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Determinants of Life Purpose and Life Satisfaction of Elderly People in Greece

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Abstract

With the aim to explore how demographic factors impact a subject's life purpose and meaning and life satisfaction nowadays, especially among Greek elderly population, 272 individuals aged 60-89 years were studied with Purpose in Life test (PIL Test – Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) and Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS – Diener, 1984). The total sample was regrouped three times according to the participants' gender (male and female), age (60-74 elderly and 75-89-year-old), and level of education (primary, secondary, and higher education), and the results of the groups were compared. Our findings showed that level of education, but not gender and age, was related to individual differences in subjective perception of both life purpose and meaning and life satisfaction. We found that 60-89-year-old with higher education demonstrated significantly higher level of meaning and purpose of life and higher satisfaction of life in comparison to 60-89-year-olds with primary or secondary education.

Keywords: life purpose, life satisfaction, elderly, age, gender, level of education.

1. Introduction

Europe is the fastest ageing region in the world and this fact has somehow naturally put the well-being of older people not only in the focus of public policies of the European countries, but also in the focus of the research interest.

Subjective well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon and life satisfaction is seen as its cognitive component implying a judgmental process and evaluative comparison of the present life situation with the desired life situation (Diener et al., 1999).

Life satisfaction is conceptualized as a result of interactions between internal and external factors and subjective perception of their influence on ageing (Ferring et al., 2004: 17).

There is evidence that a subject's age affects the self-reported level of life satisfaction among the elderly and that the own level of satisfaction with life of elderly people in Europe increases with age (Angelini et al., 2012). In fact, previous research has shown that multiple factors – social, psychological, and behavioral, but not genetic, are associated with life satisfaction in senior adults (see Papi & Cheraghi, 2021). For example, Li, Chi and Xu (2013) found that the factors with the greatest effect on life satisfaction among Chinese older people were the level of education, financial resources, self-assessment of health and receiving financial support from

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their children. Didino and co-workers (2016) found that life satisfaction of senior adults in Siberia (Russia) depended most on income, level of home equipment, anxiety and loneliness. Papi and Cheraghi (2021) reported a significant relationship of job, education, social support, daily activities, and health with feeling of life satisfaction in Iranian elderly people. Myers (2000) found no significant effects of age, gender, and income on the feeling of happiness and life satisfaction in the American population. About two decades ago, Efklides, Kalaitzidou and Chankin (2003) have examined several factors that may contribute to the subjective quality of life in Greek elderly people and also found no effects of age, gender, education and health on life satisfaction.

- Higher education is significantly associated with higher purpose in life and higher satisfaction with life in Greek older people.
- Gender and age have no significant effect on purpose in life and satisfaction with life in Greek older people.
- Purpose in life is positively related to life satisfaction in Greek older people.

The apparent inconsistency of the research findings may be due to various factors: methodological differences, cultural differences, as well as to the dynamic nature of life satisfaction as a psychological phenomenon.

Purpose in life is another psychological phenomenon considered as a defining feature of mental health and subjective well-being (Pinquart, 2002). This psychological construct refers to people's perceptions for the core significance and purpose of their personal existence (Dezutter et al., 2013) and plays a guiding role in life goals and decision making (Ribeiro et al., 2020).

Using meta-analysis to synthesize findings from 70 studies on purpose in life in middle age and old age, Pinquart (2002: 90) found "a small age-associated decline of purpose in life, which was stronger in older age-groups". In addition, the researcher revealed a strong association of purpose in life with social integration, health, everyday competence, socioeconomic status, employment and marital status, as well as with psychological well-being and levels of depressive symptoms.

Nearly two decades later Ribeiro et al. performed an integrative review of publications on purpose in life in adults and senior adults and its effects on aging or adaptation in aging, and found that high purpose in life is associated "with positive outcomes in health, cognition, emotional regulation, subjective well-being, and sense of adjustment" (Ribeiro et al., 2020: 2127).

Despite undeniable advances in the understanding of aging, little is known about changes in levels of purpose in life and satisfaction with life during serious life crises and possible protective effects of demographic, social or psychological factors.

Without a doubt, Covid-19 pandemic emerged as an event with a serious potential to initiate changes in purpose in life and subjective feeling of life satisfaction. Covid-19 pandemic caused distressing economic, health and social impacts worldwide (Shang et al., 2021) and totally changed people's daily lives. This pandemic is not just a medical condition – it triggered negative impact on the mental health of people and caused a wide range of negative mental problems.

