a sense of meaning in their lives (Martinez & Florez, 2015).

Logotherapy proposes three foundational assumptions or pillars; the first is *freedom of will*, which refers to humans having the ability or freedom to choose how to respond to life's circumstances. The second, is the *will to meaning*; this refers to the desire to find meaning in one's life as being the main motivational factor for humans. The last assumption proposed by logotherapy is that there is *meaning in life*; that "meaning in life is unconditional under any and all circumstance" (Lewis, 2011).

The three ways in which individuals find meaning in their lives, according to Frankl, are through creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values (Frankl, 1967). *Creative values* encompass the things in which one contributes to the world. This may be exemplified through work, hobbies or doing good deeds. *Experiential values* include all experiences of truth, love and beauty as exemplified through art, music and relationships. While, *attitudinal value* reflects one's perception of unchangeable situations or unavoidable suffering; for example, choosing to be brave and merciful over vengeful or wishing to cause suffering to others. People find meaning by actualizing all three of these (Lewis, 2011).

Individuals who are able to identify and actualize creative, experiential and attitudinal values in order to find meaning through their suffering, experience *tragic optimism* (Mason & Nel, 2012). *Tragic optimism* is based on the concept of the *tragic triad*. The tragic triad is composed of experiencing guilt, suffering or death. Experiencing these has potential to, and often times leads individuals to face existential crisis. An existential crisis refers to an individual questioning various foundational aspects of life, and more specifically the meaning and purpose of their own. Tragic optimism, is the opposite experience of an existential crisis and composed of three counterparts to the tragic triad. The first component is turning suffering into an accomplishment, the second is finding the opportunity to grow from guilt, and the last is to view life's transitions and the inevitability of death as an incentive to take action in one's life (Mason & Nel, 2012)

One thing which hinders individuals from actualizing any or all of these, is whether or not they are presenting as authentic or inauthentic (Martinez & Florez, 2015). Logotherapy proposes that when an individual's spiritual dimension and both biological

and psychological dimensions are aligned, they present with an authentic personality. This alignment allows the person to exemplify or project their individuality and potentiality. When an individual is restricted by their psychological or biological dimension and are not able to accurately portray their true selves as defined by their spiritual dimension, they are defined as an inauthentic personality. These individuals are unable to actualize who they truly are and aim to be, these individuals become closed to the external world (Martinez & Florez, 2015).

One's ability to live authentically, or lack thereof, also impacts the way they cope with hardships and obstacles in their lives. There are two general categories of coping as proposed by logotherapy, maladaptive coping and adaptive coping (Martinez & Florez, 2015). Maladaptive coping strategies are behaviors defined by an intense need to escape or eliminate the negative emotions they are experiencing due to their circumstances. These may include: self-harm behaviors, substance abuse, avoidance, etc. Adaptive coping skills include behaviors where the individual faces the factors which are bringing discomfort into their lives as opposed to trying to escape them (Martinez & Florez, 2015). These include: self-distancing and self-transcendence. Maladaptive coping strategies are linked to the inauthentic personality type, and often occur due to the inability to face threats to one's façade or presentation of self in fear that one may see who they truly are. While individuals with authentic personality types are able to use adaptive coping skills, due to the absence of fear regarding showing their true selves. They are able to act authentically according to their morals and values and maintain a healthy perspective while facing these obstacles (Frankl, 1967; Martinez & Florez, 2015).

According to logotherapy, when an individual is unable to find purpose or meaning in their life they experience negative feelings including emptiness, hopelessness or despair (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013; Blair, 2004). This dysphoria or displeasure in life is defined as an *existential vacuum*, and has been shown to be linked to aggression, addiction and depression (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013). According to Blair (2004) the rate of individuals who experience this symptomology is increasing and “encompass large segments of younger and older generations.” Individuals who experience this are often in constant pursuit to fill this void (Blair, 2004). In contrast, those whose are able to find purpose or meaning, exemplify a reduction in mental health symptomology, and build a framework and moral compass for directing their lives (Blair, 2004).

Machell, Disabato, and Kashdan (2016), aimed to further understanding of how purpose in life acts as a resiliency factor in preventing the development of antisocial behaviors and promoting the development of prosocial behaviors in at risk teens. The authors observed that multiple studies have accumulated regarding the negative effects of adolescents and children growing up in poverty but discovered a dearth of information missing in regard to factors which buffer the effects of these negative experiences and allow a portion of these individuals to grow into healthy and productive adults. The authors further proposed that individuals who feel they have a purpose in life are more future and goal oriented, and able to overlook obstacles of everyday living in order to achieve their bigger life goals. Previous research has shown that adolescents who do not feel they have a purpose are more likely to turn to risky and deviant behaviors, that are more instantly gratifying, rather than being able to handle temporary discomfort in an effort to reach their larger goals (Machell, Disabato, & Kashdan, 2016).

