

LIFE SATISFACTION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The Relationship between Life Satisfaction and Academic Achievement of College Students

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Abstract

Life satisfaction influences the performance of individuals in different areas of life including academic performance. This paper aims to investigate how life satisfaction can be associated with academic achievement to show whether a positive, negative, or insignificant relationship exists. In previous research studies, some researchers have found a positive correlation between the two. However, other researchers have also found an insignificant or low to moderate association between school-related performance and life satisfaction. Some research studies also indicate that factors such as age, interpersonal relations, parent's education level, academic failure, and self-esteem play a confounding role in the correlation between the two variables. Data was collected from 28 young participants, all junior and senior students, who are enrolled in the Fall 2020 Research Methods Lab course at Fordham University. The age of participants was between 19 and 37 years. The research method used in this paper involved collecting data using online data collection methods and analyzing it using SPSS program. Although the findings of the study did not agree with the results of some previous studies that indicate a positive association between students' academic performance and their level of life satisfaction, the study highlights the need to support students who are facing certain (negative) conditions that may make them experience low life satisfaction and possibly low academic performance.

Key words: Life satisfaction, academic performance, college students, Satisfaction with Life Scale, GPA scores, subjective well-being

Introduction

The self-evaluation of one's satisfaction in life involves a cognitive process enabling an individual to evaluate their well-being and judge it based on their expectations. According to Crede et al. (2015), life satisfaction refers to how one views or evaluates their own conditions of life in the past, present, and the future. Evaluation of life satisfaction is influenced by certain life domains such as health, family, education, religion, work, and friends (Crede et al., 2015; Schafer et al., 2013). According to Schafer et al. (2013), individuals may indicate high level of satisfaction in certain aspects or domains of life, however, dissatisfaction with other life domains may cause them to express dissatisfaction with life as a whole.

Studying life satisfaction in relation to different life domains would be easier if similar life domains were used for all participants. However, individuals place different levels of value to different life domains (Schafer et al., 2013). Domain importance is influenced by heterogeneity of the population, even for study groups (Schafer et al., 2013). In this study, for example, while the research consists of a student population, it is rest assured that every study participant attaches different levels of importance to different domains in life. This research paper aims to investigate the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between life satisfaction and academic achievement of college students.

Life satisfaction is important in studying subjective well-being. As described in study conducted by Diener and Lucas, subjective well-being (SWB) is a research topic that's comprised of three components that are related but distinct (Crede et al., 2015). However, life satisfaction is the main component studied under subjective well-being as it is the most significant indicator. Accordingly, life satisfaction is the component discussed in this study.

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Different studies provide different results on the relationship between academic performance and life satisfaction. According to Crede et al. (2015), some studies indicate that there is no significant correlation between the life satisfaction scores of students and their academic achievement. However, some researchers have indicated that there is a correlation between the life satisfaction score of students and their academic achievement. Arguably, the differences result from factors about the study population that need to be included in research studies.

Some research studies show that high level of life satisfaction leads to high academic achievement. In a study considering middle school students, the researchers found that life satisfaction positively correlated with students' academic performance, engagement, and behaviors at school (Lyons & Huebner, 2015). Additionally, the researchers indicated high life satisfaction scores did not contribute to a decline in school-related functioning among students (Lyons & Huebner, 2015). Another research study conducted by Ng et al. (2015) also indicates that life satisfaction correlates positively with academic performance of students. Also, in a research study conducted by Crede et al. (2015), the researchers found that student's life satisfaction levels were directly associated with their school-related factors such as academic results. While some research studies indicate otherwise, these studies show there is a relationship between life satisfaction and academic achievement.

However, there's also several research studies indicating insignificant or low to moderate relationship between the academic achievement of students and their life satisfaction. Some studies indicate that life satisfaction leads to low to moderate positive relationship with particular areas in life (Lyons & Huebner, 2015). Other studies comparing life satisfaction and specific areas in life indicated that the relationship between the two becomes insignificant when life satisfaction levels become significantly high (Lyons & Huebner, 2015). It may also create a negative reciprocal relationship between the two (Lyons & Huebner, 2015). In a meta-analysis study carried out by Bückner et al. (2018), the researchers found that relationship between SWB and academic performance was low to

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moderate. In another study conducted by Samaha and Hawi (2016), researchers found that an insignificant association exists between the academic achievement of students and their life satisfaction. Additionally, another study conducted on Lebanese college students indicated that there was insignificant relationship between life satisfaction and academic performance (Ayyash-Abdo & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2012; Ng et al., 2015). Therefore, this study needs to properly evaluate data collected while also considering factors that may influence the results of the study, such as demographic and individual differences.

