

Relationship between Purpose in Life and Psychological Distress among Older Adults

Mehjabeen Mehaboob¹ and Shimil P V²

¹India Gandhi open university, Delhi

²Chair of counselling, St Aloysius (Deemed to be University), Mangalore



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Abstract- The study investigates the relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults, along with gender differences in these variables. The sample consists of 80 older adults aged 65 to 79 years, selected from various parts of Kerala, primarily Palakkad, using a purposive sampling method to ensure equal representation of genders and minimize bias. The participants include 40 males and 40 females. Results reveal a significant negative correlation between purpose in life and psychological distress, indicating that higher purpose in life is associated with lower psychological distress. Furthermore, a t-test analysis shows no significant gender difference in purpose in life, suggesting similar perceptions of life purpose among male and female participants. However, a significant gender difference is observed in psychological distress, with females reporting higher levels of distress than males. These findings highlight the protective role of purpose in life against psychological distress and the need for gender-sensitive interventions to support older adults' mental well-being.

Keywords: purpose in life, psychological distress, older adults.

Introduction

Aging is an inevitable process accompanied by a range of physical, psychological, and social changes. Older adults often face transitions such as retirement, loss of loved ones, health challenges, and shifts in social roles, all of which can significantly affect their mental well-being. Amid these challenges, the concept of "purpose in life" has gained considerable attention as a potential buffer against psychological distress. Purpose in life is defined as the sense of meaning, direction, and intentionality that gives life coherence and motivates individuals to pursue goals. (Celano et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021) It serves as a fundamental component

of psychological well-being and has been linked to various positive outcomes, including reduced risk of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Psychological distress, on the other hand, is a state characterized by symptoms of emotional suffering, such as sadness, anxiety, and irritability, which often result from adverse life circumstances. It is prevalent among older adults, particularly due to factors such as chronic illness, social isolation, and decreased physical functioning. Research highlights that psychological distress not only diminishes quality of life but also poses risks for cognitive decline and physical health deterioration (Bonanno et al., 2015). Understanding the interplay between purpose in life and psychological distress in older adults is essential for developing interventions that enhance their mental health and overall well-being.

The global population is rapidly aging, with older adults representing a significant proportion of society. This demographic shift underscores the importance of addressing the mental health needs of older individuals. (Cacioppo et al., 2015). While advancements in healthcare have extended life expectancy, they have also exposed older adults to prolonged periods of psychological vulnerability. Studies reveal that psychological distress among older adults is a growing concern, contributing to a diminished sense of fulfillment and increased risk of comorbid conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Aldwin & Igarashi, 2015; Boylan et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2016).

In this context, purpose in life emerges as a vital psychological construct that may act as a protective factor against the adverse effects of aging. Research indicates that older adults with a strong sense of purpose are better equipped to cope with life's challenges, maintain social connections, and engage in health-promoting behaviors. For instance, individuals with a clear purpose may exhibit lower levels of depression and anxiety, as their sense of direction provides a buffer against feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty (Asharani et al., 2022; Pfund, 2020).

Despite the established benefits of purpose in life, its relationship with psychological distress in older adults remains underexplored, particularly in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. Most studies have focused on younger populations or examined related constructs such as resilience and optimism. There is a need to examine how purpose in life operates in the later stages of life, where existential concerns and the search for meaning often take center stage (Alonso et al., 2023; Crowther et al., 2002).

Understanding the relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults holds immense significance, both theoretically and practically. As the global population ages, there is a growing recognition of the need to address the mental health challenges faced by older individuals. Psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and emotional strain, is particularly prevalent in this age group due to factors such as chronic health conditions, social isolation, bereavement, and a sense of role loss. (Dewitte & Dezutter, 2021; Diener et al., 1999; Golovchanova et al., 2021) These challenges not only compromise the quality of life but also exacerbate physical health problems and increase healthcare costs. Against this backdrop, examining how purpose in life can serve as a protective factor is critical for promoting mental health and enhancing the overall well-being of older adults.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding body of research on aging and psychological well-being by exploring how purpose in life, a key dimension of positive psychology, influences mental health outcomes in later life. While extensive research has linked purpose in life to positive outcomes such as resilience and life satisfaction, there is a need to delve deeper into its specific role in reducing psychological distress among older adults. The findings from this study can refine existing theoretical models by identifying the mechanisms through which purpose mitigates distress, such as fostering adaptive coping strategies, enhancing social connections, and improving emotional regulation.