Machell, Disabato, and Kashdan (2016), collected data from 1,846 parent-adolescent pairs. The adolescents were between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. Data on the following variables was collected: purpose in life, annual household income, prosocial traits, altruism, generosity, empathy, prosocial behavior, and antisocial behavior. The study found that purpose in life did mediate the relationship between poverty and antisocial disobedience and bullying behaviors, but did not predict prosocial traits or behaviors. Therefore, adolescents with a purpose in life are less likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors, but may not necessarily be more inclined to engage in more adaptive behaviors.

Okun and Kim (2016) reported that “individuals who are high in purpose in life have goals in life and a sense of directedness, feel there is meaning in the present and past, and hold beliefs that give purpose” (p.1). They further emphasized that early adulthood is an especially important time for finding one’s purpose in life. One way to develop purpose in life, according Okun and Kim (2016), is to participate in volunteer activities; however, the motivation behind participation in volunteer activities may play a moderating role in the relationship.

There are two basic forms of motivation; intrinsic and extrinsic (Okun & Kim, 2016). Intrinsic motivation is based in internal pleasure, being internally motivated. Pleasure-based prosocial motivation is a form of intrinsic motivation, in which an individual is driven by the pleasure they anticipate feeling from helping others. While pressure-based prosocial motivation is a form of extrinsic motivation, in which an individual feels externally motivated or obligated to complete a task based on social expectations (Okun & Kim, 2016).

Based on the information presented, Okun and Kim (2016), aimed to further the understanding of the relationship between the frequency of volunteering and purpose in life, with either pleasure-based or pressure-based prosocial motivation. The study consisted of 576 participants between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. The data collected included purpose in life, frequency of volunteering, pleasure-based prosocial motivation and pressure-based prosocial motivation. The results of the study indicated that frequency of volunteering and prosocial motivation had an interactive effect on purpose in life (Okun & Kim, 2016). When both pleasure-based prosocial motivation and pressure-based prosocial motivation were reported as low, the relationship between frequency of volunteering and purpose in life was insignificant. Most interestingly, the relationship between frequency of volunteering and purpose in life was strongest when pressure-based prosocial motivation was higher. In other words, when individuals feel more motivated to participate in volunteer activities due their belief that they are helping others and doing what is socially expected of them, they are more likely to report having a purpose in life compared to those who are solely intrinsically motivated (Okun & Kim, 2016).

Chippendale and Boltz (2015) also promote volunteering as a means to develop purpose or meaning in life in the elderly population. These authors aimed to determine the efficacy of a program for the elderly population which addressed the various components of subjective well-being as a means to promote health and wellness (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). Subjective well-being is comprised of three parts: evaluative well-being, hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being. The first, evaluative well-being, is one's satisfaction in life. The second, hedonic well-being, is composed of feelings of happiness, and the absence of negative feelings such as sadness,

anger, and stress. The third, eudemonic well-being, is the sense of purpose and meaning in life (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). The authors indicate that lack of wellness in any of these three areas can have detrimental effects on an individual. For example, individuals with poor hedonic well-being have more difficulty rehabilitating and decline in overall functioning; while poor eudemonic well-being is associated with decreased cognitive functioning and mortality in the elderly population (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015).

There were 41 participants in this study, all of which were above the age of 60 years old (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). Participants were randomly assigned to a life-review writing workshop or writing workshop plus intergenerational exchange program in which the elderly population would be able to share their life stories and lessons with younger generations (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). Data was collected using the following instruments: Mini-Mental Health Status Examination, Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Geriatric Depression Scale, Demographics and Baseline Measures such as assistance with activities of daily living. The results of the study showed that the participants assigned to the writing workshop plus intergenerational exchange program showed significant increases in purpose in life. In contrast, the opposing group saw a slight decrease in purpose in life, which the authors believe may be due to the natural decline seen in this population as they continue to face life stressors unique to the aging population (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). The group that exemplified a significant increase in their purpose in life reported that they felt more fulfilled while sharing their knowledge and life stories with others (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015).

In line with the previous study, Stoyles Chadwick and Caputi (2015) stated, “purpose in life represents the pursuit of a goal that is personally significant and

meaningful, with that goal being an object, a person, or the act of coping in some way.” For the last study, the goal that was personally significant and meaningful was sharing knowledge and experiences with others. For the present study, Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi (2015), looked at how spirituality moderated the relationship between purpose in life, coping and hopefulness in the undergraduate population.

The authors reported that a majority of undergraduate drop-outs occur during the first year, and that those who wait till their second or third year often report that they had difficulty transitioning and adapting in their first year (Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi, 2015). Students diagnosed with depression often use maladaptive coping strategies, are less goal-oriented and have difficulty engaging in activities that enhance personal growth (Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi, 2015). In contrast, previous research has identified that individuals with high levels of hope are better able to continuously adapt while moving forward towards their goals despite obstacles; and that individuals who score high on hope and purpose in life are better able to cope with episodes of depression, anxiety and unexpected obstacles (Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi, 2015).

