

Relationship between Purpose in Life and Psychological Distress among Older Adults

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Abstract- Later life is accompanied by physical decline, psychosocial changes, and increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Purpose in life, defined as a sense of meaning, direction, and intentionality, has emerged as a protective factor that fosters resilience and psychological well-being. The present study investigates the relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults, with attention to gender differences. A purposive sample of 80 participants (40 males and 40 females) aged 65–79 years was selected from Palakkad district, Kerala. Standardized measures including the Purpose in Life Scale (PIL), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) were administered. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and independent samples *t*-test. Results revealed a significant negative correlation between purpose in life and psychological distress ($r = -0.469, p < .001$), suggesting that higher purpose is associated with lower distress. No significant gender difference was found in purpose in life; however, females reported significantly higher psychological distress than males. These findings highlight the protective role of purpose in life in reducing psychological distress and underscore the need for gender-sensitive interventions to support the mental well-being of older adults.

Keywords: Purpose in Life, Psychological Distress, Older Adults, Gender Differences, Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Aging is an inevitable process accompanied by multiple physical, psychological, and social changes. Older adults frequently encounter transitions such as retirement, bereavement, health challenges, and changing social roles, which significantly impact their mental well-being. Amidst these challenges, purpose in life has gained attention as a psychological construct that buffers against psychological distress. Purpose in life refers to the sense of meaning, direction, and intentionality that provides coherence to life and motivates individuals to pursue goals (Celano et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021).

Psychological distress, defined as emotional suffering characterized by symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, and irritability, is highly prevalent among older adults, particularly due to chronic illness, social isolation, and decreased functioning. It not only reduces quality of life but also contributes to cognitive decline and poorer physical health (Bonanno et al., 2015). The demographic shift toward an aging population further underscores the importance of addressing these challenges (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Research highlights that a strong sense of purpose is linked to positive outcomes, including lower depression and anxiety, greater resilience, and improved physical health (Aldwin & Igarashi, 2015; Cohen et al., 2016). Purpose fosters adaptive coping strategies, enhances social connectedness, and protects against existential despair. However, the relationship between purpose and psychological distress in Indian older adults remains underexplored.

The present study aims to investigate this relationship and to examine gender differences in purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults in Kerala.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies have consistently linked purpose in life to psychological resilience and lower distress. Celano et al. (2018) emphasized the role of positive psychology interventions in promoting health behaviors and well-being through meaning-making. Kim et al. (2021) identified purpose and social well-being as essential components of resilient aging.

Psychological distress has been recognized as a widespread challenge among older populations, with implications for physical illness and mortality (Cohen et al., 2016). Bonanno et al. (2015) argued that resilience processes, including purpose, buffer the effects of stress and loss. Research also indicates

that loneliness and social isolation amplify distress in late life (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Gender differences remain a point of interest. Some studies suggest women are more vulnerable to distress due to cultural, social, and financial dependence (Dewitte & Dezutter, 2021), while others find no significant gender differences in perceived purpose. Alonso et al. (2023) in a scoping review noted that purpose in life is often stable across gender, but its protective effect against distress may vary depending on social support and cultural context. Thus, the evidence highlights purpose in life as a protective factor, yet findings on gender remain mixed, necessitating further investigation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a correlational design to examine the relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress among older adults, while also exploring gender differences.

Participants

A purposive sample of 80 older adults (40 male and 40 female) aged 65–79 years was drawn from Palakkad district, Kerala. Participants were recruited from community settings and old-age homes. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was assured. Inclusion criteria required mental clarity to respond to questionnaires, while individuals with dementia, severe illness, or language barriers were excluded.

Tools

Purpose in Life Scale (PIL; Crumbaugh & Henrion, 1988): Consists of 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Scores range from 20–140, with higher scores indicating stronger purpose. Reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$ – 0.86) and test–retest reliability (0.68–0.83) support its validity.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002): A 10-item tool assessing nonspecific distress, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Scores range from 10–50, with higher scores reflecting greater distress. Reliability coefficients ($\kappa = 0.42$ – 0.74) confirm moderate reliability.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985): A 5-item scale rated on a 7-point Likert scale, used here as a supplementary measure. Cronbach’s alpha (0.80–0.89) and test–retest reliability (0.84) confirm its strong psychometric properties.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson’s correlation to assess the relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Table I. Correlation between Purpose in Life and Psychological Distress

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

The results show a significant negative correlation between purpose in life and psychological distress ($r = -0.469, p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of purpose are associated with lower levels of distress. The correlation is of moderate strength, suggesting a meaningful protective role of purpose.

Gender Differences

Table II. Gender Differences in Purpose in Life and Psychological Distress

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

Note: $p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

The results indicate that females reported significantly higher psychological distress than males ($t = 2.12, p < 0.05$). However, no significant gender differences were found in purpose in life scores, suggesting that both male and female participants experienced similar levels of meaning and direction.

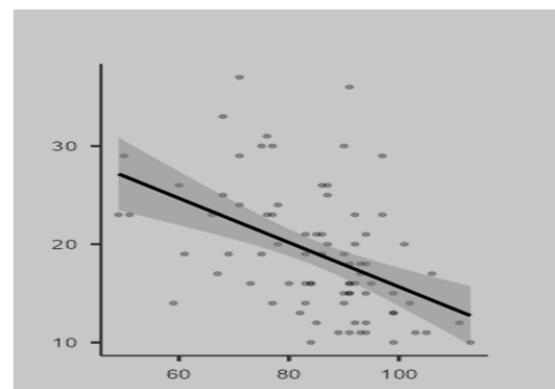


Figure 1: Relationship between purpose in life and psychological distress

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.

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.

LIMITATIONS

The study is limited by its regional focus on older adults from Palakkad, which restricts generalizability. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, and reliance on self-report measures introduces potential biases. Variables such as socioeconomic status, financial independence, and previous occupational roles were not examined, which may influence levels of distress and purpose.

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