Predicting the Presence of Purpose Through the Self-Efficacy Beliefs of One’s Talents

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Abstract

Individuals with greater levels of purpose and meaning tend to be happier, demonstrate greater self-control, strong values, and have healthier mental attitudes (Molasso, 2006a; Steger, 2009). It has been suggested that knowing one’s talents may be related to the development of purpose, but this hypothesis has not been previously tested. This study examines the self-efficacy belief in one’s talents identified through the Clifton StrengthsFinder® and its relationship to hope, well-being, and meaning in life among college students. Results from a path analysis indicate that these self-efficacy beliefs can predict hope and the presence of meaning in life, and the results may suggest that this inventory can be a practical assessment tool.

Understanding the development of meaning and purpose in students’ lives is an aim of many practitioners working with college students (Johnson, 2006). This aim is in part because the presence of meaning can elevate human lives such that they are “not merely tolerable, but fulfilling, vital, and rich” (Steger, 2009, p. 685). Research has shown that individuals with greater levels of purpose and meaning tend to be happier, and demonstrate greater self-control, stronger values, and healthier mental attitudes (Molasso, 2006a). The problem is that practical frameworks for helping students synthesize purpose and meaning are limited and require further study.

We propose researchers and practitioners in college student development may benefit from considering assessments that help students identify their individual talents. Seligman (2002) suggested that meaning may be a result of one’s awareness of and dedication to these talents. Knowing one’s talents is also related to career decision making and planning (Stebleton, Soria, & Albecker, 2012), subjective well-being (Proctor, Malby, & Linely, 2011), hope (Dalton & Crosby, 2009), student success (Lopez & Louis, 2009), and leadership development (Lane & Chapman, 2011; Wisner, 2011).

A widely used assessment for identifying one’s talents is the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory administered through StrengthsQuest (Lopez & Louis, 2009). The Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory has

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been used by more than 600 campuses and 850,000 students in North America (The Gallup Corporation, 2011). However, this inventory only provides a student with his or her signature theme and does not measure that student’s belief in the ability to use the signature theme in practice (i.e., strengths-self-efficacy). This study addresses that limitation by exploring the relationship between strengths self-efficacy and meaning in life, hope, and well-being among college students.

**Positive Psychology Theory**

An aim of positive psychology theory and practice is to shift the focus from a deficit preoccupation by building upon positive qualities such as well-being, hope and optimism, flow and happiness, future mindedness, perseverance, and talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Institutionally, this focus can be applied such that it “move[s] individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic” (p. 5). Schreiner (2010) suggested such an approach can direct students toward a process of thriving, rather than simply toward a process of surviving the adjustment to the college environment. This suggestion may be in part because understanding one’s talents predicts attendance, achievement, credits earned, and student retention (Lopez & Louis, 2009). It may also be a result of a relationship to self-development and personal growth. For example, Dalton and Crosby (2009) suggested “positive aspects of personality such as talents, feelings, interests, and strengths have salutary effects on individuals’ search for happiness, the good life, and personal fulfillment” (p. 4) and may help to foster hope during challenging times.

So how do individuals identify their talents? One approach is through the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory, developed by The Gallup Corporation (1999). It is based on the idea that individuals perform at higher levels when they build upon their dominant talents and make similar efforts to remediate their areas of lesser talents (Clifton & Harter, 2003). A talent is defined within the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory as “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (The Gallup Corporation, n.d.). The inventory identifies these patterns through an online assessment where respondents distinguish between pairs of self-descriptors, such as “I like to help people.” These descriptors are associated with 34 possible themes, but only the five most prevalent are considered to be one’s signature themes or talents.