One hundred and sixty-six individuals participated in this study, 112 of which were female and 54 were male (Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi, 2015). Participants were between 17-53 years old. The following measures were used in this study: Purpose in Life Survey, Coping Self-Efficacy Scale, Adult Trait Hope Scale, Spirituality Index of Well-Being and Measure of Suicidality. As hypothesized by the authors, the relationships between purpose in life, hope, and coping were statistically significant; while spiritual well-being was found to be a significant moderator. The study found multiple predictors of purpose in life, including internal and external spiritual sensitivity, perceived support

system and the ability to effectively work towards achieving goals and to maintain a hopeful outlook toward the future (Stoyles Chadwick, & Caputi,2015). This indicates that when individuals have a high sense of self through internal spirituality, purpose in life, and hope, they are more able to maintain goal-oriented behavior despite temporary obstacles or hardships.

A meta-analysis of 112 studies on existential therapies found that, meaning in life and positive well-being are critical aspects of coping with stressful life events (Vos, Craig, & Cooper, 2015). In observing these studies, Vos, Craig and Cooper (2015) divided them into four categories: positive meaning in life, psychopathology, self-efficacy and self-reported physical well-being. This study strengthened previous research proposing that meaning in life and positive well-being are also negatively correlated with mental health symptomology and positively correlated with self-efficacy. The results of the meta-analysis suggest that meaning centered therapies are more effective than other forms of therapy (Vos, Craig, & Cooper, 2015). This may be in part due to the impact having purpose and meaning has on the way an individual's lives their life on a daily basis and is able to cope with various stressors (Vos, Craig, & Cooper, 2015).

There are copious amounts of research exemplifying the correlations between finding meaning in one's life and the reduction of depression, anxiety and maladaptive coping strategies; as well as increased well-being, self-efficacy, and goal-oriented behavior. Due to the vast number of benefits, it is important to understand factors which impact one's ability to find meaning in their lives. The current study proposes that one of these factors may be dispositional optimism.

Optimism

Optimism is a widely studied construct, due to its vast amount of psychological and physical benefits. Research shows that dispositional optimism is considerably stable over time and is defined as “a generalized tendency to expect positive outcomes,” in one’s life (Patton, 2004). High levels of optimism have been shown to be related to high levels of self-esteem, low levels of psychological distress, more confidence in career decisions, lower levels of anger, depression, anxiety, substance use and antisocial behavior (Creed, Patton & Bartrum, 2002; Patton, Tollit, Romanjuk, Spence, Sheffeld & Sawyer, 2011; Puskar, Bernardo, Ren, Haley, Tark, Switala & Siemon, 2010).

Studies have shown that individuals with high levels of dispositional optimism are better able to cope with the effects of major life changes and trauma. Optimists have stronger psychological resilience which contributes to their ability to cope with stressors and also contributes to life satisfaction (Jiang, Li, Jiang, Yu, Liu, Li, & Zuo, 2014). Individuals who score high on dispositional optimism tend to look towards to the future and be welcoming of any potential obstacles they may encounter. Optimists tend to attribute failures to specific situations while continuing to believe that they will have positive experiences in the future. Optimists separate negative experiences from themselves, which protects their self-concept, self-esteem and perspective of the world. Unlike their counterparts, pessimists tend to internalize negative experiences, thus impacting their self-concept, self-esteem and encouraging their belief that the world is inherently bad. Pessimists believe that good experiences are situational and tend to expect the worst out of future situations (Jiang et al, 2014). This relationship is exemplified through the research of Jiang, Li, Jiang, Yu, Liu, Li, & Zuo (2014), looking at how core self-evaluations mediate the associations of dispositional optimism and life satisfaction.

The research being discussed collected data from 630 undergraduate college students in China. The participants included 317 men and 313 women, between the ages of 19 and 22 (Jiang et al, 2014). The study used the following instruments: Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Jiang et al, 2014). This study aimed to strengthen the research identifying core self-evaluations as a mediating factor between dispositional optimism and life satisfaction. Using a chi-square statistical analysis, this research found that both dispositional optimism and core self-evaluations were significantly related to life satisfaction. Further, this study exemplified that there are “significant paths from optimism and pessimism to life satisfaction through core-self evaluations” (Jiang et al, 2014).

The view held by optimists encouraging them to be welcoming of future events and potential obstacles contributes to not only the psychological resiliency but also allows them to remain goal oriented and motivated (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). Studies have shown that when individuals expect positive outcomes, they are more apt to work harder to achieve their goals (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). Their belief and expectation that their hard work will result in a positive outcome and completion of their goal, gives meaning to their suffering at the time. Further, optimists are better able to reevaluate and adapt to changing circumstances when trying to accomplish a set goal, compared to their pessimistic counterparts. When pessimists face obstacles and difficulty, they tend to disengage and give up on their goals (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014; Jiang et al, 2014).