By exploring the protective effects of purpose in life on psychological distress, the study not only advances academic knowledge but also provides actionable insights for improving the mental health and quality of life of older adults. As such, it aligns with global efforts to promote healthy and active aging in an increasingly older world population.

Objectives

1. To find out the relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults.
2. To find out the significant difference in psychological distress among male and female older adults.
3. To find out the significant difference in purpose in life among male and female older adults.

Hypotheses

1. Hypothesis 1 (H_1):

There is a significant relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults.

2. Hypothesis 2 (H_2):

There is a significant difference in psychological distress between male and female older adults.

3. Hypothesis 3 (H_3):

There is a significant difference in purpose in life between male and female older adults

Method

This study employs a quantitative research approach using a correlational design to explore the relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults, with a specific focus on gender differences. The survey method will be used to collect data from participants. The research will be conducted after selecting participants, during which informed consent forms will be distributed to ensure ethical compliance and voluntary participation. The purpose of the study will be explained clearly, and participants will be assured that their responses will remain confidential. Rapport will be established to make participants comfortable, and data will be collected through face-to-face interactions. Participants will be informed that they have the right to withdraw at any point if they feel uncomfortable.

Sample

The sample for the study comprises 80 older adults aged 65 to 79 years, selected from various parts of Kerala, primarily from Palakkad. A purposive sampling method is employed to ensure equal representation and minimize bias. The sample includes an equal number of male ($n = 40$) and female ($n = 40$) participants. Informed consent collected from the participants

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Adults aged between 65 and 79 years.
2. Residents of Kerala, with a focus on participants from Palakkad.
3. Both male and female participants, ensuring equal representation.
4. Able to understand and respond to the study's questions (mental clarity).
5. Willingness to participate in the study and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Individuals with severe cognitive impairments or diagnosed dementia.
2. Those with significant physical or mental health conditions that could interfere with participation, such as terminal illness or severe psychiatric disorders.
3. Participants who are unable to comprehend the purpose or content of the study due to language or communication barriers.
4. Individuals who have participated in similar research studies that might bias the results.

Tools

The Purpose in Life Scale (PIL), developed by Crumbaugh and Henrion (1988), measures the sense of purpose and meaning in life through 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 20 to 140. It demonstrates good psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70–0.86 and test-retest reliability of 0.68–0.83. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), developed by Kessler et al. (2002), assesses psychological distress using 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 10 to 50. It has moderate reliability, supported by kappa values of 0.42–0.74. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), developed by Diener et al. (1985), evaluates global life satisfaction using five items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. It has strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.80–0.89 and test-retest reliability of 0.84. These scales are reliable tools for assessing purpose, psychological distress, and life satisfaction across diverse populations.

Data Analysis

Data analysed using Pearson's correlation to assess the relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults. To determine gender differences in these variables, an independent samples t-test will be performed. This approach aims to provide insights into the strength and direction of the correlation and identify any statistically significant differences between male and female participants.

Results

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Pearson's r	p-value
Purpose in Life	80	84	12	-0.469	< .001
Psychological Distress		18	6.2		

The analysis demonstrates a statistically significant negative correlation between purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults, as indicated by Pearson's correlation coefficient, $r = -0.469$, and a p-value of $p < .001$. This suggests that as purpose in life increases, psychological distress tends to decrease. The strength of the correlation is moderate, implying a meaningful relationship between the two variables. The sample size for purpose in life ($N = 84$, $M = 12$, $SD =$ not reported) and psychological distress ($N = 80$, $M = 18$, $SD = 6.2$) supports the reliability of the findings.

Hypothesis 1 (H_1):

There is a significant relationship between psychological distress and purpose in life among older adults accepted

Variable	Group	N	Mean	t value	SD	p value
Psychological Distress	Female	40	20.6	2.12	6.57	0.037
	Male	40	17.5		6.03	
Purpose in life	Female	40	83	-1.25	14.1	0.217
	Male	40	86.8		12.6	

The analysis reveals a statistically significant gender difference in psychological distress among older adults, with females reporting higher levels ($M = 20.6$, $SD = 6.57$) compared to males ($M = 17.5$, $SD = 6.03$). This is supported by a t-value of 2.12 and a p-value of 0.037 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the observed difference is unlikely due to chance. In contrast, the difference in purpose in life between male ($M = 86.8$, $SD = 12.6$) and female ($M = 83$, $SD = 14.1$) older adults

is not statistically significant. The t-value of -1.25 and p-value of 0.217 ($p > 0.05$) suggest that the variation in purpose in life scores is not meaningful. Therefore, while gender appears to influence psychological distress, it does not significantly impact the purpose in life among older adults.