The problem with this inventory is that it does not measure one’s belief in those talents, likely a necessary precursor to the inventory’s utility. To overcome this limitation, we extend Dewitz, Woolsey, and Walsh’s (2009) theoretical and conceptual linkages that self-efficacy beliefs may be connected to the development of an individual’s sense of purpose by concurrently measuring self-efficacy beliefs relative to identified strengths/talents (i.e., strengths self-efficacy). Self-efficacy is defined as a person’s belief in his or her capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and course of action needed to exercise control over task demand (Bandura, 1997). Research suggests that self-efficacy plays an important role in task performance, persistence, and psychosocial outcomes in diverse situations and has the potential to benefit people psychologically, physically, and socially (Hagedoorn & Molleman, 2006). As such, individuals should design a plan to gain control and implement one’s strengths across different roles and situations, measured through the concept of strengths self-efficacy.

Strengths self-efficacy is defined as individuals’ beliefs in their capability to apply personal strengths in their daily lives in order to maximize their potential (Zhao, Tsai, Chaichanasakul, Flores, & Lopez, 2010). It is grounded in hope, which serves “an activating force that enables people, even when faced with the most overwhelming obstacles, to envision a promising future and to set and pursue goals” (Helland &
Winston, 2005, p. 43). This requires both a critical reflection of our goal motivation and actions toward those goals. Such reflection has been shown to decrease high-risk behaviors, aid in the coping of mental and physical illness, and increases one’s level of energy and confidence in his or her goals (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Hope has also been shown to improve overall psychological well-being, self-esteem, optimism, positive affect, and persistence (Snyder et al., 2002). As such, student affairs practitioners may want to consider leveraging positive psychology theory and practice to help students better understand the role of personal strengths in building hope because of possible implications for the development of meaning and purpose in these students.

Meaning in Life

Research on meaning and purpose is centered on the belief that one’s life in context can be meaningful (Steger, 2009). Meaning in life is defined as “an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 209). Within examples of theories that inspired positive psychology literature, meaning in life is also characterized as an innate drive or pursuit of life goals or purpose (Frankl, 1963). The inability to achieve this meaning can result in psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). However, meaning in life can also be defined as an existential experience or belief that meaning is experienced when life makes sense (Baumeister, 1991). When individuals experience this meaning, they tend to have greater life satisfaction, joy, and happiness (Steger et al., 2006).

Given these two unidimensional approaches, Steger (2009) stated that meaning in life is both the search for and presence of it. People may find meaning in their lives by “engaging in created endeavors, through elevating experiences, or through their ability to reflect upon and grow from negative experiences and suffering” (Steger, 2009, p. 682). Meaning in life can also be created through work, relationships, spirituality/religiosity, and self-transcendence (Emmons, 2003). We support this framework but also suggest it may be fostered through an awareness of talents, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory, and mediated through hope and satisfaction with life.

Purpose of the Study

The literature calls for the exploration of programs that develop hope, well-being, and meaning in life (Molasso, 2006a). Evaluating these relationships in the context of one’s self-efficacy beliefs in identified talents may help to inform this inventory as a potential tool toward that aim. As such, we explore strengths self-efficacy along with hope, well-being, and meaning in life within a multi-institutional sample of college students using path analysis.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included students from one private mid-size urban university in the southwest (n = 85) and one regional public university located in the southeast (n = 132) for a total sample of n = 217. Students were 53% female (n = 115) and 47% male (n = 102). Racially, students were 57.1% Caucasian (n = 124), 19.3% African-American (n = 42), 2.8% Native-American (n = 6), 1.8% Hispanic (n = 4), 0.9% Asian
(n = 2), 7.4% multi-racial (n = 16), and 1.8% other or nonspecified (n = 4). By classification, the sample makeup was 14.3% freshman (n = 31), 28.1% sophomore (n = 61), 32.3% junior (n = 70), 24.9% senior (n = 54), and 0.5% graduate (n = 1).

Measures

**Strengths Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES).** The SSES (Zhao et al., 2010) is a 16-item scale comprised of two dimensions (strengths building; strengths application) designed to measure individual beliefs in their top five Clifton StrengthsFinder® signature themes (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007). Participants are then required to respond to each item in the SSES using a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = do not agree, 10 = strongly agree). Internal consistency reliability estimates (α) have been reported to range between .91 -.96. Strengths self-efficacy is positively correlated with hope and goal-directed thinking (Wisner, 2011), subjective well-being (Proctor et al., 2011), and individual values of the social change model of leadership (Lane & Chapman, 2011).