Barkhuizen, Rothmann and Vijver (2014) exemplified this relationship in their research looking at the effect of dispositional optimism on burnout and work engagement of academics in higher education institutions. The study collected data from 595 students across six universities in South Africa. Forty-six percent of the participants had a doctoral degree, 50.1 percent were female, and the participants were aged between 40 and 49 years old (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). The scales used were the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R), an adapted version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, an Organizational Commitment Scale, and the physical health and psychological health subscales from the ASSET (An Organizational Stress Screening Tool). The study looked at six measurement models, all of which looked at the following variables: job demands, job resources (supervisor relations, task characteristics, and role clarity), burnout (exhaustion and cynicism), work engagement, health (physical ill health and psychologically unwell-being), organizational commitment and dispositional optimism.

The researchers defined 'job demands' as the "physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physical and psychological costs". Job resources are variables which reduce job demands and cost of physical and psychological effort put in to achieve job related functions. Burnout was defined in terms of exhaustion, cynicism, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). Exhaustion is when an individual is void of energy due to physical or psychological overexertion; this often occurs due to being faced with too many job

demands without enough job resources. These factors are widely known as the defining factors of burnout.

Work engagement was studied in regard to an employee's excitement, dedication and confidence in their work (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). Work engagement has three sub factors, including: vigor, dedication and absorption. Vigor is one's mental resilience and willingness to be persistent in accomplishing their work. Dedication is marked by one's commitment and pride in their work. While absorption is when someone is so invested in their work that they are unable to detach from it (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014).

Barkhuizen, Rothmann and Vijver (2014), found that dispositional optimism positively impacted individual's perception of job resources, which had a positive impact on work engagement. Further, dispositional optimism was inversely related to burnout and ill health. These findings further the understanding of the buffering effects of dispositional optimism in regard to burnout (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014).

Ionescu (2014) defined this unrelenting form of motivation as 'motivational persistence', and explored the relationship between this factor, dispositional optimism, neuroticism and goal achievement (Ionescu, 2014). The study proposed that goal achievement provides life meaning and personal accomplishment throughout one's life, and therefore it is important to understand various factors which may impact one's ability to complete the goals that they set (Ionescu, 2014). The author discussed various factors which divide goals, such as if the goal is self-imposed, externally imposed, if the individual feels as if they are fully in control of achieving the goal, or if there are external factors which may hinder or facilitate the acquisition of the goal, (Ionescu, 2014).

Individuals who score higher on optimism, also tend to score higher on motivational persistence. This is likely due to the characteristics associated with dispositional optimism, in which these individuals are more likely to expect positive outcomes, believe in their ability to achieve the goals that they set out to, and their ability to see problems or obstacles as temporary (Ionescu, 2014). Whereas, individuals who score higher on pessimism tend to see problems and obstacles as persistent, while internalizing these; they also tend to expect the worst out of difficult situations which negatively impacts motivation to persist in goal achievement behaviors (Ionescu, 2014).

Ionescu (2014), aimed to strengthen previous research linking dispositional variables to self-concordance and psychological well-being by looking at motivational persistence, optimism and neuroticism as dispositional determinants for self-concordance of goals and psychological well-being. The study defined self-concordance as being related to goals which coincide with one's values and subjects of interest. It was reported that goal self-concordance leads to psychological well-being, therefore any variables which impact self-concordance of goals will simultaneously affect psychological well-being. Ionescu (2014), defined psychological wellbeing as an internal state equal to happiness, and an observable state of one functioning fully; it is further exemplified by "satisfying the needs of competence, autonomy and psychological relatedness".

Data for this study was collected from 74 participants, 30 of which were men and 44 were women. The study collected data using the following self-report measures: Goal self-concordance was measured using the *Striving Assessment Scale*, psychological well-being was measured using the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMEBS)*, motivational persistence was measured using the *Motivational Persistence Scale*,

neuroticism was measured with the *Neuroticism Scale of the Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire* (ZKPQ) and dispositional optimism was measured using the *Life Orientation Test* (Ionescu, 2014). The results of the study indicated that when the variables are looked at together, high levels of motivational persistence and dispositional optimism, and low levels of neuroticism predict high levels of psychological well-being (Ionescu, 2014). Further, the results showed self-concordance was correlated with the measures of dispositional optimism and motivational persistence; while, neuroticism was not a predictor of self-concordance (Ionescu, 2014).

This coincides with previous research exploring the relationship between dispositional optimism, rumination and anxiety. Rumination is defined as a repetitive thinking process, in which an individual becomes mentally stuck on a topic or scenario; this often occurs when an individual is under great pressure or stress, however can become a maladaptive pattern which individuals exhibit inappropriately (Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong & Xiaobo, 2015). Multiple studies have proposed that ruminative thought processes contribute to the maintenance of depression and anxiety and has been found to be more common among females (Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong & Xiaobo, 2015). Despite this agreement, it has yet to be determined whether rumination is a considered a trait or based on affective states. Regardless, it is well documented that rumination and anxiety are highly correlated with one another, and further that dispositional optimism is negatively correlated with anxiety (Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong & Xiaobo, 2015). Due to the stability of dispositional optimism and being known as a protective factor for one's mental health, Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong and Xiaobo (2015) proposed that dispositional optimism would play a mediating role

between ruminative thought process and anxiety. They further hypothesized that rumination would be positively related to anxiety, that dispositional optimism would be negatively correlated with both rumination and anxiety and that dispositional optimism would play a mediating role between the two.