While some studies show that life satisfaction influences academic performance, there are individual factors that influence life satisfaction. According to Ng et al. (2015), several research studies indicate a positive association between life satisfaction and school-related functioning. A student with high self-efficacy in academic competence, willingness or enthusiasm to engage in school, and high self-esteem leads to high life satisfaction (Ng et al., 2015). Ng et al. (2015) explains that individuals who seek support in solving problems or have ability to deal with problems have higher life satisfaction scores. Accordingly, students whose level of life satisfaction is high are more likely to attain high academic performance. On the contrary, those with low level of life satisfaction have low academic performance. Therefore, these research studies indicate that the association between life satisfaction of students and their academic performance is positive.

Most research studies on the relationship between school-related functioning and student's level of life satisfaction indicate the effect of factors such as age on research results. Over time, individuals undergo developmental stages, experience change in roles and practices (Schafer et al., 2013). Age highly influences the values individuals place onto certain life domains (Schafer et al., 2013). Age may influence an individual's expectations and subsequently impact how they evaluate their level of life satisfaction. However, a meta-analysis study conducted by Bückner et al. (2018) indicates that factors such as age and gender have insignificant effects or none at all on the relationship

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between SWB and academic achievement. Study groups may be categorized on factors such as age, culture, and work thus standardizing results makes analysis and interpretation of research data challenging.

There are several conditions that may influence a student's life satisfaction and their academic achievement. The education level of parents, interpersonal relations with other family members, and family income might impact the relationship between a student's academic performance and their scores on life satisfaction. Crede et al. (2015) explains that the education level of parents impacts the association between life satisfaction of adolescents and their academic achievement. Mothers had more positive impact compared to fathers. However, research studies looking at the impact of such individual factors are limited, and the results provided may be impacted by several other factors causing research limitations. Another study shows that the use of smartphones may increase life satisfaction but lead to poor academic performance (Samaha and Hawi, 2016). Addiction to the use of smartphones may lead to high perceived stress levels and subsequently lead to low life satisfaction scores. Therefore, the current study is limited by the factors or data collected.

Academic failure may lead to loss of self-esteem and subsequently low life satisfaction. Fairlamb (2020) describes the concept of academic contingent self-worth (ACSW) and explains that it may negatively impact academic achievement or performance. While academic success boosts self-esteem, academic failure can lead to low self-esteem (Fairlamb, 2020). Also, students who attach high importance to ACSW may lose self-esteem if they are not accepted to institutions with higher levels of education or if they fail to achieve accomplishments and high grades in school (Fairlamb, 2020). While every individual strives to attain high self-esteem, some students may use their academic performance to determine their self-esteem. Accordingly, if such students fail to achieve these goals, it may cause loss of self-esteem and subsequently lead to low life satisfaction.

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Another study investigated the impact of interpersonal relationships on academic achievement during the transition of Finish students from primary to lower secondary school. The researchers found a positive correlation between the two elements (Kiuru et al., 2019). While good relations with teachers can be associated with school satisfaction, the researchers found no significant impact on academic performance. However, researchers found that conflicts with teachers led to low academic performance. Academic performance was higher for those that had close friends prior to joining lower secondary (Kiuru et al., 2019). Close friendship contributes to school satisfaction due to support from friends. Therefore, school satisfaction can contribute to high academic achievement while stress or dissatisfaction at school can lead to poor academic performance or school-related functioning.

Subjective and objective measures can be used when collecting data. The use of subjective criteria influences the results differently when compared to objective criteria (Crede et al., 2015). When students or other study participants are allowed to provide data, they may provide data on their perceived academic efficacy. Relying on participants' self-evaluation helps to more efficiently study and evaluate their life satisfaction scores (Crede et al., 2015). On the other hand, objective criteria may include utilizing grading system of students (Crede et al., 2015). However, objective data is less efficient since different groups of people have varying results.

Methods

Participants

The data found in this study was collected through an online survey administrated through Qualtrics. Data was collected from 28 young participants who were recruited through email via a CC list. Due to the time restraints of a single semester, all participants recruited were junior and senior students who are enrolled in the Fall 2020 Research Methods Lab course (i.e., sample comprised of 18 (64.3%) juniors and 10 (35.7%) senior participants) at Fordham University. Participants' ages ranged

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from 19-37 years old ($M=21.86$). Within this sample size, there were 20 female participants (71.43%), 7 male participants (25%), and 1 other (3.57%).