**Adult Trait Hope Scale (ATH).** The ATH scale is a two dimensional 12-item scale designed (pathways thinking; agency thinking) to measure Snyder et al. (1991) cognitive model of hope. Participants are required to respond to each item using 8-point Likert scale (1 = definitely false, 8 = definitely true), and internal consistency reliability estimates (α) have been reported to range between .79 -.89. Adult trait hope is positively correlated with academic achievement, physical health, coping, and subjective well-being (Rand & Cheavens, 2009).

**Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).** The MLQ is a two dimensional 10-item scale developed to operationalize Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler’s (2006) theoretical construct of purpose (presence of meaning; search for meaning). These two dimensions are usually examined orthogonally in the literature. Participants are required to respond to each item using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = absolutely untrue, 7 = absolutely true), and internal consistency reliability estimates (α) have been reported to range between .83 -.88. The presence of meaning is positively correlated with life satisfaction, love, joy, agreeableness, and intrinsic religiosity while negatively correlated with fear, anger, depression, and neuroticism. The search for meaning is positively correlated with fear, sadness, neuroticism, and depression (Steger et al., 2006).

**Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS).** The SWLS is a one-dimensional 5-item scale developed to measure one’s satisfaction with life as a whole (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The SWLS is measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), and internal consistency reliability estimates (α) have been reported to range between .82 -.87. Life satisfaction is positively related to health, happiness, and relationships (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009).

Procedures

Students were identified using a purposive sample of student organizations and academic programs to identify participants. Random selection was not possible given inventory costs and institutional collaboration needed to fund this study. Those who responded to our invitation then received a code to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder® 2.0 as a basis for identifying their talents and participated in a workshop to help inform the inventory. In some instances, the inventory was part of their enrollment in cocurricular courses. However, all workshops defined talents for participants as discussed in Clifton, Anderson, and Schreiner (2006a) and utilized the same activities published from the Strengths Activity Workbook (The Gallup Corporation,
2008). Following the workshop, students were then given a questionnaire that contained 56 items measuring strengths self-efficacy, meaning in life, hope and life satisfaction.

**Analysis**

Although the original and a modified version of the SSES have been used in the literature (Lane & Chapman, 2011; Wisner, 2012), the structural validity of this scale is limited (Zhao, Tsai, Chaichanasakul, Flores, & Lopez, 2010). Given that this scale served as a basis of our investigation, we first tested the SSES in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using MPlus (version 7). This scale was specified using the model reported in Zhao et al. (2010). Once the structural validity of this scale was confirmed within our sample, scale scores were saved and included in a path analysis to predict ATH, SWLS, and the search and presence dimensions of the MLQ (Figure 1).

Mean and variance adjusted maximum likelihood estimation (MLMV) was used to estimate both CFA and path analysis models given non-normality in our data (Table 1). These models were then evaluated using Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2$, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Fit levels suggested in Hu and Bentler (1999) and Schumacker and Lomax (2004) were used to guide model evaluation. However, standardized factor loadings and residuals were also used given that overly stringent cut-points may result in an over-rejection of reasonably fitting models (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

**Figure 1.** Path diagram model of Strengths Self-Efficacy, Adult Trait Hope, Satisfaction With Life, and Meaning in Life.

![Path diagram model of Strengths Self-Efficacy, Adult Trait Hope, Satisfaction With Life, and Meaning in Life.](image)