The mediating effect of dispositional optimism on the how rumination impacts anxiety was tested on 448 participants from an undergraduate sample in China. The participants consisted of 214 women and 234 men, with an average age of 20.47 years old. The following scales were used in this study: The Ruminative Response Scale, Revised Life Orientation Test, Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale. The study found that dispositional optimism does play a mediating role. The study further strengthened previous research exemplifying that individuals who score high on dispositional optimism tend to focus on positive life events, and adapt and reevaluate stressful events and situations, rather than ruminate on negative or pessimistic thoughts (Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong & Xiaobo, 2015). Results found that individuals who scored high on dispositional optimism are able to recovery more quickly from situations which spark frustration or stress, compared to individuals with low levels of dispositional optimism (Junbo, Jing, Kongqing, Xiaodong & Xiaobo, 2015).

Individuals who report higher levels of optimism more often use approach related coping strategies, meaning that they take initiative to directly fix the problem rather than attempt to avoid it (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver 2002; Duffy et al., 2013). In addition to this, individuals with greater levels of optimism tend to have more reliable support systems which tend to buffer the effects of stressful life events (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). It is proposed that, individuals with an optimistic life orientation tend to

attract others due to their positivity, which is why they have greater support systems than pessimistic individuals do.

Brissette, Scheier and, Carver (2002), aimed to further understand the mediating role of coping strategy utilization and social networks between dispositional optimism and psychological adjustment during stressful life events by measuring optimism, self-esteem, coping, perceived social support, friendship network size, depression, and perceived stress. Data was collected from 89 undergraduate students. The first set of data was collected within the first three weeks of their first year in college, while the second set of data was collected at the end of their first semester. Participants were between 17 and 20 years old; 46 of which were female and 43 were male (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002).

The authors found that individuals who scored higher on dispositional optimism, also tended to report higher on perceived support measures, and greater social network size (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). Both of these findings supported previous propositions of this relationship. Further, students who scored higher on dispositional optimism, also tended to score high on self-esteem. Despite this relationship, self-esteem was not a predictor of perceived social support, but a mediating variable between optimism and perceived social support (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002).

In regard to psychological adjustment, the study found that the higher an individual score on dispositional optimism, the smaller the impact or increase of stress and depression over the course of the school semester. While self-esteem was not correlated with the amount of stress and depression reported by individuals, social support was. The study found that perceived social support accounts for 71% of the

variation in the relationship between dispositional optimism and depression, and 67% of the variation in the relationship between dispositional optimism and stress (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002).

The last variable studied was coping strategies and how it impacts the relationship between dispositional optimism and scores on stress and depression. The study found that individuals who score higher on optimism are more likely to implement healthier coping strategies such as planning, active coping and positive reinterpretation and growth; while individuals who score lower on optimism are more likely to utilize denial and behavioral disengagement (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). Further, the results also indicated that the coping strategies utilized does play a partially mediating role between dispositional optimism and the development of stress and depression, however high levels of dispositional optimism continue to be the main predictor of these factors. In other words, the higher an individual scores on dispositional optimism, they more likely they will be to handle and cope with changes in their life (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002).

A study by Gherasim, Măirean, and Rusu (2016), looked at the relationship between dispositional optimism and judgments of future life events. The study proposed that affective states would moderate the relationship between dispositional optimism and the extent to which they expected positive future events. Affective states may also be defined as moods, they are temporary emotional states. The study believed that a positive or negative affective state would have a parallel effect on one's judgment of the future (Gherasim, Măirean, & Rusu, 2016). For example, if an individual were in a negative affective state, they would have a negative judgment of future life events; and

alternatively, if someone were in a positive affective state, they would be more likely to judge future life events in a positive manner. However, the study found that affective states did not have a significant effect on individual's expectations of future life events, but that dispositional optimism and dispositional pessimism were stronger predictors of how and individual judges future life events (Gherasim, Măirean, & Rusu, 2016). These findings support previous research in exemplifying the stability and significance of dispositional optimism on expecting future life events to have positive outcomes even when they are not in an optimistic mood.

Gherasim, Măirean, and Rusu (2016) collected data from 259 undergraduate students, 84% of which were female and between the ages of 19 and 28 years old. The study had three randomly assigned experimental groups; a positive affect group, a negative affect group and control group. The participants' affective states were manipulated by watching films eliciting positive or negative feelings, while the control group did not watch a film. Participants were asked to complete the *Life Orientation Test-Revised* (LOT-R) prior to watching the film based on their assigned group, after which participants were asked to rate their moods using the *Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule* and the *Judgment of Life Events Scale* (Gherasim, Măirean, & Rusu, 2016). Gherasim, Măirean, & Rusu (2016), found that while affective states did moderate the relationship between dispositional optimism and judgement of future life events, dispositional optimism was the strongest predictor of individuals' judgments of future positive life events across all affective states. Further, the affective state moderated the relationship in the opposite manner of what was expected. Such that, when an individual scored high on positive affect the relationship between dispositional optimism and

judgment of future positive events weakened, becoming less significant than both the negative affect and control groups relationship to judgment of future positive events (Gherasim, Măirean, & Rusu, 2016).