Materials and Procedures

With adherence to research ethics, participants were provided with information regarding the study and the risks and benefits of participating. After clicking the link to reach the online survey, they were presented with an informed consent form. By signing their names and agreeing, participants gave their consent to participate in the survey and data collection process.

The online survey consisted of three sections. The first section included a demographic information form where age, gender, ethnicity, and year in college information was collected.

The second section included the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). It is a 5-item life satisfaction measure with statements such as “*The conditions in my life are excellent*”, “*So far, I have gotten the important things I want in my life*” (see Appendix A). A 1-7 scale is used to indicate participants’ agreement to each item. The questions are *not* reversed and higher scores on each item indicates that a person perceives areas of their life they consider important to be going well. The SWLS was administered to assess general life satisfaction.

The third section included a form for GPA entry for the Spring 2020 semester (most recent reflection of academic performance).

Data collected was then imported into the latest Microsoft Excel Software where the responses: “*Agree*”, “*Disagree*”, were replaced with numerical values (1-7) where 1 represented the lowest score “*strongly disagree*” and 7 represented the highest score “*strongly agree*”. This conversion was important for data analysis in using the latest version of SPSS software. Both descriptive and correlational tests will be conducted to assess the results of the study.

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Results

Life Satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). A mean score of the 5 items on the scale was computed for each participant where a higher score on the 1-7 scale indicated that the participant perceives areas of their life, they consider important, to be going well.

The bivariate function (SPSS software) was used to compute a correlation to determine the association between Life Satisfaction ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.52$) and GPA scores ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.32$), reflective of Academic Performance. In addition, a linear regression model was developed to determine the linear relationship between the variables, Life Satisfaction and Academic Performance.

The correlation between the two variables was indicated by $r(23) = 0.13$, $p = 0.52$, $r^2 = 0.018$. The results did not support the hypothesis that higher level of Life Satisfaction improves Academic Performance (among college students). The low correlation coefficient value indicates a weak linear relationship between the two variables, which can be seen on the scatterplot graph (see Figure 1). The high p value indicates that the findings are nonsignificant, and the low r^2 value tells us that the regression line does not fit the data that well.

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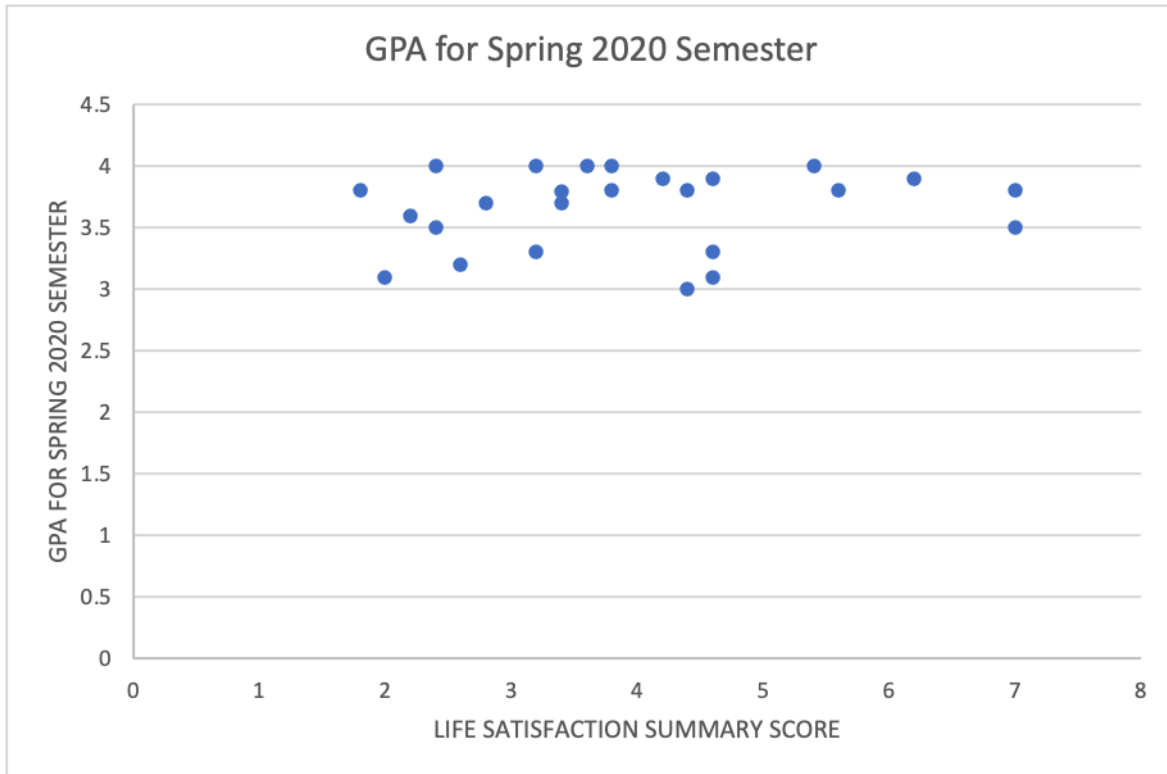