**Results**

The specified two-factor CFA model of strengths self-efficacy was an improvement over an alternative one-factor model, despite the high correlation between factors ($r = .87$). However, our two-factor model did not fit the data ($\chi^2[54] = 216.22, p < .001$; SRMR = .142; RMSEA = .188 [90CI: .102 - .135]; CFI = .91; TLI = .90) as well as previous findings reported in Zhao et al. (2010). Additional item error-covariances within factors were required to improve SSES model fit to within acceptable levels ($\chi^2[51] = 89.10, p < .001$; SRMR = .117; RMSEA = .059 [90CI: .038 - .079]; CFI = .96; TLI = .94): Items 10 ("determine how to..."
build on your current strengths”) and 11 (“utilize several strategies for enhancing your strengths”) \( (r = .48) \); 7 (“apply your strengths at work/school”) and 13 (“find ways to use your strengths at work/school every day”) \( (r = .32) \); 7 (“apply your strengths at work/school”) and 8 (“use your strengths in many situations” \( (r = .29) \); and 6 (“accomplish a lot by using your strengths”) and 7 (“apply your strengths at work/school”) \( (r = .27) \). Other modifications were possible that could have improved model fit but required cross-loading items that could not be theoretically justified. The two-factor model with four within factor item error-covariances served as our final model.

Strengths self-efficacy scores were then saved and included in a path analysis (Figure 1). Strengths self-efficacy was found to be a statistically significant predictor of adult trait hope \( (\beta = .583, SE = .050, p < .001) \) and accounted for 34% of the individual differences within these scores. Hope was found to be a statistically significant predictor of satisfaction with life \( (\beta = .482, SE = .071, p < .001) \) with both direct \( (\beta = .204, SE = .083, p = .014) \) and indirect effects on the presence of meaning in life \( (\beta = .326, SE = .071, p < .001) \). Together, strengths self-efficacy, hope, and satisfaction with life could explain approximately 21.1% of individual differences in the presence of meaning in life. None of these variables statistically predicted the search for meaning in life. This model demonstrated acceptable fit \( (\chi^2[4] = 7.51, p = .112; RMSEA = .064 [90CI: .000 - .133]; SRMR = .040; CFI = .98; TLI = .95) \) so no additional modifications were made.

**Discussion**

Meaning in life has many implications for the physical and psychological well-being of college students, and our results seem to confirm this construct’s relationship to hope and overall satisfaction with life, which is empirically supported in the literature. However, only one dimension of meaning in life (presence) was statistically predicted by these two constructs. This relationship was unanticipated but may be preferred because the presence of meaning is related to increased levels of love, joy, and religiosity, whereas search for meaning is positively associated with fear, sadness, and depression (Steger et al, 2006). This dichotomy of meaning in life is not to suggest the search for meaning is always negative. It may be necessary during times of growth and transition when one’s purpose is less clear, and the transition to college may be one of these situations. However, the development of meaning and purpose through hope and satisfaction in life may not be an effective strategy during this stage.

Our findings also suggest an increased belief in one’s talents is associated with higher levels of hope and life satisfaction. Approximately one-third of individual differences in hope could be explained by strengths self-efficacy alone. This result seemed both statistically and practically noteworthy given the other relationships in this model and conceptually valid because an awareness of one’s talents would seem to influence one’s intent to act upon them (Snyder et al.’s [1991] cognitive model of hope). Synder et al. (2002) suggested it would be hard to envision change without this iterative process. As such, the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory may serve as a vehicle for developing this motivation to act when individuals believe in their ability to apply these talents.

**StrengthsQuest** (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006) is the collegiate educational model designed by Gallup to specifically assist students with identifying talents through the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory. It encompasses five principles (measurement, individualization, networking, deliberate application, and intentional development) that embody “a student-centered form of education with the primary goal of transforming students into confident, efficacious, lifelong learners whose work is infused with a sense of purpose” (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2). Institutions may want to explore StrengthsQuest as a framework for building awareness in one’s identified StrengthsFinder® talents.
### Table 1

**Variable Means, SDs, Correlations and Internal Consistency Reliability Estimates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SSES</th>
<th>ATH</th>
<th>SWLS</th>
<th>MLQP</th>
<th>MLQS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strengths Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>SSES</td>
<td>123.41</td>
<td>19.94</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Trait Hope</td>
<td>ATH</td>
<td>52.86</td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td>* .583</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Life</td>
<td>SWLS</td>
<td>26.64</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>*.356</td>
<td>* .482</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of Meaning</td>
<td>MLQP</td>
<td>27.06</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>*.325</td>
<td>*.361</td>
<td>*.424</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for Meaning</td>
<td>MLQS</td>
<td>25.94</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>-.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewness</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.315</td>
<td>-1.55</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>-0.913</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 216 undergraduate students; * = p < 0.001; Cronbach alpha coefficient reported on the diagonal.