Another study by Dunn (1996), discussed the impact of dispositional optimism and pessimism on coping with uncontrollable life circumstances such as having an amputation. The study proposed that dispositional optimism and perceived control would greatly impact the effect of a disabling experience, acting as a buffer on psychological wellbeing (Dunn, 1996). Wellbeing was measured and defined by low levels of depression and high levels of self-esteem.

Dispositional optimism has been defined as a steady trait which facilitates an individual to look for and expect positive experiences and outcomes in the future, regardless of the present state that they are in. Based on this, Dunn (1996) proposed that dispositional optimists would be more likely to view their disabling experiences in a more favorable light and allow them to find meaning in it. By finding meaning in a traumatic experience if gives the individual control over their experience, it prevents them from feeling like a victim and encourages them to see the “silver lining” (Dunn, 1996). Dunn, (1996) reported that individuals who are able to find positivity in an aversive situation have a typical set of coping strategies in order to do so. These include: making favorable social comparisons, reevaluating the event as positive, finding side benefits, imagining worse situations, and forgetting the negative aspects of their situations (Dunn, 1996).

The current study collected data from 138 participants who were members of the Eastern Amputee Gulf Association. The ages were between 19 and 78.6 years old, and

123 of the participants were male. Data collection consisted of age and time since amputation, positive meaning by asking participants “has anything positive or good happened to you since your amputation?”, dispositional optimism using the Life Orientation Test, perceived control over disability, depression using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, and self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Dunn, 1996).

Seventy-seven percent of the participants reported that they had found something positive through their disabling experience, and thus given meaning to it (Dunn, 1996). The study further found that those who scored higher on dispositional optimism were better able to cope and adapt. When problem-focused copings strategies are not applicable, optimistic individuals are able to appropriately utilize emotion-focused coping in order to accept circumstances and find meaning for their experiences (Dunn, 1996). Individuals who reported finding meaning through their experiences scored lower on the depression scale, but this did not appear to effect self-esteem scores. While both dispositional optimism and perceived control were both correlated with lower levels of depression and higher scores of self-esteem (Dunn, 1996).

The Present Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between dispositional optimism and purpose in life. This study used a bivariate regression analysis with one independent variable, dispositional optimism, and one dependent variable, purpose in life. One hypothesis was tested in this study:

H₁: Dispositional optimism will predict purpose in life so that optimism will be positively associated with purpose in life.

Previous research suggests that individuals who score high on dispositional optimism are able to cope with life's stressors and obstacles more successfully than those who tend to score lower on optimism and higher on pessimistic traits (Hatchett & Park, 2004). Further, previous research suggests that individuals who score higher on optimism are more confident in career and life decisions (Creed, Patton & Bartrum, 2002). In a society with rising complaints of dissatisfaction in life, it's important to understand factors which impact finding purpose and meaning in one's life (Jiang, et al., 2014).

Method

Participants

This study consisted of 254 participants, 73.6% were women ($n = 187$) and 26.4% were men ($n = 67$). The majority of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 ($n = 220$, 86.6%), followed by individuals between 25 - 30 ($n = 27$, 10.6%), 31 - 40 ($n = 2$, .8%) and 40 + ($n = 5$, 2%). Of the 254 participants, 123 (50.8%) reported their highest level of education as high school, 112 (44.1%) reported it to be an undergraduate degree, 9 (3.5%) reported having a post-graduate degree, and 4 (1.6%) reported their highest level of education as 'other.' The ethnicities of the participants are as follows: Caucasian, not Hispanic ($n = 42$), African American ($n = 80$), Hispanic ($n = 83$), Asian ($n = 4$), Caribbean ($n = 25$), and other ($n = 20$).

Procedure

This study used archival data which was originally collected by emailing a link to students from a private university located in the southeastern part of the United States, posting the link on social media and random participation through the online survey platform, PsychData. Individuals completed a series of questionnaires including a

Diversity/Environment Questionnaire, the Purpose in Life Test, and the Life Orientation Test. Individuals were able to anonymously complete the survey at their convenience. Anonymity was maintained by excluding any names or identifiers in the survey, as well as utilizing PsychData's 256-bit encryption technology to ensure protection of all data transactions. Prior to participation, individuals were presented with a cover letter indicating the purpose of the study and informing them that they were able to opt out of the study at any time (See Appendix A).

Measures

The Diversity/Environment Questionnaire (DEQ) is a 4-item survey created by the researchers in order to record environmental and demographic information (See Appendix B). The questionnaire collects data regarding gender, age, ethnicity, and education. Sample items include, "What is your gender?", and "What is your highest level of education?".