Figure 1. Relationship between Life Satisfaction and GPA scores

Discussion

When interpreting the results from the bivariate test, the correlation coefficient (r) was used as a measure to determine the direction and relationship between the two variables, Life Satisfaction (measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993) and academic performance (measured by GPA scores of participants). The results seemed to be in conflict with the hypothesis that higher level of Life Satisfaction improves Academic Performance (among college students).

The two variables proved to have a weak (positive) correlation, indicated by $r(23) = 0.13$ Pearson's Correlation value. The results of this study also proved to be insignificant with a p value of $p = 0.52$. In addition, the low r^2 value indicates that the regression line does not fit the data that well (there is a large distance between actual values and the predicted values).

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The hypothesis that higher level of Life Satisfaction improves Academic Performance (among college students) is not supported because the results indicate an insignificant weak relationship between the two variables. This suggests that we cannot predict the value of one variable in association to a decrease or increase in the other variable.

Referring back to previous findings, some studies indicate that there is no significant correlation between the life satisfaction scores of students and their academic achievement. However, according to Crede et al. (2015), some researchers have indicated that there is a correlation between the life satisfaction score of students and their academic achievement. The results of this specific study are in conflict with existing literature that have found a significant correlation between the two variables. Arguably, the differences result from factors of the sample used in the study.

Several limitations were pinpointed within this study. Firstly, the reliability of the measures was questionable. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993) may not have been a sufficient measure of an individual's overall satisfaction with life. Not only were participants presented with only one questionnaire, but that questionnaire only had 5 items that was meant to summarize all possible inquiries that may lead to a score level of life satisfaction. Additional questionnaires/ measures of life satisfaction should've been included in the survey, to determine the reliability of participants' scores. If a participant receives a score that match up to the scores in 2 or more other questionnaires reflecting life satisfaction, it could be concluded that the items on the questionnaire more accurately represent the life satisfaction variable and are more reliable.

A second limitation of the study are confounding variables. There are many other factors that affect students' GPA scores. Among these factors some are external stressors in an individual's life, academic year, education level of parents, expression of family expectations, study time etc. These

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variables were unmeasured and not held constant in this study due to the fact that they are uncontrollable. Due to this, the validity of the research findings remains questionable.

Furthermore, factors such as the self-report format of the survey, Likert-type questions, and social desirability may have played a role in skewing results. Self-reporting a very subjective experience such as life satisfaction and well-being can be difficult and uncertain because it is difficult to conceptualize/ operationalize. The Likert-scale is also very abstract; each level is relative to each individual and the areas from one level to another are left out. In regard to social desirability, participants sometimes may not be completely attentive and honest when filling out surveys for many reasons such as lack of motivation. However, in the case of this study because participants were asked to provide their GPA scores, there is a chance they might've provided a higher score than what they actually got as a higher GPA score is more socially desirable than a low one. GPA scores can be overly valued by some students who attach high importance to their academic contingent self-worth (ACSW) (Fairlamb, 2020).

In addition, there are also threats to external validity. The findings most likely cannot be generalized to the general population of students because of the convenience sampling type used in the study. All participants recruited were junior and senior students who were enrolled in the Fall 2020 Research Methods Lab course at Fordham University. The demographics of this set of participants was not reflective of the larger population of students and these differences may be confounding variables.

Strengths of the study include validity of data collected through Qualtrics via a survey with Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). There was no data missing that may have skewed the results. However, for further research studies, additional measures of life satisfaction and other methods of operationalizing the abstract concept must be included. In addition, a more strategic sampling method, whereby participants

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are chosen based off accurate demographic representations of the population they are being generalized to, should be used.

It was important to conduct this study because it highlights the need to support students who are facing certain (negative) conditions that may make them experience low life satisfaction which may possibly lead to low academic performance.

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Appendices**Appendix A**

ID# _____

Satisfaction with Life Scale

Below are five statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale below the item, indicate your agreement by circling the appropriate number. Please be open and honest in your reporting.

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. The conditions of my life are excellent.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. I am satisfied with my life.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

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1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree