

## MEANING IN LIFE AND HOPE AS PREDICTORS OF POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH: DO THEY EXPLAIN RESIDUAL VARIANCE NOT PREDICTED BY PERSONALITY TRAITS?\*

Peter HALAMA<sup>1,2</sup>, Mária DĚDOVÁ<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Experimental Psychology, Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Dúbravská cesta 9, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovak Republic  
E-mail: peter.halama@savba.sk

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Trnava  
Homopotočná 23, 918 43 Trnava, Slovak Republic

*Abstract:* The study examines the question whether meaning in life and hope can explain unique variance of positive mental health not predicted by personality traits. The sample consisted of 148 adolescents (73 males, 75 females) ranging in age from 16 to 19 years - mean age 16.84. NEO-FFI was used to measure the big five traits, Halama's Life Meaningfulness Scale for measuring meaning in life and Snyder's Hope Scale for measuring hope. To measure positive mental health, use was made of Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. The correlation analysis showed that personality traits, meaning in life and hope have significant correlations with positive mental health variables. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that the big five traits explain 26.1% of life satisfaction variance. Meaning in life but not hope explained additional 8% of variance of life satisfaction. The Big five traits explained 42.4% of self-esteem variance, hope explained additional 8% and meaning in life 4%. The results confirmed that meaning in life is an independent predictor of both life satisfaction and self-esteem, and hope is an independent predictor of self-esteem.

*Key words:* meaning in life, hope, big five traits, life satisfaction, self-esteem

There is much discussion on what are the factors of optimal mental functioning. A huge amount of research was done on this topic from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, which led to identifying many factors predicting mental health, including various social, demographic as well as psychological variables. Concerning psychological variables, two strong opinions can be identified about the factors which predominantly affect mental health.

The first stream emphasizes the role of basic personality traits and temperament in

the prediction of mental health and well-being. These traits are usually considered as genetically determined and relatively stable. Much research has been done on the relationship between basic personality traits and different aspects of mental health. Roysamb (2006) gives a review of research concerning genetic influence on well-being and concludes that the studies report heritability coefficients from 0.35 to 0.55. Correlational research has mainly focused on temperament and the big five traits and has provided much evidence for a close relationship. Klein et al. (1989) examined the relationship between temperament as defined in the Buss and Plomin EAS theory (emotionality, activity and

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sociability) and life satisfaction. They found that emotionality is the best predictor of life satisfaction. Hansenne et al. (1999) analyzed differences between depressed and non-depressed persons in Cloninger's Temperament and Character Inventory. The results showed higher scores in harm avoidance in depressed patients. In a longitudinal study by Heinonen et al. (2002), the focus was on the prediction of self-esteem on the basis of the mother's assessment of child temperament. The authors found that temperament assessed as difficult (i.e., high in activity and in negative emotionality, and low in social cooperation) predicted low self-esteem and higher hostility in later age. The research on the relationship between basic traits and well-being reflects the contemporary dominance of the Five Factors Theory. The research confirmed that five traits are the predictors of different negative and positive aspects of mental health, as depression (Mascaro, Rosen, 2005), well-being (Hayes, Joseph, 2002; Roysamb, 2006), self-esteem (Ficková, 1999), etc. From the big five dimensions, neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness are consistently related to mental health.

The second stream is related to current trends in psychological research and theory usually covered by the label "positive psychology" (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder, Lopez, 2002; Kováč, 2003; Křivohlavý, 2004). Opinions in this stream emphasize the role of human strength in enhancing mental health and optimal functioning. In the volume edited by Snyder and Lopez (2002), different authors present many positive psychological constructs and areas where positive psychology can be applied. The important difference from the authors emphasizing the influence of basic personality on well-

being is the nature of the constructs considered by positive psychology. Although a few of them are considered to have a biological basis, most of them are not considered as completely inborn and genetically determined, but rather as socially learned and self-developed life attitudes and virtues. This view permits to realize the goal of positive psychology, that is to build those characteristics which contribute to enhancing and flourishing good life (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

From among positive psychological constructs, meaningfulness and hope belong to phenomena most intensively studied both theoretically and empirically. Sense of meaning in life is widely researched especially by authors related to V.E. Frankl's logotherapy (Frankl, 1996, 1997). There is much evidence that meaningfulness is highly related to positive and negative mental health. Moomal (1999) found that life meaningfulness correlates negatively with most of the clinical scales of MMPI: depression, paranoia, psychopathic deviation, schizophrenia, hypochondria, psychasthenia, anxiety, social introversion, and positively with ego strength. Meaning of life was found to be a strong predictor of psychological well-being (Balcar, 1995; Zika, Chamberlain, 1992; Compton, 2000). Reversely, lack of meaning was found as a symptom of depression in the elderly (Reker, 1997) as well as of alcohol and drug addicts (Newcomb, Harlow, 1986; Wolf et al., 1995). Research on hope has been influenced by the cognitive concept of hope provided by Snyder (1995, 2000). He understands hope as a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful agency (goal directed determination) and pathway (planning of ways to meet the goals). The research done with Snyder's Hope Scale as well as with other measures has confirmed the ability of hope

to predict mental health. Hope was found to have a negative relation with depression and dysphoria (Cheavens, 2000; Kwon, 2000) and hope dimension Agency predicted negatively later depression and anxiety (Arnau et al., 2007). Concerning positive mental health, Wroblewski and Snyder (2005) found that the elderly with higher hope had greater life satisfaction and they were more confident of reaching their goals. Sumerlin (1997) also found a positive relationship of hope with life satisfaction and likewise with self-actualization.

Some discussion is going on about the mutual relationship between traits and positive human strengths. It has been found that these are not independent, rather, there exists some relationship between them. Concerning meaningfulness and hope, previous research (Halama, 2005; Mascaro, Rosen, 2005) showed that both correlate with some of the big five traits, especially neuroticism (negative relationship), extraversion, and conscientiousness (positive relationship). These facts lead to the opinion held by some authors who emphasize the role of traits in human functioning. McCrae and Costa (1999) in their five-factor theory of personality suggest that basic personality tendencies defined as five traits are projected in characteristic adaptations, self-schemes and other personality characteristics. This raises the question whether human strengths as defined in positive psychology are not just derivatives of basic personality traits. This opinion would lead to the conclusion that these characteristics do not have any special effect or influence on well-being and other manifestations of mental health and therefore, their relationship could be explained by the effect of basic traits. On the other hand, if human strengths are personality characteristics relatively indepen-

dent of basic traits, they should have an independent and unique effect on well-being not explained by personality traits.

In our study, we decided to contribute to the understanding of the scientific problem, viz. how different personality characteristics predict optimal human functioning. We focused on the evaluation of the relationships between personality traits, level of meaning in life, hope and selected aspects of positive mental health. We also wanted to examine whether the level of meaning in life and hope can explain the unique variance in predicting positive mental health, that is, whether these variables can explain residual variance not explained by personality traits.

## METHOD

### *Research sample*

Our research sample consisted of 148 adolescents, 73 males and 75 females, students of a secondary grammar school in the Slovak town Hlohovec. Their age ranged from 16 to 19 years, with a mean of 16.84 and standard deviation 0.79. They filled out a set of questionnaires during the school lessons.

### *Measures*

The *Life Meaningfulness Scale* (LMS, Halama, 2002) was used to measure the sense of experiencing meaning in life. The scale has 18 items and measures the overall sense of meaningfulness and its three dimensions as defined in the three-component theory of meaning (Reker, Wong, 1989), namely cognitive component, motivational component and affective component. In this research, only the overall sense of life meaningfulness served as predicting variable.

The *Hope Scale* (HS, Snyder, 1995) helped to measure the level of hope in life. It has 12 items and defines hope in terms of Snyder's (1995, 2000) understanding of hope, mentioned above and consisting of two dimensions - pathway and agency. Similarly as in meaningfulness, only the overall sense of hope was employed as the predicting variable.

In the present research, the five factor theory was taken as an approach to personality traits. The *NEO Five Factor Inventory* (NEO FFI, Costa, McCrae, 1992, Slovak version Ruisel, Halama, 2007) applied in this research, measures five personality traits as defined in the five factor theory, namely neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experiences, agreeableness and conscientiousness. It has 60 items (12 for every dimension) and is one of the questionnaires most frequently used in the current personality research.

Positive mental health was measured by two scales which represent the most common indicators of psychological health. The first was *Satisfaction With Life Scale*

(SWLS) created by Denier (Lewis et al., 1999). It is a short, 5-items scale measuring general sense of life satisfaction and is one of the scales most used to assess the general aspect of well-being. The second scale was the 10-items *Self-Esteem Scale* (SES) which measures the global level of a person's self-esteem. It was created in 1965 by M. Rosenberg and is widely used in research of global self-esteem (e.g., Osecká, Blatný, 1997; Pullman, Allik, 2000).

## RESULTS

The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine relationships between personality traits, meaning, hope and mental health variables: life satisfaction and self-esteem. Results of this analysis can be found in Table 1. As can be seen, there are two personality traits which correlate with both variables of positive mental health, namely neuroticism and conscientiousness. Extraversion and agreeableness have positive correlations with

Table 1. Correlations between personality traits, meaning, hope and two indicators of mental health

	N	E	O	A	C	LMS	HS	SWLS
E	-0.12							
O	-0.01	0.03						
A	-0.17*	0.19*	-0.12					
C	-0.05	-0.06	-0.01	0.02				
LMS	-0.30**	0.29**	0.25**	0.09	0.44**			
HS	-0.22**	0.31**	0.06	-0.14	0.43**	0.65**		
SWLS	-0.38**	0.21*	-0.05	0.22**	0.32**	0.50**	0.34**	
SES	-0.58**	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.23**	0.57**	0.52**	0.56*

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Note: N - Neuroticism, E - Extraversion, O - Openness, A - Agreeableness, C - Conscientiousness, LMS - Life Meaningfulness Scale, HS - Hope Scale, SWLS - Satisfaction With Life Scale, SES - Self-Esteem Scale

life satisfaction, but not with self-esteem. Both meaningfulness and hope correlate positively with positive mental health, however meaningfulness has somewhat higher correlations.

To examine whether meaning of hope can explain unique variance in predicting positive mental health, we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses. The first regression analysis used life satisfaction as the dependent variable, the second one used self-esteem. Both regression analyses consisted of three steps. When predicting life satisfaction, five personality traits were entered in Step 1. Meaningfulness was added to predicting variables in Step 2, and hope in Step 3. When predicting self-esteem, the process was quite similar, however, due to the fact that correlation of self-esteem with hope was higher than with meaningfulness, hope was added in Step 2, and meaningfulness in Step 3. To avoid possible bias caused by potential multicollinearity caused, we computed tolerance levels for both regressions. Tolerance levels were satisfactorily high, none of them approached level 0.2 (they ranged from 0.426 to 0.985), so we could conclude that multicollinearity was not a problem in our analyses.

The results of the first regression analysis with life satisfaction as a dependent variable are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 presents standardized beta coefficients, t-values and levels of significance for variables in every step and Table 3 presents R statistics for every model of prediction. As seen in the tables, the first model explained 26.1% of variance, and there are two traits: Neuroticism and Conscientiousness which significantly predicted life satisfaction. Adding meaningfulness to the predictors increased variance explained by the model of 8% and this change was statistically significant. However, a minimal and non-

significant change in R-square was caused by our adding hope to the predictors.

The second hierarchical regression analysis used self-esteem as dependent variable. Tables 4 and 5 present the results of this analysis. The first model explained 42.4% of variance, and Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness were significant predictors of self-esteem. Adding hope in Step 2 increased R-square by 8.2%, and adding meaningfulness increases R-square by 4%. Both these changes were statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

The correlation analysis revealed several correlations which were identified in previous studies. Partially surprising is the lower correlation of extraversion with well-being and self-esteem which differs from typical opinions based on previous research investigating the relationship between personality traits and positive mental health (see Roysamb, 2006 for review) where extraversion together with neuroticism is considered to be the best predictor of well-being and optimal functioning. These results are usually associated with the presence of emotions as basic characteristics of these traits, neuroticism with negative emotions, and extraversion with positive emotions. However, our results showing the lower effect of extraversion on well-being are in consistency with studies questioning the role of extraversion in well-being (Vitterso, 2001; DeNeve, Cooper, 1998). In our research, the best trait predictors of well-being and self-esteem are neuroticism and conscientiousness. One of the reasons for the higher correlation of conscientiousness with well-being is the nature of the scale used in our research for measuring well-being. The

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis of five personality traits, meaning and hope on life satisfaction

Variable	Standardized beta coefficient	t-value	Significance
Step 1			
N	-0.299	-3.863	0.000
E	0.128	1.640	0.103
O	-0.033	-0.426	0.671
A	0.129	1.649	0.102
C	0.326	4.256	0.000
Step 2			
N	-0.216	-2.838	0.005
E	0.033	0.418	0.677
O	-0.111	-1.479	0.141
A	0.112	1.503	0.135
C	0.145	1.685	0.094
LMS	0.370	3.932	0.000
Step 3			
N	-0.221	-2.881	0.005
E	0.050	0.606	0.546
O	-0.118	-1.552	0.123
A	0.090	1.109	0.270
C	0.162	1.807	0.073
LMS	0.410	3.703	0.000
HS	-0.075	-0.684	0.495

Note: N - Neuroticism, E - Extraversion, O - Openness, A - Agreeableness, C - Conscientiousness, LMS - Life Meaningfulness Scale, HS - Hope Scale

Table 3. Model summaries for hierarchical regression analysis of five personality traits, meaning and hope on life satisfaction

	R	R-square	R-square change	F Change	Significance of F change
Model 1	0.511	0.261	0.261	9.039	0.00
Model 2	0.584	0.341	0.080	15.459	0.00
Model 3	0.586	0.344	0.002	0.468	0.49

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis of five personality traits, meaning and hope on self-esteem

Variable	Standardized beta coefficient	t-value	Significance
Step 1			
N	-0.552	-8.084	0.000
E	0.176	2.545	0.012
O	0.031	0.454	0.650
A	-0.108	-1.556	0.122
C	0.265	3.921	0.000
Step 2			
N	-0.485	-7.455	0.000
E	0.040	0.567	0.572
O	0.022	0.350	0.727
A	-0.008	-0.124	0.902
C	0.083	1.115	0.267
HS	0.374	4.602	0.000
Step 3			
N	-0.446	-6.985	0.000
E	0.019	0.275	0.784
O	-0.039	-0.622	0.535
A	-0.065	-0.964	0.337
C	0.011	0.145	0.885
HS	0.215	2.339	0.021
LMS	0.306	3.324	0.001

Note: N - Neuroticism, E - Extraversion, O - Openness, A - Agreeableness, C - Conscientiousness, HS - Hope Scale, LMS - Life Meaningfulness Scale

Table 5. Model summaries for hierarchical regression analysis of five personality traits, meaning and hope on self-esteem

	R	R-square	R-square change	F Change	Significance of F change
Model 1	0.651	0.424	0.424	18.811	0.00
Model 2	0.711	0.506	0.082	21.178	0.00
Model 3	0.739	0.546	0.040	11.049	0.01

Satisfaction with Life Scale is generally considered as measuring cognitive/evaluative aspects of well-being. Conscientiousness as a trait dimension is not related to emotions such as neuroticism and extraversion, but it reflects an ability to achieve goals. As achieving goals is an important factor in effective functioning in society, evaluation of personal success is associated with cognitive reflection of life quality (Hayes, Joseph, 2002; DeNeve, Cooper, 1998).

From all the variables, meaning in life had the highest correlation with positive mental health. This finding is consistent with previous findings mentioned in the introductory part of this study which see meaning as an important predictor of mental health (Balcar, 1995; Zika, Chamberlain, 1992; Compton, 2000). In this study, we tried to answer the question, whether this prediction can be considered as independent and not explained by personality traits. Hierarchical regression analysis brings several noteworthy results concerning this problem. First of all, meaning in life explains the unique variance of positive mental health defined through life satisfaction and self-esteem, which has not been explained by the big five traits. In the case of life satisfaction, it adds 8% of additional variance explained, and in the case of self-esteem, it adds 4% of the variance explained. These results support the theoretical formulations of positive psychology and existential psychology which consider meaning in life as an important independent factor of optimal human functioning (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1997). Support for this assumption is confirmed not only by our research but also by the research with a longitudinal design. Debats (1996) focused on patients at the University Center for Mental Health and tried to answer the question whether meaning in life can be

considered as a clinically relevant variable. He tested patients before and after treatment and found that level of meaning in life is related to improvement during therapy, and it predicts the outcome of treatment regardless of patients' pretreatment levels of well-being. Debats (1996) concludes that his findings disprove the assumption of many clinicians, that the problem of meaning in life is not relevant in psychotherapy because it tends to diminish with decreasing psychological disturbances. Similarly, Mascara and Rosen (2005) tried to reveal whether meaning influences the unique aspects of depression symptoms. They asked college students to fill in a set of questionnaires at two time points (with a two-month interval in between) and found that meaning in life negatively predicted later levels of depressive symptoms.

More complicated results were found about the level of hope. Correlational analysis showed that the level of hope correlated positively with both aspects of mental health (life satisfaction and self-esteem) and correlation with self-esteem was substantially higher (0.52). However, hierarchical regression analysis revealed that hope did not explain any significant amount of residual variance of life satisfaction which remained unexplained by personality traits and meaningfulness. Therefore, hope does not seem to be an independent predictor of life satisfaction. Correlations with the big five traits suggest that especially conscientiousness is the trait related to hope. As we mentioned earlier, conscientiousness reflects an ability to achieve goals, which is similar to the definition of hope. Hope is also related to the evaluation of personal success associated with cognitive reflection of life quality in the Satisfaction with Life Scale. So, it may be assumed that relation be-



tween hope and life satisfaction can be explained by the level of conscientiousness. However, hope was found to be an independent predictor of self-esteem, because it explained 8% of variance not explained by personality traits. Snyder (2000) emphasizes that especially goal pursuit thoughts, in particular, explicitly defined in definition of hope, influence self-esteem. This can be the aspect of hope responsible for the independent effect on self-esteem, because it is not present in the usual concept of conscientiousness.

To conclude, the results of our research bring support to an understanding of meaning and hope as specific psychological phenomena not fully explained by basic personality tendencies. Although related to these traits, their effect on positive mental health can be evaluated as independent, mainly in the case of life meaningfulness. Hope is a factor independent of personality traits only in predicting self-esteem, but not in predicting life satisfaction. Despite this apparent contradiction concerning hope, our results lead us to emphasize the significance and importance of the phenomena termed 'human strengths' by positive psychologists in optimal human functioning.

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## ZMYSEL ŽIVOTA A NÁDEJ AKO PREDIKTORY POZITÍVNEHO MENTÁLNEHO ZDRAVIA: VYSVETLUJÚ REZIDUÁLNY ROZPTYL NEPREDIKOVANÝ OSOBNOSTNÝMI ČRTAMI?

P. H a l a m a, M. D ě d o v á

*Súhrn:* Štúdia skúma otázku, či zmysel života a nádej dokážu vysvetliť reziduálny rozptyl premenných pozitívneho mentálneho zdravia, ktorý nie je vysvetliteľný vplyvom osobnostných črt. Výskumný súbor pozostával zo 148 adolescentov (73 mužov, 75 žien), s vekovým rozpätím 16 až 19 rokov a priemerným vekom 16.84. Päť veľkých črt osobnosti bolo meraných dotazníkom NEO-FFI, zmysel života Halamovou škálou životnej zmysluplnosti a nádej Snyderovou škálou nádeje. Na meranie pozitívneho mentálneho zdravia boli použité Dienerova škála životnej spokojnosti a Rosenbergova škála sebaúcty. Korelačná analýza ukázala, že osobnostné črty, zmysel v živote aj nádej signifikantne korelujú s premennými pozitívneho mentálneho zdravia. Hierarchická regresná analýza odhalila, že päť veľkých črt vysvetľuje 26.1% rozptylu životnej spokojnosti. Zmysel života, ale nie nádej, vysvetľuje ďalších 8%. Päť veľkých črt vysvetľuje 42.4% rozptylu sebaúcty, nádej vysvetľuje ďalších 8% a zmysel života 4%. Výsledky potvrdili, že zmysel života je nezávislým prediktorom životnej spokojnosti aj sebaúcty a nádej je nezávislým prediktorom sebaúcty.