Purpose in Life Test (PIL) consists of 20-items assessing the presence or lack of meaning or purpose in one's life (See Appendix C). Participants were asked to respond to statements to the degree that is most true for the individual at the time they are taking the test. Sample items include, "I am usually... 1 = bored, 2, 3, 4, 5 = enthusiastic" and "Life to me seems....1 = completely routine, 2, 3, 4, 5 = always exciting." Responses are added up to a total score of 20-100; a score of less than 50 indicates the participant is experiencing a lack of meaning or purpose in their life. In this study, the instrument was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .93$).

Life Orientation Test- Revised (LOT-R) consists of 10-items, measuring dimensions of optimism and pessimism (See Appendix D). Items 1, 4, and 10 assess

optimism; while items 3, 7 and 9 assess pessimism. Additionally, there are 4 filler items. Sample items include, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best” and “If something can go wrong for me, it will.” This measure uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. In this study, the instrument was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .75$).

Results

A bivariate linear regression analysis was used to predict purpose in life from optimism. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and the correlation coefficient. The regression equation for predicting purpose in life is:

$$\text{Purpose in Life} = .50 \text{ Dispositional Optimism} + 2.12$$

The 95% confidence interval for the slope, .39 to .62, does not contain the value of zero, and therefore overall strength is significantly related to purpose in life. As hypothesized, optimism predicted purpose in life, $F(1, 252) = 80.14, p < .001$. Approximately 24% ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .24$) of the variance in purpose in life was accounted for by its linear relationship with optimism.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's r

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Purpose in Life
Purpose in Life	3.84 (.70)	-
Optimism	3.41 (.68)	.49*

Note. $N = 254$.

* $p < .001$.

Discussion

The objective of the current study was to determine the extent to which dispositional optimism predicts purpose in life. The results strongly supported the hypothesis suggesting that dispositional optimism predicts purpose in life; such that as dispositional optimism increases, purpose in life does as well.

The results of the present study are consistent with previous findings suggesting a positive relationship between optimism and various adaptive behaviors and psychological variables. For example, both Barkhuizen, et al. (2014) and Ionescu (2014) found that optimism was positively correlated with mental resilience and motivational persistence. These authors found that individuals who score higher on optimism, are more apt to persist in the face of obstacles in order to obtain their goals. In addition, Ionescu (2014) found that goal achievement provides meaning in life, which encourages a resilient mentality. Jiang, et al. (2014) further demonstrated that individuals who score higher on dispositional optimism are better able to cope with major life changes and trauma; they are able to separate negative experiences from themselves and continue to expect positive experiences in the future.

The impact that optimism has on adaptive behaviors also overlaps with the foundations of logotherapy, a meaning-centered approach to psychotherapy proposing that individuals are motivated by the desire to find meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1967). Logotherapy presents the idea that individuals are able and willing to choose to suffer for what they believe to be a meaningful cause, such as obtaining a goal (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013). It further proposes, that one way that individuals find meaning in their lives, is to give meaning to their suffering and to choose to grow from it, in other words to develop

resiliency (Martinez & Florez, 2015). Similarly, optimistic individuals are more likely to persist in the face of obstacles in order to achieve their goals (Ameli & Dattilio, 2013; Jiang et al., 2014). Therefore, if individuals are more optimistic while experiencing challenges in life, these individuals would be more likely to put themselves in a position to give meaning to their experiences.

Practical Implications

The findings of the present study in context with previous research may be utilized in clinical settings to promote well-being. Heintzelman and King (2014) reported that purpose in life is the cornerstone of overall well-being. By targeting and promoting the development of optimism, mental health therapists may in turn be able to help their clients find purpose in life and facilitate the development of their overall well-being. It would be beneficial for future studies to look further into the variables that impact optimism, and other confounding variables which may impact purpose in life.

Limitations

While the present study offers useful information in understanding the predictive role of optimism in purpose in life, there are several limitations which should be noted. The first is that the study used self-report survey data. Wright (2005) reported that in collecting self-report data online, there is automatically self-selection bias as certain individuals are automatically more apt to participate in specific studies than others. Self-report surveys also run the risk that participants may consciously or unconsciously respond in a manner that presents them as more favorable despite remaining anonymous (Wright, 2005). The second limitation is that the results of this study are limited to the primary demographics of the participants, which were women between the ages of 18 and

24. As a result, these findings may not be generalizable to other populations. The final limitation in the present study is the use of cross-sectional data. As a result, findings offer an analysis of the relationship between the variables at the time that the surveys were taken but do not inform about causal factors underlying these differences and how they change over time (Duffy, et al., 2013).