### Table 2

**Path Analysis Summary of Direct and Indirect Effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>β</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSES</td>
<td>ATHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATHS</td>
<td>**.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWLS</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQP</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQS</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATHS</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWLS</td>
<td>**.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQP</td>
<td>**.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQS</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATHS</td>
<td>**.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWLS</td>
<td>**.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQP</td>
<td>**.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLQS</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: b = unstandardized coeff.; β = standardized coeff. * Path statistically significant at the p < .05 level. **Path statistically significant at the p < .01 level.
These findings may also help extend the value of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory in the context of college student development research. This literature is grounded in Chickering’s (1969) and later Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seminal text Education and Identity, which suggested developing purpose as an integral part in the formulation of identity development. However, his work has been heavily criticized for its lack of practical guidance for student affairs practitioners (Molasso, 2006b). The Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory is a practical tool that has been shown to increase students’ ability to apply their strengths and manage future expectations when used as an assessment among college students (Stebleton et al., 2012). As such, the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory may help to address some of those criticisms with continued research.

Lastly, the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory may be a tool to help improve academic success given the ability of strengths self-efficacy to predict hope. This conclusion is because high hope students (scores 56 to 63) have been reported to outperform those with low hope (scores 27 to 46) in terms of GPA by as much as 0.40 points at the end of the first semester (Snyder et al., 2002). Similar differences were also found in the likelihood to persist to graduation. As such, this inventory may be a multifaceted tool for improving both psychological aims and academic performance.

**Recommendations and Implications for Future Research**

Results of any study should be considered in the context of its limitations. Although our path model demonstrated reasonable model fit, the strengths self-efficacy scores used in that model required some changes to model specification. Because the SSES explained a considerable amount of variance across items (64%) and demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$), we believe the implications for the interpretation of our results is likely minimal. However, the stability of these findings may vary across samples and utilizations of this scale.

Additionally, other instruments are available that measure one’s belief in their talents. For example, a 10-item Strengths Awareness Scale (Schreiner, 2004) and a 7-item Strengths Impact Measure (Wisner, 2006) purportedly measure strengths awareness and ownership and demonstrate good internal consistency ($\alpha > .86$). The SSES also claims to measure strengths awareness and uses many similarly worded items. However, strengths ownership may represent a different domain of strengths self-efficacy not captured in the SSES. As such, our findings may be limited to the belief in one’s talents as measured by the SSES used in this study.

The nature of these instruments being self-reported by the student, in isolation, is also potentially problematic. The perception of a strength or talent, and the self-efficacy beliefs surrounding said perception, may paint an incomplete picture when it comes to actual achievement or outcome. Additional validity evidence should be compiled in future studies where self-perceptions of these variables are matched with behavioral results, which is not something StrengthsFinder® inherently captures.

Lastly, variability in workshops to support the understanding of this inventory across universities should be considered. We attempted to mitigate these differences by utilizing the same facilitator across institutions as well as curriculum and activities made available from the StrengthsQuest website. However, such training may be implemented differently across institutions to meet specific needs of students. Therefore, the strategies to educate students about their talents should be considered before generalizing these results.
Conclusion

The development of meaning and purpose in the lives of college students is an aim of higher education research given its ability to predict increased overall well-being and mental health (Johnson, 2006; Molasso, 2006a; Steger, 2009). However, interventions that may lead to its development are not always clear. The Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory is a popular talent identification model used among colleges and universities. One’s beliefs in those identified talents can be measured through strengths self-efficacy, which was found to positively predict the presence of meaning through increased hope and well-being. These relationships have not been previously demonstrated in the literature and may suggest the Clifton StrengthsFinder® inventory as a practical assessment tool when the aim is to develop the presence of purpose in students’ lives.

References