Elderly people are at the highest risk of the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic due to both clinical and social reasons (Javed et al., 2020). For this reason, investigation of life purpose and life satisfaction and their determination by demographic factors, especially in senior adults, is of research interest.

The present study aimed at investigating Greek senior adults' life purpose and life satisfaction during Covid-19 pandemic, and analyzing their relation to the participants' gender (males versus females), age (early elderly versus late elderly) and educational level (primary, secondary, or higher education).

2. Method

The sample comprised 136 individuals, aged 60-89 years living independently, i.e., who were not institutionalized. There were 113 participants in the age range of 60 to 74 years (i.e., early elderly; Mean age = 64.30; SD=2.84) and 23 participants in the age range of 75 to 89 years (i.e., late elderly; Mean age = 73.30; SD=4.19). Half of the total sample (68 participants) were males and the other half were females. As to their educational level, 8 participants had completed primary education, 80 had completed secondary education, and 48 had completed higher education.

The purpose in life of the participants was assessed by means of Crumbaugh and Maholick's Purpose in Life test (PIL Test) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Life satisfaction of the participants was assessed by means of Diener' Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1984).

Data was collected between June and December 2021. The participants were recruited through the help of social institutions (mainly through the churches), as well as through personal contacts. The questionnaire was given individually to each participant with a request to complete it immediately.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the results of the Univariate Analysis of Variance which was performed with the aim to determine the effects of participants' age, gender and educational level and their interactions on the participants' sense of purpose in life. Homogeneity of variances was checked using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances. The Mean purpose in life scores were entered as a dependent variable, with participants' age, gender and educational level as fixed factors.

Table 1. Mean scores (M; SD) on the purpose in life scale of the subgroups formed according to the participants' gender, educational level, and age

Purpose in life					
Gender	Educational level	Age	N	Mean	SD
Men	Primary	Early elderly	2	96.00	38.18
		Late elderly	2	121.50	4.94
	Secondary	Early elderly	30	105.70	21.23
		Late elderly	6	94.16	21.27
	Higher	Early elderly	25	117.72	13.50
		Late elderly	3	130.00	3.46
Women	Primary	Early elderly	3	114.33	12.66
		Late elderly	1	116.00	-
	Secondary	Early elderly	36	108.08	20.58
		Late elderly	8	110.88	4.91
	Higher	Early elderly	17	110.35	22.40
		Late elderly	3	128.33	0.57

The results from the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects showed a significant main effect of educational level on the Mean purpose in life scores ($F_{(2,135)}$=5.712, Sig.=.004). Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons showed significant differences between the subgroups with secondary and higher education (Sig.=.001), with the subgroup with secondary education demonstrating lower Mean purpose in life scores (M=104,70; SD=19,97) in comparison to the subgroup with higher education (M=121.604; SD=17.30). No significant differences were found between the Mean purpose in life scores of the subgroup with primary education (M=111.95; SD=19.00) and the rest two subgroups (Sig.>.05).

No significant main effect was found for gender (male group – M=110.84; SD=19.93; female group – M=114.66; SD=19.15; $F_{(1,135)}$=.422, Sig.=.517) and age (Early elderly group – M=108.69; SD=19.98; Late elderly group – M=116.81; SD=17.00; $F_{(1,124)}$=1.910, Sig.=.169). Nevertheless, a tendency to slightly higher Mean scores of purpose in life in female and late elderly subgroups than in male and early elderly subgroups, respectively, was revealed.

No significant main effect was found for the interactions between gender and age ($F_{(1,135)}$=.012, Sig.=.914), educational level and gender ($F_{(2,135)}$=.987, Sig.=.375), educational level and age ($F_{(2,135)}$=2.193, Sig.=.116), and educational level, gender and age ($F_{(2,135)}$=.771, Sig.=.465), on the Mean scores of purpose in life scale.

The Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of purpose in life in the total sample found that one third of all participants (33.8%; N=46) reported a high level of purpose in life, 42.6% (N=58) reported a moderate level of purpose in life, and the rest 23.5% (N=32) – a low level of purpose in life.

The Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of purpose in life in gender subgroups (Table 2) revealed no gender-related differences, with the highest percentage of both subgroups demonstrating a moderate level of purpose in life and the lowest percentage demonstrating a low level of purpose in life ($\chi^2_{|2|}$=.655, p=.721; Cramer's V=.069).

Table 2. Distribution of participants in gender subgroups according to the level of purpose in life

Gender subgroups	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Males	14	20.6	29	42.6	25	36.8
Females	17	25.0	30	44.1	21	30.9
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|2\|}$=.655, p=.721					
Cramer's V	.069					

The results from the performed Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of purpose in life in age subgroups (Table 3) revealed no age-related differences, with the highest percentage of both subgroups demonstrating a moderate level of purpose in life and the lowest percentage demonstrating a low level of purpose in life ($\chi^2_{|2|}$=.306, p=.858; Cramer's V=.047).

Table 3. Distribution of participants in age subgroups according to the level of purpose in life

Age subgroups	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Early elderly (60-74 years)	27	23.9	47	41.6	39	34.5
Late elderly (75-89 years)	5	21.7	11	47.8	7	30.4
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|2\|}$=.306, p=.858					
Cramer's V	.047					

The results from the performed Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of purpose in life in the subgroups with different educational level (Table 4) revealed significant between-subgroup differences, with the highest percentage of the subgroup with higher education demonstrating a high level of purpose in life (47.9%) and the highest percentage of the subgroup with secondary education demonstrating a low level of purpose in life (31.2%), respectively, in comparison to the rest two subgroups ($\chi^2_{|2|}$=10.317, p=.035; Cramer's V=.275).

Table 4. Distribution of participants in the subgroups with different educational level according to the level of purpose in life

Subgroups with different educational level	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Primary education	2	25.0	3	37.5	3	37.5
Secondary education	25	31.2	35	43.8	20	25.0
Higher education	5	10.4	20	41.7	23	47.9
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|4\|}$=10.317, p=.035					
Cramer's V	.275					

Table 5 presents the results of the Univariate Analysis of Variance which was performed with the aim to determine the effects of participants' age, gender and educational level and their interactions on the participants' life satisfaction. Homogeneity of variances was checked using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances. The Mean life satisfaction scores were entered as a dependent variable, with participants' age, gender and educational level as fixed factors.

Table 5. Mean scores (M; SD) on the life satisfaction scale of the subgroups formed according to the participants' gender, educational level, and age

Life satisfaction					
Gender	Educational level	Age	N	Mean	SD
Men	Primary	Early elderly	2	22.50	14.84
		Late elderly	2	27.00	7.07
	Secondary	Early elderly	30	23.16	5.53
		Late elderly	6	23.00	6.03
	Higher	Early elderly	25	27.40	6.17
		Late elderly	3	30.33	3.05
Women	Primary	Early elderly	3	27.00	1.73
		Late elderly	1	29.00	-
	Secondary	Early elderly	36	23.66	7.50
		Late elderly	8	27.62	4.10
	Higher	Early elderly	17	27.64	4.93
		Late elderly	3	31.66	3.05

The results from the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects showed a significant main effect of educational level on Mean life satisfaction scores ($F_{(2,135)}$=4.467, Sig.=.013). Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons showed significant differences between the subgroups with secondary and higher education (Sig.=.003), with the subgroup with secondary education demonstrating lower Mean life satisfaction scores (M=24.36; SD=6.45) in comparison to the subgroup with higher education (M=29.26; SD=5.47). No significant differences were found between the Mean life satisfaction scores of the subgroup with primary education (M=26.37; SD=6.70) and the rest two subgroups (Sig.>.05).

No significant main effect was found for gender (male group – M=25.56; SD=6.28; female group – M=27.76; SD=6.54; $F_{(1,135)}$=1.310, Sig.=.255) and age (Early elderly group – M=25.23; SD=6.57; Late elderly group – M=28.10; SD=5.16; $F_{(1,135)}$=2.234, Sig.=.138), although a tendency to slightly higher Mean scores of life satisfaction in female and late elderly subgroups than in male and early elderly subgroups, respectively, was observed.

No significant main effect was found for the interactions between gender and age ($F_{(1,124)}$=.055, Sig.=.815), educational level and gender ($F_{(2,135)}$=.177, Sig.=.838), educational level and age ($F_{(2,135)}$=.131, Sig.=.878), and educational level, gender and age ($F_{(2,135)}$=.269, Sig.=.765), on the Mean scores of life satisfaction scale.

The performed Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of life satisfaction in the total sample revealed that more than half of all participants (56.6%; N=77) showed a high level of life satisfaction, one third (33.8%; N=46) showed a moderate level of life satisfaction and the rest 9.6% (N=13) showed a low level of life satisfaction.

The Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of life satisfaction in gender subgroups (Table 6) revealed that the highest percentage of both subgroups showed a high level of life satisfaction and the lowest percentage – a low level of life satisfaction, with the between-group differences being slight and insignificant ($\chi^2_{|2|}$=1.184, p=.553; Cramer's V=.093).

Table 6. Distribution of participants in gender subgroups according to the level of life satisfaction

Gender subgroups	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Males	6	8.8	26	38.2	36	52.9
Females	7	10.3	20	29.4	41	60.3
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|2\|}$=1.184, p=.553					
Cramer's V	.093					

The results from Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of life satisfaction in age subgroups (Table 7) revealed insignificant between-subgroup differences, with the highest percentage of both subgroups exhibiting a high level of life satisfaction and the lowest percentage of both subgroups exhibiting a low level of life satisfaction ($\chi^2_{|2|}$=3.506, p=.169; Cramer's V=.162).

Table 7. Distribution of participants in age subgroups according to the level of life satisfaction

Age subgroups	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Early elderly (60-74 years)	13	11.5	39	34.5	61	54.0
Late elderly (75-89 years)	0	0.0	7	30.4	16	69.6
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|2\|}$=3.506, p=.169					
Cramer's V	.162					

The results from Chi-square comparisons of the frequency of low, moderate or high level of life satisfaction in the subgroups with different educational level (Table 8) revealed significant between-subgroup differences, with the highest percentage of the participants in the subgroup with high education exhibiting a high level of life satisfaction and the lowest percentage of the participants in the subgroup with secondary education exhibiting a low level of life satisfaction ($\chi^2_{|4|}$=12.349, p=.015; Cramer's V=.301).

Table 8. Distribution of participants in the subgroups with different educational level according to the level of life satisfaction

Subgroups with different educational level	Low level		Moderate level		High level	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Primary educational level	1	12.5	2	25.0	5	62.5
Secondary educational level	10	12.5	35	43.8	35	43.8
Higher educational level	2	4.2	10	20.8	36	75.0
Pearson Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{\|4\|}$=12.349, p=.015					
Cramer's V	.301					

A moderate positive correlation between purpose in life and life satisfaction was found (r=.572; p<.01), which suggests that the higher the purpose in life, the greater the satisfaction of life.

4. Discussion

This research investigated how age, gender and educational level affect the self-reported levels of life satisfaction and purpose in life in elderly people in Greece after more than a year of living in a Covid-19 pandemic.

The results identified significant differences in both purpose in life and satisfaction with life related to the educational level of the participants. It was found that Greek senior adults with high education had higher life purpose and life satisfaction. These findings are in line with previously reported findings by Li, Chi and Xu (2013) and Papi and Cheraghi (2021), who found that the level of education is one of the factors with the greatest effect on life satisfaction among senior adults in their countries – China and Iran, but are not consistent with findings of Efklides, Kalaitzidou and Chankin (2003), who found no effects of education on life satisfaction of Greek elderly people. At this stage of research, it would be difficult to make any suggestion about this discrepancy. Most probably it is due to factors that were not taken into account in the present study.

As for the effects of gender and age on life purpose and life satisfaction, no significant influences of these demographic factors on the purpose in life and satisfaction with life were found, which is in line with previously reported findings by Myers (2000) and Efklides, Kalaitzidou and Chankin (2003), who also found no significant effects of age and gender on life satisfaction.

Finally, the results revealed that purpose in life positively correlate to life satisfaction in senior adults, which is in agreement with previous research findings (Karataş Uzun & Tagay, 2021; Pinquart, 2002; Ribeiro et al., 2020). This finding allows the suggestion that Greek elderly maintain their life satisfaction by maintaining their sense of life purpose and life meaning.

The present study's findings reveal that the subjective perception of life satisfaction among Greek older people is the importance of their level of education. Greek elderly with higher education has higher purpose in life and higher satisfaction with life in comparison to those with primary and especially with secondary education.

It can be assumed that a higher level of education is associated with higher anticipatory reflection and better developed anticipatory abilities, with more adequate rationalization and prediction of one's own behavior in difficult and challenging life situations.

Taken together, the present findings allow the conclusion that having a high level of education helps Greek senior adults maintain their purpose in life and life satisfaction, even in situations of severe life crises.

The current picture of the research on psychology of aging in Greece reveals a growing interest in understanding older people's psychology. Knowledge about factors related to purpose in life and life satisfaction of elderly during a global crisis is necessary and can contribute to improving public policies towards elderly people and adapting the care to their needs and perspective with the aim to help more senior adults age well.

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