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Appendix A
Cover Letter

Dear Research Participant:

Your participation in a research project is requested. The title of the study is The Influence of Dispositional Optimism on Experiencing Purpose in Life. The research is being conducted by Linda Bacheller, PsyD, JD, a faculty member in the Psychology Department at Barry University, and is seeking information that will be useful in the field of psychology. The aims of the research are to further the understanding of the relationship between dispositional optimism and purpose in life. In accordance with these aims, the following procedures will be used: the study will be posted on social media on an online survey forum, in which individuals will be able to complete at their convenience. The link to the survey will be sent to Barry University Students through email, as well as posted on social media to generate participants. Individuals will complete a series of questionnaires including the Diversity/Environment Questionnaire, The Purpose in Life Test, and the Life Orientation Test. Once these steps have been completed, participants will receive a summary of the study. If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to spend approximately 10 minutes completing the three questionnaires mentioned above.

Your consent to be a research participant is strictly voluntary and should you decline to participate or should you choose to drop out at any time during the study, there will be no adverse effects on your academic standing. There are no known risks to you and therefore is considered minimal. This means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation in this study will help further the understanding of the relationship between optimism and finding one's purpose in life.

As a research participant information that you provide will be kept anonymous, that is, no names or other identifiers will be collected. Opinions will be collected via an anonymous online survey tool, PsychData. The following description outlines PsychData's policies with respect to confidentiality and data security: "PsychData is

specifically designed to meet and exceed industry standards for Internet security as well as IRB standards for the protection of research participants. Our servers, database, and web presence employ multiple forms of enterprise-level security features to accomplish these goals. PsychData utilizes Secure Socket Layer (SSL) 256-bit encryption technology to ensure protection of all data transactions on our website. Data is encrypted at the instant that a user submits it and can only be decoded by the target server. PsychData maintains an SSL certificate from Verisign, the industry leader in SSL technology". In addition, PsychData allows for disabling IP address collection, thereby assuring that the results received will be truly anonymous and there will be no record kept of IP address nor linkages, which could be utilized to identify participants. Upon completion of data collection, all electronic data will be downloaded and then deleted from the PsychData server.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in the study, you may contact me. Dr. Linda Bacheller, at lbacheller@barry.edu, or the Institutional Review Board point of contact, Estela Azevedo, at (305) 899 - 3020.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Linda L. Bacheller, PsyD, JD

This study has been approved by Barry University's IRB #170917.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

- 1) What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
- 2) What is your age?
 - 18 – 24
 - 25 – 30
 - 31 – 40
 - 41+
- 3) What is your highest level of education?
 - High School
 - Undergraduate Degree
 - Post-Graduate Degree
 - Other
- 4) What is your ethnicity?
 - Caucasian, not Hispanic
 - African American
 - Hispanic
 - Asian
 - Caribbean
 - Other

Appendix C

PURPOSE IN LIFE TEST

Write the number (1 to 5) next to each statement that is most true for you right now.

1. I am usually:	bored	1	2	3	4	5	enthusiastic
2. Life to me seems:	completely routine	1	2	3	4	5	always exciting
3. In life, I have:	no goals or aims	1	2	3	4	5	clear goals and aims
4. My personal existence is:	utterly meaningless, without purpose	1	2	3	4	5	purposeful and meaningful
5. Every day is:	exactly the same	1	2	3	4	5	constantly new and different
6. If I could choose, I would:	prefer to never have been born	1	2	3	4	5	want 9 more lives just like this one
7. After retiring, I would:	loaf completely the rest of my life	1	2	3	4	5	do some of the exciting things I've always wanted to do
8. In achieving life goals, I've:	made no progress whatever	1	2	3	4	5	progressed to complete fulfillment
9. My life is:	empty, filled only with despair	1	2	3	4	5	running over with exciting things
10. If I should die today, I'd feel that my life has been:							

completely worthless	1	2	3	4	5	very worthwhile
11. In thinking of my life, I:						
often wonder why I exist	1	2	3	4	5	always see a reason for being here
12. As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:						
completely confuses me	1	2	3	4	5	fits meaningfully with my life
13. I am a:						
very irresponsible person	1	2	3	4	5	very responsible person
14. Concerning freedom to choose, I believe humans are:						
completely bound by limitations of heredity and environment	1	2	3	4	5	totally free to make all life choices
15. With regard to death, I am:						
unprepared and frightened	1	2	3	4	5	prepared and unafraid
16. Regarding suicide, I have:						
thought of it seriously as a way out	1	2	3	4	5	never given it a second thought
17. I regard my ability to find a purpose or mission in life as:						
practically none	1	2	3	4	5	very great
18. My life is:						
out of my hands and controlled by external factors	1	2	3	4	5	in my hands and I'm in control of it
19. Facing my daily tasks is:						
a painful and boring experience	1	2	3	4	5	a source of pleasure and satisfaction
20. I have discovered:						
no mission or purpose in life	1	2	3	4	5	a satisfying life purpose

Appendix D

Life Orientation Test-Revised

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It's easy for me to relax.	1	2	3	4	5
3. If something can go wrong for me, it will.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I'm always optimistic about my future.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I enjoy my friends a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
6. It's important for me to keep busy.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I don't get upset too easily.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I rarely count on good things happening to me.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.	1	2	3	4	5