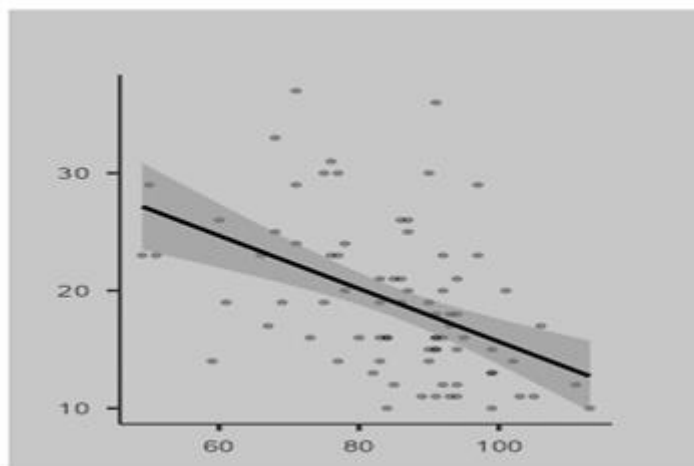


Figure 1 Relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between purpose in life (x-axis) and psychological distress (y-axis) among older adults. The negative slope of the regression line indicates an inverse relationship, where higher levels of purpose in life are associated with lower levels of psychological distress. The data points scatter around the regression line, with a shaded confidence interval showing the degree of variability in this relationship. The consistent downward trend suggests a moderately strong negative correlation, aligning with the Pearson's $r = -0.469$, as previously noted. This relationship is statistically significant, reinforcing the finding that a stronger sense of purpose in life contributes to reduced psychological distress.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3):

There is a significant difference in psychological distress between male and female older adults accepted.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3):

There is a significant difference in purpose in life between male and female older adults rejected.

Discussions:

The study shows that there is no difference among male and female older adults on the basis of purpose in life. Both male and female adults have the same way of thinking on the basis of this variable. Purpose in life didn't show any difference on the basis of gender in this case. The study has a result that even if it is a male or a female variable of purpose in life makes no difference among them. The variable didn't make differences on the basis of gender. Gender differences didn't influence this variable. But there is a chance of contradiction that purpose in life among older adults are different among male and female. Cultural bias shows that purpose in life is more among male population. But in this particular geographical area it clearly shows that there is no such difference among male and females.

The study shows that there is a significant difference between psychological distress among male and female older adults. Here females have more Psychological distress than men. There are various reasons that include male dominance in our culture or in the society, or the area where we conducted the study. In old age females are more dependent on their kids and husbands. That creates distress among females more. Females are facing more problems than men in our society. Older people in this time means that when they were young, at that time females didn't go for a job. They were fully engaged with household activities. So nowadays they don't have any income or when they get old can't do anything at home also. That increases depression and anxiety among older females. So it is clear that psychological distress is more in females than men.

Study shows another finding that there is a relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress among Older adults. Purpose in life is a positive psychological element and that creates a meaning in their life. It gives positive energy and enthusiasm to their life. So when there is no purpose in life, psychological distress will arise. Psychological distress includes depression, anxiety, loneliness, boredom. It influence in a negative manner in their daily life. It is clear that there is a correlation between these two variables. If a person has purpose in life obviously chances of psychological distress to that person is less.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is a significant negative correlation between purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults, indicating that higher levels of purpose in life are associated with lower psychological distress. Furthermore, the t-test results reveal a significant gender difference in psychological distress, with females experiencing higher levels of distress compared to males. However, no significant gender difference was observed in purpose in life, suggesting that both male and female older adults perceive purpose in life similarly in the studied population. These findings underscore the protective role of purpose in life in reducing psychological distress and highlight the need for targeted interventions, especially for older women who are more vulnerable to distress.

Suggestion for future research

Future research could explore how cultural and regional differences influence purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults, as cultural biases may affect these variables differently across geographical areas. Intervention-based studies, such as mindfulness programs or counseling sessions, could be implemented to enhance purpose in life and reduce psychological distress. Longitudinal studies tracking changes over time would provide insights into how aging and life transitions affect these variables. Additionally, examining socioeconomic factors, financial independence, and previous occupational roles could help understand why older women often report higher psychological distress.

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